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# THE BAY

bay<sup>1</sup> /beɪ/ *n.* a broad inlet of the sea where the land curves inwards

> WHEN MOST VICTORIANS TALK ABOUT MELBOURNE'S PORT PHILLIP BAY, THE WORDS 'HIGH BIODIVERSITY' OR 'ABUNDANT MARINE LIFE' RARELY POP UP. THE SHALLOW NATURE OF THE BAY AND ITS PROXIMITY TO THE CITY OF MELBOURNE SEEMS TO SUGGEST THAT PORT PHILLIP

ONLY HOSTS A FEW TYPES OF FISH, A CRAB OR TWO, AND IF YOU'RE REALLY LUCKY, AN OLD THONG. BUT MELBOURNE'S SNORKELERS AND DIVERS BELIEVE THAT THOSE WHO ASSUME VERY LITTLE LIVES BENEATH THE BAY SIMPLY HAVEN'T GONE IN AND TAKEN A LOOK.



For three years, I and two uni mates, dedicated our time to the animals of Port Phillip, hoping to create stronger awareness that life actually exists here. We snorkeled Port Phillip at least once a week rain or shine, cold or not so cold, photographing the marine life of Port Phillip to produce the book *Beneath our Bay*. As more sites were investigated, it became patently obvious that this is a unique ecosystem which plays an extremely important role in Victoria's coastal ecology.

The variety of species living in the bay is astounding, completely hidden from the public eye. It became our mission to expose these wonders in hope that people would finally appreciate our local marine life. After all, who would want to preserve a bay if they don't think there is anything in it?

Port Phillip is a very shallow environment allowing lots of light to reach the ocean floor which in turn promotes rich plant and algae growth. Due to this many animals are able to inhabit the same area. This also means that to jump in and have a look, all you need is a mask and a pair of flippers. Having an average depth of five metres, the bay has plenty of great sights for even the less experienced aquatic adventurer. For this reason, all our research and photography was done on snorkel to demonstrate how accessible this activity actually is. We decided to explore and document areas close to shore to encourage others to jump in and see for themselves. To simplify this activity even more, we decided to do all underwater research and take all our photos with affordable mid range point-and-shoot cameras. This would show others that you don't need to lash out to

enjoy underwater photography and it can all be done right here in Melbourne.

Port Phillip Bay's Marine National Parks and Marine Sanctuaries were the first places we included, along with Melbourne's popular beaches, piers and rock pools. While exploring Port Phillip's marine habitats, we encountered diversity that can compete with anywhere in Southern Australia. Some of the more iconic species encountered were globe fish, Southern fiddler rays, blue blubber jellyfish, Southern hermit crabs, Tasmanian blennies, old wives and various species of pipefish and seahorses. Some of the more spectacular species encountered include the cryptic weedy seadragons that move between the seaweeds at Portsea, the striking Vercos nudibranchs that add a splash of vibrance to the pier pylons at the southern end of



Main: Rye Pier on a calm spring day.  
Left: Short-headed seahorse under St Leonards Pier; A rarely seen paper nautilus at Beaumaris; Globe fish among old pier pylons at Clifton Springs.  
Above: Vercos nudibranch among the sponge gardens at Blairgowrie Marina.



Left: Perfect conditions at Mount Martha protected from an easterly wind; Schooling Eastern Australian salmon commonly circle snorkelers and divers; John Gaskell among the seagrass beds at Ricketts Point Marine.

Right: Two juvenile thornfish try to blend into a prickly rose sponge; Weedy seadragon at Portsea Pier; A juvenile scalyfin takes refuge by a gorgonian coral at Point Lonsdale; Eastern shovelnose stingaree at Clifton Springs; The amazing giant spider crab aggregation at Safety Beach Dromana.



the bay and the super-intelligent giant cuttlefish mimicking its surroundings to perfection.

The Bay's 260km coastline also showcases some of Victoria's most ecologically important habitat types. Vast plains of sandy seabeds, endless seagrass beds and large patches of rocky reef create many special places to observe our natural marine wildlife. One of the most unique places lies at Port Phillip Heads Marine National Park. The rock platforms at Point Lonsdale are positioned as though they were meant for exploring. The rock structure blocks the waves at low tide creating a crystal clear haven exhibiting amazing alga gardens teeming with life, which on a calm sunny day cannot be beaten.

Snorkeling in Port Phillip can also be done in some less obvious places where only a handful of people would have attempted to explore. Point Lillias and Clifton Springs surround the outer harbour where nutrient rich currents move between Corio Bay and Port Phillip. The old pier pylons at Clifton Springs and the bluestone rock walls at Point Lillias provide a hard substrate for many of the Bay's smaller inhabitants as they hide among the colourful seaweeds and seagrasses.

Over 200 snorkels contributed to the production of *Beneath our Bay* which allowed us to get a good idea of what can be found in the bay year round. An outstanding event was witnessing the mass aggregation of giant spider crabs that occurs in late autumn each year. I've only seen it in full swing once and it certainly takes being outnumbered to a new level. Over 50 thousand crabs cover the floor and come together in huge piles sometimes stacked 20 high that often breach the water surface. The most viable hypothesis as to why they do this is to protect each

other from predators during their seasonal moult. How they all know to return to the same location each year is a mystery. However they do it, it seems to work well. I remember one moment when five or six individuals started to move towards me from the pack in a formation resembling a line of attack, I took a photo and left!

Another unique event was in June 2008 just south of Beaumaris at a spot I hadn't snorkeled before. I decided to see how cold nine degrees felt in a 4'3 steamer and see what could possibly be about this time of the year. The first 10 minutes felt like my head was in an ice-box, so I waited for the numbness to set in then the exploring began. For the first 30 minutes it seemed that the local marine life were as keen as me for the cold and were totally out of sight. Nothing but a few bait fish. Then I noticed something quite peculiar suspended in midwater just above the seaweed. Even a puffer fish would have been worth the swim considering the lack of fish this time of the year, so I shivered my way a little closer. As the object took shape, I imagined how awesome it would be to see a nautilus as they come into the bay at this time of the year but are rarely seen alive. I couldn't believe my eyes – one of the least understood and rarely seen animals of Southern Australia was looking right at me – I probably seemed as weird as it did to me. An octopus from the deep with a shell – you don't see that every day!

Among all the beauty of Port Phillip, the many snorkeling adventures opened my eyes to how delicate this ecosystem is. Not only is the bay surrounded by a population of over 5 million, but major rivers bringing agricultural run-off into the northern end year-round. Even though the results of these problems were evident underwater, it was good to see a high biodiversity and balance between species

in our Marine National Parks and Marine Sanctuaries. Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary even seemed to improve during our three years' snorkeling, with more and more fish and invertebrates being sighted each year.

Hopefully more people will begin to appreciate the less commercialised sections of our coastline and recognise that areas like Port Phillip are just as important to Australians as the Great Barrier Reef. Who knows – maybe one day even Queenslanders will start packing their mask and snorkel when they visit Melbourne!

#### PORT PHILLIP BAY FAST FACTS

**Geography** The bay covers 1,930km<sup>2</sup> (480,000 acres) and the shore stretches roughly 264km (164mi). Although it is extremely shallow for its size, most of the bay is navigable. The deepest portion is only 24m (79ft), and half the region is shallower than 8m (26ft). The eastern side of the bay is characterised by sandy beaches extending from St Kilda, Sandringham, Beaumaris, Carrum, and down the Mornington Peninsula to Frankston, Safety Beach/Dromana and Rye to Portsea. Longshore drift carries sand south to north during winter and north to south during summer. Cliff erosion control has often resulted in sand starvation, necessitating offshore dredging to replenish the beach. On the western side of the bay there's a greater variety of beach types, seen at Queenscliff, St Leonards, Indented Head, Portarlington, and Eastern Beach. Port Phillip's mostly flat topography and moderate waves make perfect conditions for recreational swimming, scuba diving, snorkeling, and other watersports.

**Primary sources** Yarra, Patterson, Werribee Rivers, Little River, Kororoit Creek  
**Major marinas and piers** Elwood Beach & Port Phillip, Station Pier, St Kilda Pier, St Kilda Marina, Sandringham Marina, Mornington Pier, Martha Cove Marina, Dromana Pier, Rosebud Pier, Rye Jetty, Blairgowrie Marina, Sorrento Pier, Patterson Lakes Marina, Portsea Pier, Point Lonsdale Jetty, Queenscliff Harbour, Portarlington Pier, Bellarine Street Jetty, Cunningham Pier, Werribee South Jetties, RAAF Williams Pier, Altona Pier.

**BENEATH OUR BAY** *Discovering the Hidden Secrets of Port Phillip*. A full colour photographic book by John Gaskell, Christopher G. Smith & Evan Y. Coker. Visit [www.beneathourbay.com.au](http://www.beneathourbay.com.au) for more details & pricing.

