



Breach of trust

ON A MISSION TO RAISE AWARENESS OF THE HUMAN IMPACT ON WHALES, THIS CREW OF KAYAKERS SET OFF ON AN OCEANIC ODYSSEY AND GAINED NEW RESPECT FOR THE GENTLE GIANTS OF THE SEA

STORY JEREMY STEVENS

When a humpback whale says hello, no amount of prior research or life experience prepares you for your response. Surprise is a given, but seeing one breach up close can sear your memory, leaving you filled with trepidation, happiness and awe, kinship even. When asked about it, people fortunate enough to have had the experience will uniformly pause before detailing an encounter that may be impossible to top.

It's an interaction with nature that's been sought after, imagined and chronicled since time immemorial, as anyone who's read the Bible or *Moby-Dick* will know. All of which is why I've undertaken a six-hour rail and bus journey to the mid-north coast of NSW to hook up with a band of gypsies following the annual humpback migration down the east coast.

TransparentSea is a project organised by pro surfer Dave Rastovich, co-founder of Surfers for Cetaceans. To bring attention to the plight of humpbacks slaughtered by Japanese

whaling ships, Rastovich – in conjunction with his primary sponsor, Billabong – gathered a crew of five adventurers to paddle trimaran kayaks 780km from Byron Bay to Bondi Beach over 36 days. En route, they've stopped to promote beach clean-ups, sample pollution levels and engage with environmentally concerned locals.

"The ocean is the most stressed part of the environment, with the least protection," says 30-year-old Rastovich. "Inside that, look at the whale and dolphin issue. If there was ever an emotional hook for people, it's those two. If we can't even spare them from our polluting and indirect killing through commercial fishing, there's little hope for the ocean and the other animals that are copping it to a larger extent."

Rastovich enjoys celebrity within surf culture due to his freakish talent and alternative lifestyle. As a result, he's paid handsomely to surf for film and photoshoots. A dream gig, you may say, but he's not one to enjoy a free ride without using his profile to champion causes he believes in. >



For the TransparentSea project, pro surfer Dave Rastovich (pictured, above and top right) gathered a crew to paddle 780km from Byron Bay to Bondi in trimaran kayaks.



In 2007, he travelled to Japan to protest whale and dolphin slaughter alongside *Heroes* star Hayden Panettiere and *Home and Away* alumni Isabel Lucas. While the move damaged his earning potential in the lucrative Japanese surf market, he was subsequently invited to be one of only 300 participants at Al Gore's climate change conference in Melbourne last July.

"The whaling issue is such an intricate beast, like a big ship that takes a long time to turn around," says Rastovich of the success they've had so far. "There's no quick fix. You have to keep making cracks in the wall - it's little victories along the way."

His commitment and passion make him the perfect Captain Ahab - albeit a benevolent one - for my journey on the high seas. For weeks, I've been playing cat-and-mouse while trying to hook up with the TransparentSea bandwagon; the fickle realities of shifting weather and access to remote locations has led to several false starts in me climbing aboard. But, finally, here I am at Blueys Beach to rendezvous with the crew and a growing throng of admirers at base camp.

As a lightning storm looms, there's a flurry of phone calls. The support crew is worried about the kayaks making it to shore as it grows dark and the storm switches to horror-movie mode. A lighthouse to the south beams and, as if on cue, several whales breach offshore. It couldn't have been scripted better.

I hear an excited, "They're comin' in!" and half the assembly runs to the shoreline. Five kayaks are flying around the rocky northern headland and those of us not already at the water's edge are stunned into action. A cameraman races for position, the back-up team hobbles down with equipment flailing and I'm left stumbling blind in a maelstrom of salty mist, sand and cheering.

On the beach, people plunge into the surf to guide the kayaks to safety and the sailors are engulfed in a round of blokey hugs, spirited

exclamations and high-fives. Beers are cracked and I feel as if I'm in the opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* - the blood and terror replaced with ale and bonhomie.

Team leader Rastovich is one of the last to arrive but, after finally beaching his vessel, he's straight back in the water for a bodysurf. If ever a human was in tune with the ocean's rhythms, it's this guy.

That night, a fire is lit, stories are told and guitars are passed around the circle. Rastovich is quiet, content to let others enjoy their turn in the fire's light. In the flesh, his activism is soft-pedalled and his enthusiasm for life infectious. A subtle word here, a pregnant pause there and the crew defer to him and kick in without fail, happy to swim in the slipstream of his ambition. By the umpteenth drunkenly chorused Hendrix tune, it's obvious I'm not going to be able to tap into the sailors' wisdom tonight.

Next morning, I join the inner-circle of maritime mavericks as Rastovich methodically fixes one of the kayak's peddles. He spots what appears to be a shark offshore, prompting a discussion about the 4m tiger that almost bumped a kayak the day before. I came all this way for a story about whales and now it looks as if I might end up in *Jaws 5*.

It doesn't seem to bother the crew. "Sailing so close to the water changes your sensory perception," says Rastovich. "You're not moving past landmarks; they're moving past you."

Nor do the whales worry them. Far from inspiring nightmares about being crushed by a giant tail, there's a peaceful understanding between man and beast, explains fellow traveller Will Conner, 40. "A calf breached metres from me and swam underneath my kayak," he says. "People think it will be scary, because they're huge, powerful animals, yet there's this lovely gentleness about their actions. They're playful and come near us, allowing us into their world."



"When you're near a breaching whale, the sense of mass and resistance as it breaks through the surface is palpable," Rastovich adds. "You're surprised, but you cease to be scared. After multiple breachings, it still hasn't lost its impact. We still hoot each time."

For Californian pro surfer Chris Del Moro, 27, his epiphany came upon hearing the whales' haunting underwater song. "It never fails to move me," he says. "You can dip your head over the side and hear them singing, even when the closest has breached hundreds of metres away. It's never less than beautiful and so intimate."

As for my concerns about hitting the seas in anything smaller than a cruise liner, Rastovich reassures me. "When you're constantly wet and feeling the ocean moving, you're out of normal societal interaction. A quiet introspection takes over. You're not running around a deck, fixing ropes. You're at one with the vessel, with nature."

Joining me on this leg is former pro surfer Matt Hoy, 38, who's forged a reputation in surf culture as a do-anything wildman. As we take instruction on sailing the kayaks, he whispers to me, "I'm sh*tting myself..."

I hold back from confessing I'm slightly anxious, too, and bluff my way through, instead. "Well," I say, "It's as good a day to die as any."

The problem is, the closest I've ever come to sailing was pushing the *S.S. Minnow* around the bathtub. I'm truly scared of being 3km offshore in these shark prone waters.

Hoy and I have to paddle 100m on surfboards to where Conner awaits with kayaks. Halfway there, I remember this is where we saw the shark and my sea legs kick in. In no time, I'm on the kayak, waiting for the others to catch up

Trepidation turns to confusion, then extreme concentration and, finally, ease, as we gather speed under sail and head out on the big blue. Hoy and I are soon shouting and grinning, the exhilaration turning us into a pair of unabashed

kids. I begin to see why the whaling culture of old was so mythologised. Forget the thrill of the hunt – the romance of the sea is intoxicating.

We sail for several hours, to Seal Rocks and back, but miss out on seeing any living marine life – no humpbacks or dolphins, no more sharks. Appropriately, I encounter some dead birds and assorted rubbish along the otherwise pristine coastline. Despite the area's natural beauty, it's a timely reminder of what this expedition is about.

I could sail another 100km, such is the joy I've discovered, but we have to regroup so the crew can organise their final haul to Sydney. Around the campfire that night, I ask Rastovich what insight he's gained during this challenge.

"Whales play a vital role in the network of ocean life and the best thing collectively is for us to leave them alone," he replies. "We don't have to probe or study them to understand their majesty. Just seeing them breach says that."

With that, I retire to the beach to sleep beside the kayaks, under the stars. It's the first good night's sleep I've had in months. As I wake at dawn, I can't help wondering if I'm still dreaming. Roughly 100m offshore, enjoying the morning sun in calm waters, is an adult humpback with its calf basking next to it. Despite having seen this countless times on their voyage, Rastovich and the rest of the crew are as transfixed as I am.

Turns out this gentle Ahab has led me to what I sought, after all. **SM**

For more information about the Surfers for Cetaceans' mission, visit www.s4cglobal.org.

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