



OCEAN warriors

Whether they're breaking records, swimming alongside the ocean's gentle giants and misunderstood predators, or ensuring the next generation of ocean guardians, these women are determined to conserve the last wilderness.

Carla Hüselmann dives into the blue.





dreamt about. Then a female whale appears with her newly-born calf – the tiny giant rises to the surface, gulping in a breath of air. Suddenly he veers towards Prinsloo, curious about the foreign creature floating in his watery nursery and sails so close to her that they make eye contact. And then mom and baby are gone in a flick of their flukes and Prinsloo is left humbled once again by the immense splendour of the last true wilderness on Earth.

This kind of profound experience with the ocean and its mega-fauna is what lies at the soul of Prinsloo's conservation ethos, prompting the establishment of I AM WATER, a non-profit organisation through which she has been able to teach over 500 people to freedive.

'I AM WATER believes in conservation through human experience. We believe people are more likely to take care of their shorelines once they experience the beauty and joy of our seas,' says the former champion freediver (and, arguably, real life mermaid) from her home base in Cape Town. 'They're taught the art of freediving, the joy of moving through water with ease and grace. They learn the physiology of the human body underwater, the mammalian dive response we share with whales, dolphins and seals, and how our bodies carry the memory of water.'

Educating a new generation of ocean guardians is one of her most satisfying endeavours, she says. 'The beating heart of the work we do is with underprivileged kids from South Africa, Mozambique and

DIVE DEEPER WITH HANLI PRINSLOO

Her whole body vibrates to the magical song of a humpback whale gliding 10m below her in the Pacific Ocean's crystalline waters. The gentle leviathan winds his intricate melody of loud, deep notes in unison with other males in the depths surrounding the South Pacific island of Niue. Experiencing one of the most complex non-human forms of communication created by any species in the animal kingdom so intimately is something Hanli Prinsloo has only ever

Bermuda. One of my favourites is the KwaZulu Mermaids, the brainchild of I AM WATER instructor Beth Neale, where a group of Grade 7 girls were turned into real little mermaids through snorkelling and breathing lessons, ocean education sessions and a trip out to sea. Some of them were scared in the beginning but every one of them fell in love with the ocean and grew so much in confidence. I'm very proud of our future ambassadors.'

Does she ever get frightened of the sea? 'The only time the ocean scares me is when I see her fragility. When she's displaying all her power and strength that's when I feel the world is as it should be. It's when I see destroyed mangrove forests, bleached coral or a remote part of the North Pacific that's covered in litter that she's terrifying.'

'The ocean is a mirror,' Prinsloo muses. 'It shows us the bits about ourselves that we don't see on land where we're so distracted. Every time I get in the water I learn more about myself and how I need nature – that's the greatest lesson the ocean can teach you.' iamwaterfoundation.org →



CHANNEL THE OCEAN WITH SARAH FERGUSON

In July this year, Sarah Ferguson swam an inconceivable 59.8km across the Ka'iwi Channel in a back-breaking 17 hours 54 minutes and 25 seconds. Ferguson, a Durban-based physiotherapist, was the

first-ever African woman to conquer this challenge – a sufficiently compelling reason to undertake the arduous swim. But there was something more that impelled her to brave the longest of the world's 'big seven' ocean swims, which is chillingly known as

the Channel of Bones and inhabited by lurky sharks, venomous Portuguese Man-of-War jellyfish and merciless currents.

Ferguson also wanted to use her talents for a greater purpose: to raise awareness of how plastic is smothering our oceans. 'If we don't take action now, by 2050 there will be →



Saturday, 23 July 2017 – Molokai island, Hawaii

9pm: Sarah* lathers me with my special anti-jellyfish, anti-chafe cream.

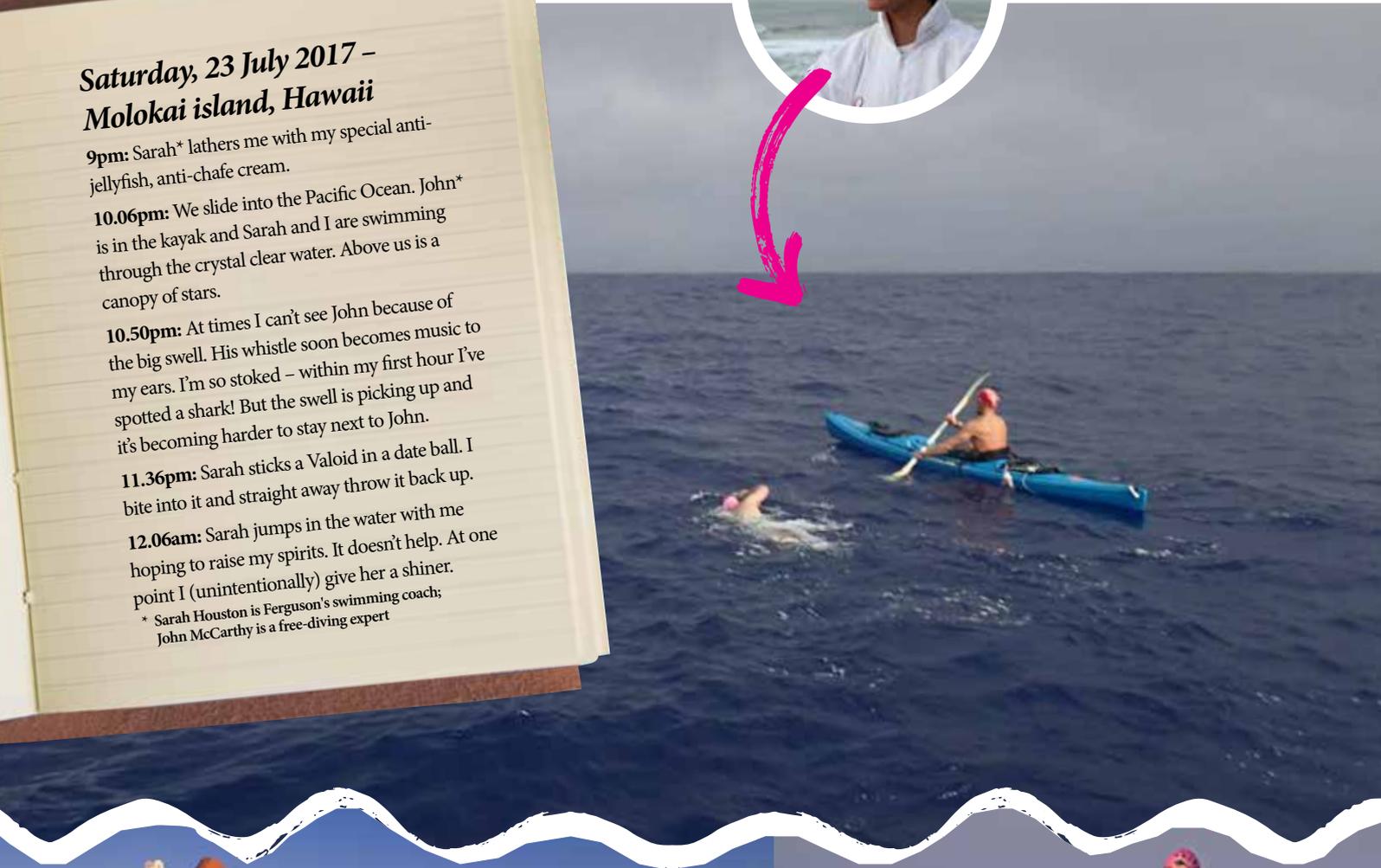
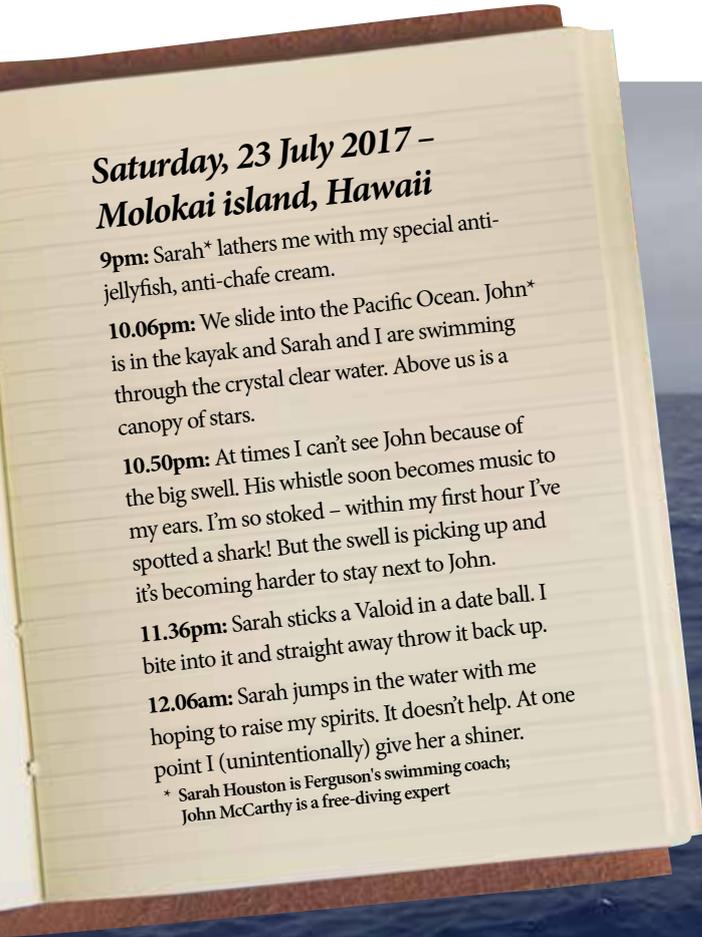
10.06pm: We slide into the Pacific Ocean. John* is in the kayak and Sarah and I are swimming through the crystal clear water. Above us is a canopy of stars.

10.50pm: At times I can't see John because of the big swell. His whistle soon becomes music to my ears. I'm so stoked – within my first hour I've spotted a shark! But the swell is picking up and it's becoming harder to stay next to John.

11.36pm: Sarah sticks a Valoid in a date ball. I bite into it and straight away throw it back up.

12.06am: Sarah jumps in the water with me hoping to raise my spirits. It doesn't help. At one point I (unintentionally) give her a shiner.

* Sarah Houston is Ferguson's swimming coach; John McCarthy is a free-diving expert



more plastic than fish in the sea,' laments Ferguson, who is the founder of the non-profit organisation, Breathe Conservation. 'Did you know that a recent study showed that 100 per cent of the mussels tested had microplastic in them? I hate that the life in our oceans has to swim in our trash and often gets sick or dies because of our total disrespect and attitude of instant gratification. The ocean is life and we need it for life.'

This tangible passion is what lay behind the four years of intense training for her Herculean feat and the estimated 60 000 strokes she took while navigating the tricky channel, which is actually 46km long but saw her swimming just under 60km due to getting stuck in vicious currents. 'What

many don't realise is that I didn't just wake up one day and swim across a channel: I got there one good decision at a time. The same goes for reaching the goal of a plastic-free ocean: it just takes one good decision at a time. If you add up every single straw or packet you said no to over a year, you'd be shocked at the real difference you can make. Now imagine if you got your loved ones and community to do the same? Start now.'

For the full report of Ferguson's epic swim: sarahferguson.co.za/blog →

Sunday, 24 July 2017 – Somewhere in the Ka'iwi Channel, Hawaii

1.06am: I try to ward off the impending feeling of failure and wanting to die. Being seasick is one of the worst feelings in the world.

1.36am: Sarah jumps back in the water shouting that John won't feed me unless I stick a suppository up my bum. There's a first time for everything. Within 10 minutes I start to feel normal again! The stars disappear, the swell picks up even more and lightning flashes as the clouds roll in. As we stroke our arms through water there's a mini-firework display going on around them – it's the phosphorous.

9.36am: So special to just be in the big blue ocean with a small oceanic black tip shark.

11.05am: John explains that for the past two hours I've hardly moved because I'm swimming against the current. I've covered less than one mile in the last three hours.

ONE MILE TO GO: We swim the last mile over the reef against a current into Makapu Bay. I catch the perfect wave and float to shore. We've made it!

SWIM WITH THE SHARK ANGELS

The quintessential dauntless, bronzed, blonde surfer, Olivia Symcox was prone to something akin to walking on water whenever she spied a shark lurking behind the backline, particularly after a surfer friend lost a leg to a great white. 'I definitely came from the dark side, believing that the only good shark was a dead shark,' admits the public relations consultancy owner who heads up Shark Angels, a NPO focused on shark conservation, based in KwaZulu-Natal. 'Then in early 2003 I experienced a complete turnaround when a large tiger shark swam past me on my third-ever scuba dive. I looked into her eyes and felt such awe at her majesty and found myself trying to catch up with her! After that I made it my mission to spend more time getting to understand sharks.'

What she learnt about the plight of the lords of the sea upset her so much that she decided to do something tangible with her newfound passion – in 2008, when she and local shark experts Mark and Gail Addison met Julie Andersen, the founder of the American NPO Shark Angels, they decided to launch Shark Angels locally. They were determined to expose the reality of the silent mass extinction of the ocean's top predators. 'An average of 10 people worldwide are killed by sharks every year but we're killing 11 000 sharks per hour, according to the

Australian Institute of Marine Science. Research shows that some populations are down 90 per cent and up to 73 million sharks are killed every year due to, for example, the high demand for shark fins and shark liver oil (squalene oil) for cosmetics and health supplements.'

Symcox points out that it's really not about whether or not you 'like' these majestic apex predators: 'Humans need sharks because they play a crucial role in maintaining healthy oceans, the earth's life support system, and if you remove them, this'll lead to the extinction of many other species.'

With the assistance of marine biologists and volunteers, Shark Angels gives a voice to the voiceless, Symcox explains, by driving scientific research projects, including vital research on the vulnerable blacktip shark population at Aliwal Shoal, education initiatives and activism such as the Paddle Out for Sharks and Silence of the Sharks underwater protest. 'We're vehemently opposed to shark culls and also tackle issues like the negative impact

shark nets have on marine life, killing dolphins, turtles and whales too.'

Symcox admits that because sharks are so misunderstood, protecting them is the 'toughest PR job' she's ever tackled. However, one of the most rewarding aspects of her mission is taking fellow surfers on dives. 'It's wonderful when their eyes are opened to the miraculous "Avatar-like" world that lies beneath the waves. Sadly, they also see how many of the sharks have human-inflicted injuries from hooks and lures and have knife wounds and boat scars.'

And what precautions should one take when diving with sharks? 'I've learnt that they aren't really interested in us and you have to go to great lengths to get their attention. However, always stay alert and maintain eye contact with them. I also never surf in murky water. Truly respect that sharks are the ocean's most efficient hunters, but they're worth more alive than dead.' sharkangels.com ■



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