

Cavorting With Sea Creatures

Uproarious sea lions, colorful fishes and tipping sea cows are all part of the fun and games until someone gets hurt.

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I have alluded in previous blogs to some of my past experiences with sea creatures, whether snorkeling, swimming or sea kayaking amongst them. But I thought it would be fun to journey down memory lane and offer a sort of hit parade of a few of my more-memorable experiences cavorting with sea creatures. So here they are – all two of them.

Masters of Disaster

Think teeny-tiny boats, great big ocean. Sea kayaking deserves to be included among the pantheon of adrenaline-junkie adventure sports, or at least the way my cohorts and I have been known to approach it on occasion.

Whenever launching a small seal-sized boat or surfboard off California's Pacific Coast, one must be prepared to become a potential menu item for the healthy populations of great white sharks trolling the ocean waters for unhappy meals. Trust me, when venturing into Pacific waters this is always in the back of my mind, not to mention the frontal, parietal and temporal lobes too. I'd rather be strapped to the outside of the Space Shuttle on launch day than have a 15-foot fish nibbling on my extremities.

Being an adventurous, albeit landlubbing, sort, quite a few Novembers ago, I suggested to my equally adventurous but landlubbing circle of friends something like this: "Hey, I've got a great idea. Let's all rent sea kayaks (something you could do at the time through a local sporting goods store) and circumnavigate 17 miles around the Palos Verdes Peninsula (a very cliffy section of coastline in the Los Angeles area). Never mind the pewter November skies, the slight drizzle, the ominous roll of the surf, the headwinds or the fact we'd be paddling for the better part of a day. We'd come too far (we'd rented boats and driven 6 miles to King Harbor, in Redondo Beach, California) – "Damn the [head winds]! Full steam ahead!"

The four of us launched our boats one at a time from a small-boat cement slab and began paddling across King Harbor to a buoy platform, which had been commandeered by a boisterous group of California sea lions. We could smell the fishy offal they must roll in from at least 20 yards away. Cutting V-shaped trails through the clear green water of the harbor, while paddling just close enough to the sea lions to singe our nose hairs, was great fare. I could have paddled around King Harbor all day long. I wished I had.

The occasional swell exploding into watery tendrils against the riprap protecting the harbor should have kicked our mental survival mechanisms into overdrive; alas, there were no gongs, bells, whistles or flashing lights to keep us from our date with the Small Watercraft Maritime Disaster of Whenever.

No sooner had our little fleet left the safe confines of the breakwater than our kayaks began to yaw wildly as they were bullied by wind and waves.

After about 20 minutes of fighting the wind and getting nowhere, one of my buddies in an adjacent kayak rolled over and quickly popped out and up to the surface next to his upturned boat. I tried to coach him in righting his kayak but to no avail. He temporarily righted his boat only to find himself awkwardly sprawled out in a facedown hunched "X" shape. His feet and hands were clutching opposite gunwales and seemed to be fighting the opposing limb for control, as the kayak leaned to the left, then the right, then shook and shimmied and spun into the beginnings of a barrel roll. Splash! Finally, I suggested my thoroughly drenched, exhausted fellow sea kayaker lay upon his upturned boat like a surfboard. Given the gravity of the situation, I extended one of my arms above my head and made circling motions in the air with the paddle

clenched in my hand. This is a signal in sea kayaking to paddle on over for an impromptu powwow. I wanted to gauge the general condition of the group as well as see if the others were feeling the same sense of futility that I was and might want to paddle ashore, retired to a local coffeehouse and enjoy the rest of our day.

No sooner had the other kayakers gathered in a loosely configured circle (more like an oval squished at one end) than a second member of our expedition began feeling woozy and pitched over into the drink. But this time he remained in his boat while submerged. He had passed out and was still underwater. We waited for him to pop up to the surface, but he didn't come up. The sense of urgency expressed in our pleas to one another cannot be overstated. The first kayaker to the rescue reached under the kayak and was able to grab our friend by his jacket collar and pull him free and to the surface. With his hands draped over the hull he began to chum seawater and stomach contents into Santa Monica Bay.

Seeing my friend was once again with the living, I paddled furiously to the beach (about a football-field length away) for help. As I passed into the surf zone, my kayak turned and was broadsided by a breaking wave and capsized. In the washing-machine action that followed, my glasses (I'm legally blind without them) began to part company with my face. Somehow I managed to grab them before they became just another part of the never-ending parade of flotsam so prevalent in our oceans today. (Might this be a plausible explanation as to how Charlie the Tuna got to wearing glasses?)

Los Angeles County Lifeguards had already sprung into action even before my boat and I spilled ashore. It was just like a Baywatch episode, except curiously lacking in Pamela Anderson types. My friend's mishap was called a "partial drowning" because of seawater in his lungs. Thankfully, he suffered no long-term ill effects, but I'm sure sea kayaking is well down on his "to-do" list. I've been sea kayaking since, but I'm always in the presence of experts on guided trips and never go in winter or inclement weather.

Looking back, I have a sinking feeling (one of many that fateful day) that that gaggle of *Zalophus californianus* wasn't barking out concerned warnings, but rather, they were, I now believe, outwardly mocking us.

Sea Cow Tipping

One of my most memorable underwater adventures occurred in 1999 when I was visiting my parents in Florida. I'd heard about guided swim-with-manatee tours people could take in the Crystal River area, about 50 miles north of my parents' home at the time. It was definitely something on my "things-to-do-before-I-exit" list.

When I arrived at Bird's Underwater (a decade later, still in business) I plopped down my credit card and was thereafter outfitted with a pair of fins, a snorkel, wet suit and mask.

I, along with other manateephiles, boarded an open-air flat-bottom boat that slowly took us out into the Crystal River and manatee central. Manatees are more widespread during the warmer summer months and can be found out in the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. During the cooler winter months, these large, peaceful aquatic mammals move up rivers from the sea and congregate near the outlets of warm-water springs. Harassing manatees, which legally includes swimming with and petting them, is strictly prohibited in most areas. However, manatees that winter in the Crystal River are grandfathered in and humans are allowed to interact with them. Still, the best option for people and manatees alike is to go through guide services like Bird's, which is permitted through the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

No sooner had I backed off the boat and into the water than I was cheek by jowl with a trio of three large adult manatees. Many times I found myself staring within a hair's-breadth at the whiskered muzzle of one of these "gentle giants," which may reach more than 3,000 pounds and 15 feet in length. Most large adults are closer to 10 feet and a 1,000 pounds.

They are like overgrown aquatic lap dogs constantly jockeying for prime stroking real estate. They really like to be petted with an open palm. They do not like to be touched on the muzzle. By far the coolest manatee maneuver is when they roll in order to expose their bellies, which they really like having rubbed.

When not being crowded by attention-seeking manatees, I swam closer to one of the spring outlets. I was immediately hit with warm water wafting up directly from Florida's complex subterranean plumbing system. It sort of reminded me why I don't frequent public pools with lots of young children in them. Minus a wet suit I spent some quality time in the spring's direct area of influence, which had the added attraction of clouds of colorful fishes. Apparently, my large complex brain and their little fish brains think alike. Hey, warm is warm.

Some of the manatees display ugly white Freddy Krueger-style pawings across their backs. These are the result of careless motorboat operators running over these animals, which are often submerged just below the surface. If you see a living manatee with this type of scarring, consider it lucky. In the course of a year, sometimes more than 150 are killed in the state of Florida this way.

A couple of cool things about manatees: 1) it is believed that their closest living relatives are elephants, 2) females have two mammary glands, with one located under each pectoral flipper, 3) these aquatic, herbivorous mammals are known as sirenians, 4) their front flippers are actually modified arms that they can use to hold their young or grasp objects with and 5) they have vestigial hind leg bones hidden from view beneath muscle and skin.

I hope you enjoyed these ocean encounters of mine. I have others, but I'll save stories of green sea turtles, tide pool denizens and barracuda for future blogs. In the meantime, enjoy the video of my 1999 manatee encounter. The use of this video on FishChannel is courtesy of birdsunderwater.com.

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