

Out Of The Blue: A Guide To Marine Mammals Of Sri Lanka, Southern India And Maldives

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A first sighting of dolphins in an estuary in 2005 marked the beginning of what can only be described as a labour of love. A deep-rooted passion and a thirst for knowledge resulted in years of self-study, research and dedication to finally culminate in Howard Martenstyn's Out of the Blue.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara

Howard Martenstyn fondly recollects his introduction to the sea at the age of 12, when his elder brother Cedric, cast him to the waters in Trincomalee, with the simple directive to swim. “Since that day we never looked back. My brothers and I spent hours in the water. Cedric was my key influence and we were all nature lovers,” says Howard of the early years. However, it would not be until his return to Sri Lanka on retirement that his old love for nature is rekindled.



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At every venture out to sea, Howard would spend hours taking photographs and recording data that served as a wealth of information for ‘Out of the Blue’. “I created a little book for myself, they were my research notes and when I learnt something, I documented that in my book,” he says. On his outings with other visitors, Howard made a note of questions posed to him on the basics of marine mammals. Thus a desire to educate the average Sri Lankan served as his primary motive to develop a comprehensive book on marine mammals. In his research, Howard proceeded to take a broader perspective, looking at 88 species of whales,

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dolphins and porpoises the world over. He then narrowed it down, based on which species are found in the northern Indian Ocean and thereafter those that are found in Sri Lankan waters. "These are the 30 species that I have included in my book. In that process, I uncovered much information with regard to scientific taxonomy," he says adding that "we still have a long way to go with marine mammals of Sri Lanka."

On one of his early expeditions out at sea, Howard found himself alone and at a loss. While aware of his location and depth he had no inkling of which direction to go and what sightings to expect. "I discovered that it is that much easier when you know what to anticipate rather than rely on pure luck," he says of discovering the secrets of the dynamic ocean. He learnt of a combination of environmental factors that could lead to the mammals' sources of food. "The key is, when you go out looking for these animals you must know where the food is." This wealth of information is translated on to the pages of the book and despite the in-depth research upon which it is based, the text is worded simply and designed for easy perusal.

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Within 272 pages amidst more than 400 photographs and illustrations are a presentation of facts and at times questions left to the thoughtful judgment of readers. "I don't attempt to reach any conclusions, it is up to the reader to decide," he says of the book's attempt to urge readers to think. Based on the form of information provided, the book can be divided into four segments. The first section is much like a mini encyclopedia, providing answers to

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a collection of questions on marine mammals. The second section is the guide with double page spreads dedicated to each animal. The information here is manifold in that, outside of factual information the author also provides colour coded tables indicating the probability of sightings at various depths and locations. The third section covers oceanography, for those who desire a greater depth of knowledge on the animals. The final section focuses on whale watching that includes guidelines. "I believe in self-regulation rather than enforcement. If you are educated you can prevent boat operators from engaging in wrong-doing," he states.

The title 'Out of the Blue' fits aptly at a glance, reflective of what a reader might expect within its pages on marine mammals. However, it reaches further as Howard explains, "I am not known, and much like the author the information and photographs, which have never before been published, are literally out of the blue."

The book saw the light of day in November of 2013 complete with a poignant dedication to Howard Matenstyn's brother Cedric. A well-chosen quote from Thomas Jefferson on the importance of education is intent on setting the tone for the book from the onset. "It is all about falling in love with these marine mammals," says author Howard Martenstyn of 'Out of the Blue'. "If I have achieved that then I have succeeded. That is my legacy to the country. It is as simple as that."

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