

Going in search of the giant nautilus

TRAGEDY can assume many guises, one of which is the death of cherished illusions.

A week searching for the Tasmanian Tiger on Tasmania's infamous Overland Track (June issue) had resulted in the sad demise of my fanciful notions about the idyllic beauty of the wilderness; of the joys of bonding my soul to nature, amidst peace and tranquillity.

Instead, I had bonded to leeches and mud, amidst

snowstorms and sleet. The Tasmanian Tiger had wisely remained absent throughout. At least, however, I had experienced an epiphany of one kind: I had a new and heartfelt appreciation for the comforts of civilisation, notwithstanding the priceless value of wilderness and the biodiversity it contains.

In honour of my new-found understanding, I decided to choose a creature that could be found amongst sunlight, comfort and warmth, as the focus of my next cryptozoological expedition. The most warm, sunny and comfortable place I could imagine was Australia's Great Barrier Reef.



A sea turtle and (below) purple coral.



Andrew Knight, BVMS, CertAW, PhD, MRCVS, London-based veterinary cryptozoologist, hopes to become the first RCVS Recognised Specialist in the medicine and surgery of supposedly mythical animals (DipCrypt).

Fortunately, several potentially suitable candidates were described within my cryptozoological texts.

Hazards of marine cryptozoology

Unknown sea monsters have been described by the world's mariners since ancient times, although these are now mostly believed to have been large

ANDREW KNIGHT

continues his quest for 'CPD with a difference' with a visit to Australia's Great Barrier Reef where he fails to find any genuine monsters – but enjoys plenty of other sights



marine species such as the frilled shark, basking shark, oarfish, giant squid or whales.

However, the 1997 detection of mysterious sounds by hydrophonic equipment in the remote depths of the Pacific Ocean indicated that not all such phenomena might be so easily explained.

Whilst matching the audio characteristics of an animal, these sounds are deemed to have originated from a creature larger than any known species. Such findings lend credence to the hypothesised survival of giant marine reptiles, such as ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs, or extinct whales like the basilosaurus, which was believed to average about 18 metres in length.

Unfortunately, however, I feared my large animal-handling skills – a source of occasional embarrassment during veterinary school – were not quite up to such encounters. I definitely needed something a little easier to manage.

With profoundest regret, I was therefore forced to conclude that this also ruled out mermaids.

Enchanting victims

Even greater embarrassment has sometimes followed my encounters with the fairer sex, who were certainly the most dangerous creatures in veterinary school. And much like sirens, mermaids have also been known to sing to their victims and enchant them, thereafter carrying them down to underwater kingdoms from which they never return.

It therefore seemed prudent to settle on something I could be quite sure would not enchant me. With 90 tentacles encircling the gaping maw contained within its ugly visage, the

giant nautilus *Cymatoceras elegans* offered the perfect choice.

Sharing a common ancestry with the remarkable chambered nautilus, *Nautilus pompilius*, it is currently believed to have been extinct for at least 65 million years. If any were left to be found, however, the Great Barrier Reef seemed the perfect place to find them. This greatest of all the world's coral reefs shelters one of the world's most diverse ecosystems.

The search begins

Yet, the creature I sought had to be, at best, exceedingly rare. I would, therefore, need to search the remotest corners of the reef. Accordingly, my partner and I grabbed our snorkelling gear, packed supplies for several days, and arranged for a water taxi to deliver us to Crayfish Bay, a remote beach on one of the outermost Whitsunday Islands, accessible only at high tide.

There we found curving white sands that stretched for about 100 metres before ending in steep, rain-forested cliffs, which also prevented any exploration of the island's interior.

At least, not without violating the new philosophy underpinning my cryptozoological explorations: namely, that optimal scientific research could only occur in conditions of maximal comfort.

We would just have to endure on our own private beach, under the palm trees and stars, until the water taxi returned some days hence. Yet we were far from trapped, for just offshore was one of the Whitsunday's best coral reefs.

Accordingly, we donned our snorkelling gear and commenced our explorations. Our brightly-coloured stinger suits provided essential protection from Irukandji. Occasionally encountered during summer, these small jellyfish inflict agonising, though rarely fatal, stings from invisible tentacles – not recommended, for anyone far beyond any phone reception.

The reef revealed to us a fabulous array of multi-coloured coral, and endless fascinating schools of fish. There were massive hard and soft corals, brain corals, fascinating sea cucumbers, sting rays, sea turtles, and clams large enough to swallow small



The author in snorkelling mode.

children whole. Clearly clever enough to ascertain our ages, however, the clams snapped closed whenever we strayed too close.

One day on the outer reef, I experienced the electric thrill of seeing a powerful-looking shark sleekly cruising along the edge. To my shame, I turned and "ran", leaping onto the nearby rocks in record time. Sheepishly, I soon realised how lucky I'd been. These incredibly graceful creatures are very rapidly disappearing from the world's oceans, and one has a greater chance of drowning in a bathtub than being killed by a shark.

Unfortunately, however, by the time the water taxi returned for us, we'd failed to locate any nautiloids. However, these creatures are often found in deeper water, so we arranged to visit the outer barrier reef. A three-hour trip aboard a massive high-speed catamaran delivered us to Hardy Reef, where the largest, and oldest, floating pontoon on the reef awaited.

Reefworld

Hundreds of people visit Reefworld for three-and-a-half hours daily, where they snorkel, take introductory scuba dives, view the reef from the underwater viewing gallery, semi-submersibles or even helicopters, or



These trevally are often pursued by George the Groper.

...optimal scientific research could only occur in conditions of maximal comfort.

simply lounge upon the sundeck.

Children of all ages whizz down a giant slide into the sea, where a marine biologist with a priceless sense of humour offers guided snorkelling tours.

Languishing on his back like a seal, he lazily informed us that he spends his entire three-and-a-half hours in the water daily, and would grow gills and stay there if he could.

Back aboard the pontoon, stressed dive instructors herded cumbersome groups of novices and licensed divers down to partly-submerged steel decks beneath the pontoon, where they followed underwater guidelines down to the reef, and along its edge.

Beautiful world

Although licensed, I'd not dived for about 100 years, and my partner had never dived at all. Both of us were thrilled to leave the shallows behind, slowly descending through clouds of bubbles into aquamarine depths. The reef wall descended some 60 metres, of which we explored the upper quarter.

We glided through another beautiful world of brightly-coloured



Reefworld from the water.

coral and tropical fish. At the limits of my dive, around 15 metres down, my dive buddy pointed out a large cuttlefish, warily eyeing us from below. However, no nautiloids were visible. Perhaps they were deeper still.

Traffic jams ensued on the guidelines during our return, when dive groups from opposing directions met. Whilst the dive instructors chatted with writing tablets and waterproof pens, we students attempted to avoid collisions – no mean feat, when encumbered with tanks and gear, restricted motion and visibility, and people closely packed in all three dimensions. It was, I believe, the most fun I've ever had in a traffic jam.

Finally, the three-and-a-half hours came to an end, and the hordes reluctantly returned to their giant catamaran to begin their long journey back to the mainland. We, however, were among six lucky guests and a

skeleton crew that would be staying overnight on this remote outpost of civilisation.

Apparently Reefworld was the only reef pontoon worldwide on which this was possible, and we had scored two of the only six guest bunks available. We felt incredibly privileged to be staying overnight, which would also allow me to search for nautiloids, in case they proved to be nocturnal.

Night-diving reconsidered

Surprisingly, my subsequent request to go night-diving was laughed off with the reply that it was "feeding time". I assumed the dive instructor simply preferred not to work both night and day. Yet, as we later enjoyed the vegan *al fresco* dinner cooked by our charming host, we heard the rushing and splashing of hunting fish and their prey, apparently attracted to the pontoon lights. Occasional bursts of fluorescence flashed through the water, and I was amazed to observe something leap three meters into the air, before re-entering with a splash. I was further shocked to see what appeared to be the tail and fins of a five-foot shark, sharply turning and slicing, just metres from our dinner table.

Reconsidering my swimming plans, I descended instead to the underwater

viewing gallery, where I found the dive instructor enjoying a fascinating nightly spectacle. Schools of giant trevally were constantly circling, diving and passing among one other in what appeared to be utter chaos, but was in fact highly organised motion, as they hunted smaller fish attracted by the lights.

Meanwhile, off to the right drifted "George". A Queensland groper weighing a quarter of a tonne, George has lived under the pontoon with half a dozen of his girlfriends (who are a petite 150kg or so), for many years.

An ambush predator, he eats small sharks – and trevallies. He spends hour after hour drifting closer and closer to them, whilst trying to appear as harmless as possible – no mean feat for a quarter-tonne monster. Eventually, they acclimatise to his presence, and when one finally becomes too careless, it vanishes into his giant maw in a flash. He only needs one a day.

Sadly, however, no nautiloids were visible. Apparently, they were far smarter than trevallies. Although this was a significant finding, I still knew so little about them. Accordingly, I left with the greatest of reluctance, determined to return one day, to further my education about these wonderful, little-known creatures.

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