

Dive Briefs

Saba in Session

LESSONS FROM THE DOLPHIN LADY, THE MOUNTAIN GOAT AND THE SECRET AGENT AT SEA & LEARN BY BROOKE MORTON



Mating Atlantic spotted dolphins (above);
the volcanic island of Saba (below)

THE FEMALE DOLPHIN appeared to faint on the sand for 10 seconds. “I had no idea what was going on,” Kathleen Dudzinski, director of the Dolphin Communication Project, recalls of the puzzling encounter caught on film in the early 1990s near Mikurajima, Japan.

Years later, she mentioned the observation to a veterinarian in Genoa, Italy, who smiled and told of a similar performance from a captive dolphin; a check of its blood levels revealed elevated progesterone. Dudzinski reviewed the footage from Japan and, sure enough, several young adult male dolphins filled the background.

“She was in heat,” Dudzinski says, “and telling the males, ‘Hey big boy, I’m ready.’”

Dudzinski’s story, told on the patio of a pizzeria called Saba’s Treasure, is part of 14 ecological presentations on the Sea & Learn syllabus. Held every October on the tiny Leeward Caribbean isle of Saba, this month-long series of informal lectures and field projects engages divers and other nature lovers in talks about topics ranging from dolphin communication to bat behavior. Restaurants take turns hosting the free events, serving wine, beer and cocktails during the presentations and dinner after. A lucky few can join that night’s presenters’ table, while everyone benefits from the event’s engaging sense of community,

FROM TOP: DOUG PERRINE/SEAPICS.COM; COURTESY CAROLE IRTZ/SEA & LEARN

where divers and nondivers in numbers as large as 40 trade tales of sport and sea.

Seven years strong, Sea & Learn is the brainchild of Lynn Costenaro, who runs Sea Saba Advanced Dive Center along with her husband, John Magor. Any given week of the program can include such varied experiences as a morning mimic-octopus hunt with cephalopod expert Roger Hanlon, an afternoon of transplanting corals with conservation biologist Graham Forrester and as the moon rises, a hike with bioluminescence expert Dimitri Deheyn to

discover pixie dust atop mushrooms in the rainforest. When participants aren't learning, there's a wealth of world-class diving available just offshore for recess.

Listening to Dudzinski, I start to realize why Sea & Learn is so popular. Science can be much more than the convergence of ideas and curiosity, patience and observation — sometimes it's about surprises.

THE MOUNTAIN GOAT

The smell of kerosene hangs in the air. The lamps at the Eco Lodge, a collection of cottages hidden within the canopy of Mount Scenery, have just been lit and it's quiet, save for the chorus of tree frogs outside. We're gathered in the lodge's restaurant, waiting.

Tom Van t'Hof is known in the dive

community for helping create the marine parks of Bonaire, Saba and Statia, as well as a few in Asia. He's about to present on the flora and fauna of his backyard — the rainforest. He's also the owner of the property and the restaurant, so before he can present, he has to take the dinner orders — no small feat given the crowd of almost 30.

Saba has remained a secret, separated from the glitz of St. Maarten by only 28 miles, or eight minutes via puddle jumper. Don't expect casinos, all-inclusives or even beaches. This island shoots straight into the clouds, its rugged terrain providing a StairMaster-like workout that leads to panoramic views stretching to its Dutch-French neighbor. With dramatic scenery above the water and below, Saba is whispered about only by hard-core



A late-night bat field project



Animal-behavior talk



Dusk at Windwardside, Saba's main town



Measuring bromeliad growth



Transplanting elkhorn coral

COURTESY CAROLIE IRTZ/SEA & LEARN (5)

divers, hikers and bird-watchers.

Orders in, Van t'Hof takes his place up front. He starts with a "before" picture of the island's rainforest, with strangler figs and palm trees reaching Mesozoic proportions.

Everything in the rainforest competes for space, light and resources — just like on the reefs, he says. And it's easy to become mesmerized looking at one thing, but you'd be missing out. Just as we have to look to the blue periodically when wall diving, so too should we look up while hiking Mount Scenery to find air plants,

such as the Lady's Lash, a copper orchid that grows in profusion along the Upper Hell's Gate trail.

Then Hurricane Georges swept through in 1998.

He clicks to the "after" — a view any condo developer would be proud of: the monstrous ferns, orchids and trumpet trees absent, leaving only ocean views.

"There is no such thing as a stable state," Van t'Hof says. He explains how this is a good thing: The rainforest lives in cycles, and Georges catapulted it ahead to a new stage, allowing fresh growth. Fast-

forward five years, and again the forest looks like a canvas after a 4-year-old was turned loose with only green crayons.

Nature wields more power than most of us get to witness on a day-to-day basis.

THE SECRET AGENT

Vince Capone doesn't have dual citizenship, but he holds two passports. He's trained in underwater covert operations that involve using side-scan sonar, sub-bottom profilers, magnetometers and other expensive toys. But he's not a spy. He's just someone who's really good at finding things: shipwrecks, fallen aircraft, mines, evidence in criminal cases and more. The passports enable him to slip between countries that are often at odds with each other. It's all part of the job — one that didn't exist until he created it.

"I can see more on the bottom in 10 minutes on sonar than I can with 10 years of diving."

I learned this between morning dives with Capone. Now, over cocktails at Brigadoon, a seafood restaurant specializing in Caribbean and Thai fare, he plays a video while explaining how to deploy the side-scan sonar and all its cable. Then we see what a "hit" looks like in his adult version of Battleship — a shadow materializing on the otherwise gold picture.

The sonar's completed image of the USS *Moray* found off San Clemente, California, is shown side-by-side with a photo of the ship before it sank: The profiles are identical. When it comes to searching the bottom with sonar, there's no doubt about what you have found.

"I can see more on the bottom in 10 minutes on sonar than I can with 10 years of diving," he says. "I got hooked."

I didn't think anything so technical could be this much fun. And yet, Capone compares his work to playing video games, and I can see why, even wondering if he might inspire a new PADI specialty: Sonar Specialist.

THE DOLPHIN LADY

Something gray shoots from the water. I'm with Dudzinski and Sea Saba divemaster Kat DeStefano on the fly bridge of *Sea Dragon*, scouting for dolphins to snorkel with. But what we think is early success



Vince Capone teaches how sonar locates wrecks on the seafloor (below).

turns out to be just flying fish. Although disappointed, I'm glad this gives Dudzinski a chance to finish telling us about *Dolphins*, the IMAX movie that she starred in with Pierce Brosnan in 2000.

"I had to plead with them not to dub over the entire thing with man-made dolphin noises," she says. I can't help but raise my eyebrow. "Not one of the dolphin noises from that 1960s series *Flipper* was made by a dolphin," she explains.

I think back to the *eh-eh-eh* calls that *Flipper* allegedly made. No wonder it's so easy for us to imitate dolphins. We've all been imitating humans imitating dolphins. I have much to learn.

That afternoon we struck out in finding a pod to swim with, but we learned that dolphins fight in gangs to establish dominance, that a pectoral fin rub means different things when targeted at different parts of another's body — and that the meaning differs among a pod of dolphins in the Bahamas and one in Japan.

She likens the difference between dolphin communities to those between



nations. It takes time and keen observation to pick up on the subtleties, but the reward seems akin to why we travel. Whether across the ocean or into it — or to an event such as Sea & Learn — we're all trying to add a few more planks to that bridge toward understanding, building on one surprise at a time.

FIVE DON'T-MISS DIVES 1. **Man O' War Shoal** This twin-peaked pinnacle bursts with life, from batfish, flying gurnards and rays on the sand, to eels, jawfish and black durgoon among the reef. 2. **Third Encounter** Groupers and sharks jockey for feeding position at this pinnacle. 3. **Eye of the Needle** This iconic spindle of reef nosing up to 90 feet attracts sharks and other curious predators. 4. **Tent Reef** For a mellow ecotour, cruise this reef slowly to find frogfish and seahorses. 5. **Twilight Zone** This current-swept pinnacle attracts clouds of bluehead wrasse and rainbow runners.

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