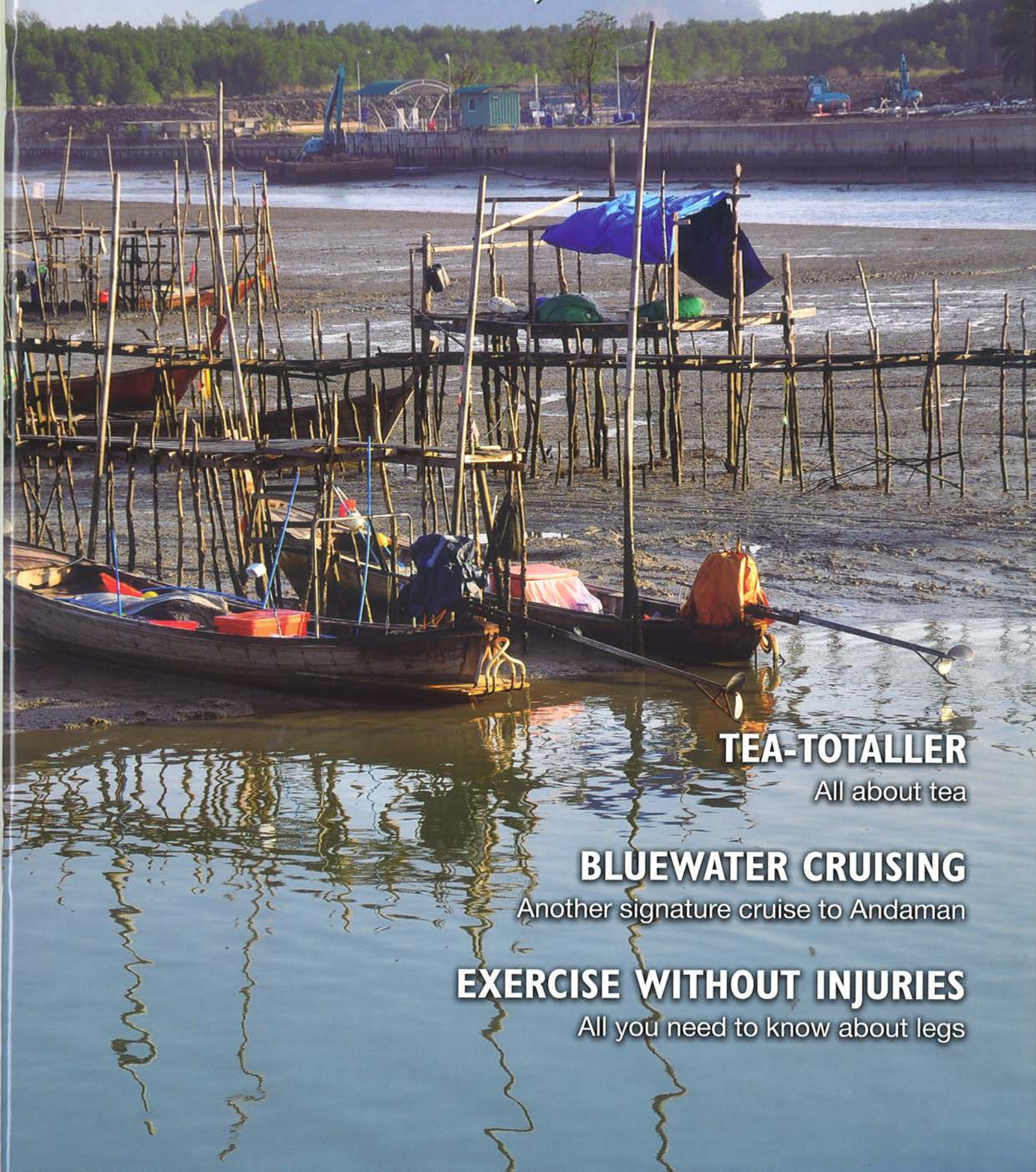


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Thar She Blows!



A coalition sets out in search of the elusive Sri Lankan blue whale and discovers the dangers that are threatening the population.
By Abigail Alling



I awake to the rolling sea and the light of dawn creeping into the foredeck cabin. I can hear the bilge being pumped by hand, while another footstep heads to the bow to ready our departure. We have 6 miles to motor after weighing anchor, to start our next two 25 nm-transects across the shipping lane in southern Sri Lanka. I rise to join my friends on the platform to power-up a computer base-station. This will record our observations set up by my colleague, Jonathan Gordon. The date is 21 March.

The Sri Lankan blue whale is a sub-species of the big blue, the largest creature known to have ever existed in our biosphere. Its awe-inspiring size makes sightings easy when the animal surfaces because it has a tall (about 20 feet) misty exhale called a blow, coined by the whalers "thar she blows!" This relatively unknown but probably endangered population is thought to live in the Northern Indian Ocean basin. They do not migrate to the Antarctic where the big blue whales gather. Instead this population feeds in areas of tropical upwelling where the underwater landscape drops, like canyon-lands, at predictable 1,000-metre and 3,000-metre zones. Such areas surround the coast of Sri Lanka, which provide habitat for 28 or more species of marine mammals known to inhabit Sri Lankan waters at some point during the year.

Unfortunately for this blue whale population, there is a shipping lane that runs along the southern coast as well. This results in an unknown number of ship-strikes. Our task with the University of Ruhuna, and Raja & the Whales, is to learn where the whales are distributed around these lanes, and the Indian Ocean. With us to assess the situation and help arrive at some thoughtful policy recommendations is Russell Leaper, and from the IWC and the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

Moments before we start the transect, Captain Raja takes the port lookout; Mark is already at the helm; Kitty on the computer data entry, and I move to starboard side lookout. Mark calls out "3, 2, 1" and then turns Raja & the Whales vessel 90 degrees to starboard. We have moved into the

first hour of our watch. All eyes are attentively scanning the horizon forward of the beam. It's a beautiful morning, we can see clearly and the seas are calm.

"Blow! Whale bearing 195 and about 800 metres away," whoops Raja who simultaneously grins and says "hello blues!"

We settle down waiting for the next cue. We can see the ships transiting perpendicular to us only a few miles ahead in the shipping lane. An enormous tanker is passing: Its overall length is more than 200 metres and it must be carrying hundreds of thousands of DWT (dead weight tonnage) of fuel. Following it is a cargo ship. Both are heading west because the lane closest to the coast is a 3 nm-wide westbound shipping lane. Soon we will cross a 3 nm 'break down lane' and then enter the 3 nm eastbound shipping lane. Our objective is to then pass 13 nm south, outside of the lanes and offshore, past the 3,000-metre drop-off to learn where the aggregation of whales vanish.

Whoosh! Startled, I look down and there, just within 10 metres of Raja & the Whales rises a 60-foot-long blue whale. I laugh with merriment and thank the whale for joining our parade. Kitty logs its presence in the computer journal, the closest encounter yet with these giants.

Over the course of several months this year, 1,413 km of transects were carried out to assess the distribution of blue whales. By May, it was clear that the highest densities were observed in the shipping lanes, suggesting severe risk of ship strikes. While it is important to continue to hone our understanding about this situation during the next field season, it is now time to turn our attention to build a coalition of Sri Lankan and international efforts, to arrive at effective measures to keep ships and whales apart. This is not a challenge unique to Sri Lanka, it is a growing problem occurring around the world as more and more ships take to the sea.

With great appreciation to Swire Pacific Offshore, The Ward Family Foundation and The Kopcho Family Foundation.

Please join our efforts and follow our progress at www.biospherefoundation.org