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THE TRIBUTE ISSUE

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Photos by Abigail Alling, Megan Engle and Salva Sanchez

A surreal encounter with sperm whales over 30 years ago, comes around full circle as they stay true to a silent pact to meet once more in the vastness of the Indian Ocean.

By **Abigail Alling**

Years ago, off the NE coast of Sri Lanka, five sperm whales circled our 33-foot vessel, rose out of the water to look at who we were, and dove under its hull in what appeared to be a lovely dance and display of joy.

We had been following their clicks for days using a directional hydrophone. No matter how deep and how long they dove, these whales found themselves with us, their surface ship-friend, bobbing by their side with a crew of delighted people. Obviously we must have raised their curiosity because the white belly of the ship that was filled with busy excited people top-side, must have been an unusual sight.

What was even more curious was the fact that they seemed to be reading our minds. For on this soft sunset evening, we were lamenting the fact that it was our last day at sea for the year, and possibly for a long time. We were a team of three that had been tasked by WWF International to study the sperm whales in support of the 1979 Indian Ocean Marine Mammal Sanctuary that had been declared by the International Whaling Commission. It was a three-year programme and this was our last day. Additionally, the SW monsoon was coming and with it, rough weather; moreover a Sri Lankan Civil War was brewing that would cease our work offshore for decades. That was April 1984.

I was a young graduate student at the time, and was deeply touched by the conscious and apparent creative being of these whales. I made a promise to

return to learn about the distribution and behaviour of these whales in support of conservation and education initiatives in the Indian Ocean. It was a pact initiated by them, and made then and there, between us.

Finally the day arrived in February 2015, off Mullaittivu (NE Sri Lanka) when we met again at sea. As sailing yacht *Mir* approached the location where we last saw the whales in 1984, I peered over the bow and met the eye of a sperm whale gazing back. In that moment I realised the promise was kept.

With the help of Biosphere Foundation and friends, sailing vessel *Mir* has returned to learn about the distribution and abundance of sperm whales and blue whales along the Sri Lanka coast, in order to provide necessary information to avert ship-strikes along the southern coast. Furthermore, these whales are possibly threatened by drift net entanglement, seismic activity, habitat destruction and noise pollution.

Working with the University of Ruhuna, *Raja & The Whales*, and the International Fund for Animal Welfare, our urgent task is timely. Together, we hope to find solutions to protect these endangered whale populations. 🐋

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