



Oahu & the Search for Higher Intelligence

Talkin[🐬] Dolphins

**Story and Photographs
by Kieth Harmon Snow**



I can hear the dolphins coming, the blasts of air from their blowholes sounding like gunshots over the waves as they surface and breathe and dive. I'm alone in the ocean, no boat, no lifejacket, a half-mile offshore, bobbing in the waves, and I'm drifting over the undersea cave of a monster tiger shark. Inhaling, sinking down and spinning around like a wide-eyed seahorse suspended in midwater, I see the dolphins coming on me...

John Kahele, he get big mana. He like the ocean: you know there so much happenin' unda the skin, but you see ony what the big water choose reveal. John Kahele like that too. He no say nothin', but you know there's a lot unda the skin.

The dolphin experts don't talk with John Kahele. Some folks say that's why they don't know much about the dolphins, except maybe how much they don't know. They know some things, fantastic things, scientific things. But John Kahele he touch the unknown, and he figure we humans—we no get consciousness—that the dolphins they try tell us something. It da mana—da power—and John Kahele, he get big mana.

A l o h a (t o l o v e)

He's also pure Hawai'ian. I find John Kahele sitting under a thorn tree by the road. He's got the big water out front and the cactus desert that slopes up to the Ka'ala Mountains behind him. John Kahele is sitting there, worrying about nothing, talkin' story with the wind. Sometimes his friends stop by and they all talk story. John Kahele calls this paradise.

John can see the dolphins coming far off by the shiver on the skin of the sea. If you got aloha, he might tell you about Leilani—"wreath of heaven"—the dolphin that gave birth while he was filming video underwater. He named the little one Moku—"the severed one, the one who stands alone, watching the others."

John touched my heart with a story about a boy in a wheelchair whom he took to swim with the dolphins. He touched my fear with his stories about swimming alone offshore at night here, when all things fear the sharks—because the sharks are feeding—and the sharks fear nothing.

"There's a big tige out there in a cave." John Kahele points offshore. "His back tail come three foot outta the water. He fifteen foot long and two ton of fish. They big sharks, bra'. Look like baby whale. He swim round me and people see the fin and they say: 'that must be John.'"

That's mana. Live and let live. John Kahele is no legend, but the National Geographic came looking for his stories and got nothin', because when they come they ask John Kahele "where's the Hawai'ian photographer who swims with wild dolphins," and John Kahele, he say, "Never heard of him, bra'."

"I'm protective of the dolphins," John said, the day we met. I come riding down the road on my bike and I see right off that John Kahele, he's kahuna—Hawai'ian spirit man—and that draws me back here day after day.

When John sees the dolphins coming he tells me how

to do it, and forgetting all the stories about sharks—local folks saw a great white lunge out of the water and bite a dolphin in half here—I swim out to meet them. That's how John and I become friends. That's how I find myself a half-mile offshore with the big, wild fish coming on.

M a l a m a (t o c a r e f o r)

"Dolphins aren't fish," says Julie Rocho-Levine of Dolphin Quest Oahu. Well, I say, dolphins got fins, and a tail, and they got a lot of mana, and when they are zooming on you in the open ocean, faster than you can imagine, porpoising through the iron waves, the distinction is as blurry as swimming open-eyed without a mask.

You'll find Dolphin Quest at Kahala Mandarin Oriental, a seaside resort on Oahu's south shore. There are no sharks at Kahala Mandarin: the lagoon is home to six captive-born Atlantic bottlenose dolphins. (Pacific spinner dolphins are the most common dolphins in Hawai'i. Spotted dolphins are seen here too, but most stay offshore.)

The programs at Dolphin Quest are no risk—no riptides, no sharks—anyone can swim with dolphins. While I rack up 45 minutes of joy floating in the lagoon with these extraterrestrial mammals, Julie Rocho-Levine is living the dream job: she's spent five years working with



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dolphins here. Imagine working in a bathing suit every day, negotiating your existence with beings of higher intelligence, sharing a little sushi now and then.

“I love my job.” Julie’s happiness is infectious. Everyone—dolphins, humans, young and old—is excited about the human-dolphin encounter. The dolphins are strong, solid, intimidating. They zoom around, dive out of sight, leap into the air and flip on command. There is Lono (age 20); Niele (10); Kai Nalu (8) and his brother Nai Noa (7); Liho (10) and his brother Hoku (14). Even the young woman (67) who can’t swim is laughing as she floats out to meet them.




Dolphins have personalities, they form intimate friendships and relationships, and both captive and wild dolphins can communicate and form deep emotional bonds with humans. Internship programs at Honolulu’s Kewalo Basin Marine Mammals Laboratory were suspended after the dolphins all died. “Our beloved dolphins passed away a year ago from cancer and related complications,” Dr. Adam Pack told me, sadly. “It was devastating to all of us who had worked with these wonderful, intelligent animals for decades.”

Julie Rocko-Levine has yet to suffer the trauma of losing a dolphin. “My job is wonderful.” She is clearly full of wonder. Julie is helping set up an electrocardiogram on Nai Noa: turns out—as John Kahele is quick to tell you—scientists know nothing about the hearts of dolphins. “It’s everything that I ever wanted it to be. I wanted to work with animals, to be an educator.”

I spend my days at Kahala Mandarin Oriental between surf and sun, and nights in the moonlight, but I always return to the spectacle of dolphins being in the lagoon. Dolphins clearly bring joy to people. Do people bring joy to dolphins?

“From all the behaviors they are showing us they seem absolutely happy,” Julie said. “We hope people will come





here and learn about dolphins. When people see how we are with the dolphins, it lures them to the program. Through the help of the dolphins—my partners—I really believe I can get people to have a greater motivation to care for our wildlife and our oceans.”

“They used to get dolphins all over,” John Kahele had said. “How many? Thousands.” John Kahele waved his arm over the horizons of his paradise. “They stretch from this bay to the other bay. That was eleven years ago.”

Some folks say that dolphin communities will separate, when the pod gets too big and split off to find other resting grounds; some folks say dolphins been swimming around Hawai’i over 800 years.

“My grandpa he say, ma kau kau hele—’lets go to ocean,’” says John Kahele. “On the edge of the reef we see the dolphins, and grandpa—it like he no there, bra’, like he in a trance—he say Mahalo Nai’a—’thank you dolphin’—and then he start fishin’. He say three, four generations before him was no dolphins. I always wonda ‘bout that.”

Paha’oha’o (to wonder)

I often rise before the sun breaks through the palm trees, when the surfers are rubbing wax onto their boards and sleepy seeds out of their eyes. The air is chill, and the die-hard surfers are walkin’ on water by the time I jump ship with Wild Side Specialty Tours.

On deck with the catamaran Island Spirit are vacationing couples from the mainland. Everyone is full of anticipation and hope. We have all traveled far, to paradise, and we all want our day in the sun with the big fish.

“Cetaceans are not fish,” Tori Cullins reminds me. Captains Tori and Armin Cullins founded Wild Side to model responsible ecotourism, and Tori founded the Wild Dolphin Foundation to benefit cetaceans and outreach the findings. She works with turtle, dolphin and monk seal stranding teams and she’s a former specialist with the Hawai’ian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary.

Frieda Kat (19) is also cruising with Island Spirit today. A volunteer with the Wild Dolphin Foundation internship program, Frieda spends her days snorkeling and dolphin spotting, categorizing human-dolphin encounters and tour boat behaviors.

Motoring out of Wai’anae Harbor I feel that old thrill of the open sea. People sunbathe on the bow and hover on deck, and everyone watches for cetaceans. I’m thinking

“I tell everyone who comes to swim in the ocean here that you are entering a wilderness experience,” says William Aila. “When you do that, you agree to become part of the food chain.”



about my talk with harbormaster William Aila, who's lived in Wai'anae for 47 years—along with generations of Aila before him—and he's worked eighteen of these with the Department of Land and Natural Resources.

"There's a lot of pressure on wild dolphins now because of tourism," William Aila said. "This whole area used to be an estuary coming out of the mountains. There were thousands of birds and ducks. Now there's less habitat, less fish, less coral, less lobsters, and more people."

"Talk to old timers about Makua Bay. They say when the fish came in the whole bay was black. Yok's beach too," he says. Yok's is named for the Japanese signalman Yokohama, who worked the train that once connected Honolulu and Ka'ena point. "Hawai'ians knew it as Keawa'ula. 'Ula' means 'red' and 'keawa' means 'bay,' and the whole bay was red with squid."

"Did you grow up with Flipper?" William Aila cited the 1960's TV sitcom about the happy-go-lucky Atlantic bottlenose dolphin. "People's perceptions about dolphins are clouded by the Flipper story." I watched Flipper for years as a kid, but dolphins are not always peaceful, loving creatures, with a smile frozen on their face: they can be extremely vicious. "I tell everyone who comes to swim in the ocean here that you are entering a wilderness experience," William Aila adds. "When you do that, you agree to become part of the food chain."

N a ' a u P o n o (to nurture a deep sense of justice)

Island Spirit is cruising. The sun has crested the Ka'ala Mountains. Iridescent flying fish flash out of sea and into sun and disappear like shooting stars. Captain Tori is



Kauai Island

Lanai Island

Wings Spanned Over Oahu

Oahu Island
Honolulu

Oahu is a miracle of diversity, a paradise of opportunity for people of any age or physical condition. The island offers unlimited choices for the seafarer and landlubber alike.

The windward shore along the Kam Highway (Rt. 83) from Haunama Bay to Kahuku Point sports countless havens of culture and society. There are nook-and-cranny clam shacks and galleries, like Sunshine Arts Hawai'i (47-653 Kam Highway, www.sunshinearts.net), packed with unique works by local artists.



Inland Oahu is lush with rainforests and waterfalls. Hanauma Bay is a snorkelers' paradise teeming with fishes all too casually habituated to giggling people in peeping masks: one tends to for-

get this is wilderness. Nearby Sea Life Park offers the opposite experience: the chance to explore the miracle of the ocean with shoes on. You can swim with dolphins here: the Atlantic bottlenose dolphins at Sea Life Park crave the joy of human friendship from two-legged visitors.

Oahu's lee shore offers another face of Hawai'i. At Makaha Beach you'll find Buffalo, a proud Hawai'ian, namesake of the famed Buffalo Classic surf competition. The north shore offers big, world-class surf competitions at Sunset Beach or the Banzai Pipeline.

The wildest part of the island is the roadless Ka'ena Point. Here is remote and fantastic scenery and the mingling of worlds—where the albatross spreads its seven-foot wingspan and soars over Oahu.



explaining the etiquette of dolphin swimming. Key points: respect, look, listen, be aware, and be prepared to sacrifice. I am wondering about becoming the next dinner for some big fish. All things pass, so too will I.

“Be sensitive to the number of dolphins versus the potential overcrowdedness of two-leggeds,” Tori tells us. “Swim gently, don’t chase or pursue. Always respect their personal space. If a dolphin approaches, don’t reach out to touch: these dolphins are totally free and wild and they have an acute sense of touch. Touching or grabbing a dolphin is illegal and is guaranteed to scare them away.”

Captain Armin monitors the VHF radio, listening in on other tour operators: some operators share sightings info, some don’t; some guarantee a swim with dolphins, or your money back. Tori and Armin promise only their best effort, in good faith, with integrity. “Due to increasing visitation to the dolphin’s habitat we will not force in-water-encounters on the animals,” reads their policy, based in ethics and respect, “nor on you.”

But the dolphins elude us today. Tour boats pass by, circle the bays, motor off and disappear. Kayakers launch off one beach, paddle around and wait, paddle back to shore for a lunch served with hula dancing and a girl strumming ukelele. Clients on the *Island Spirit* sigh, scan the horizon, rub suntan oil over their resignation: their only chance to meet the dolphins has been foiled by an uncooperative wilderness.

Another day with *Island Spirit*, and the dolphins find us. Everyone swims, and I am reminded that laughing underwater is a risky human behavior.

Olakino Maika’i (to live healthily)

Still another day and dolphins school off the bow for miles. They flip and tease. They launch and spin—they are Spinner dolphins. They stream through the water, frolicking belly-to-belly in shameless dolphin sex. We humans stay on decks: the resting dolphins are overexcited.

The desire for dolphin encounters breeds competition and aggression amongst both swimmers and tour boats. But we humans often suffer from a grasping state of being: this dolphinlust infected me too.

My dolphin quest is a lesson in being. When I let go of expectations and open my eyes to the mystery, I see. The more I open to being here and now, the more the ocean reveals. Such is the gift of tiny yellow fish that hover inquisitively and peer into my mask with wonder.

“Immerse yourself in the joy of each moment,” writes author Bobbie Sandoz in *Listening to Wild Dolphins*, “rather than submit to the repelling energies of disappointment simply because future dreams have not yet arrived.



Anytime you are filled with attractive energies, the goodness of life will draw near and shower its blessings on you.”

John Kahele echoed this mantra each time he sent me off, snorkel-and-finned, into the salty surf. One day, caught up in the anxiety of the approaching pod, and thinking I can call the dolphins by cooing underwater, they swim right by me.

“They was all over you, eh bra’.” John Kahele is laughing. Sitting under his tree, he watched the pod pass me by. This is not for everyone, I think. I’m a strong swimmer, but it took me over 30 minutes to beat the choppy waves, even with big swim fins and a strong and constant stroke, and a few mouthfuls of saltwater. Desire and frustration got the best of me. “They was jumpin’ and splashin’. You can’t be grasping for the dolphins, bra’.”

“You can’t be sendin’ out negative or aggressive energy.” John Kahele drove the point home. “When I go at night I get no fear, bra’. It like an aura—everything know I not out there fo’ harm nothing and nothing harm me. And the dolphins get sonar. They feel you energy as soon you in the water. I know they get sonar, bra’, I see them stun schools of fish—paralyze them. That’s mana.”

‘Imi ‘Ike (to seek knowledge)

“Dolphins use echolocation to find their prey.” Dr. Whitlow Au is describing the “clicks” or pulses of dolphin biosonar. “And they have a strong dependence on nighttime feeding.”

I find the famous dolphin researcher, “Whit” Au, at the University of Hawai’i’s Institute of Marine Biology, on tiny Coconut Island. The surrounding Kaneohe Bay is rainbows of corals and fish, and I want to dive out of the skiff that takes me there. Dr. Au is waiting at the pier.

“We’re not smart enough to do what dolphins can do,” Au admits. He’s a congenial and humble scientist, in high demand for his expertise. “My focus is on how dolphins use their sonar in the wild: how the sound gets out there and how is it received.”

Understanding dolphin sonar and communications is a decades-old science in its infancy. Dolphins can swim in perfect synchronicity, in a coordinated underwater ballet, even out of sight of each other. They can vary sonar emissions as they close in on a target, and they have unique “signature” whistles to communicate with the pod. The dolphins’ extraordinary hearing and telepathic powers are beyond our wildest dreams. These are creatures whose enlightenment far surpasses that of human beings.

Dolphins have complex memory maps of familiar ocean terrain. They sleep by day, in motion, flipping a fin now and then as they cruise over sandy bottom bays where sharks—foreign objects that don’t fit the terrain maps





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inscribed in their brains—easily stand out. Dolphins sleep one-half of the brain at a time, and they turn off or ramp-down their echolocation during the day.

“If people try to swim with wild dolphins, it is likely they will disturb resting animals,” says Dr. Paul Nachtigall, a renowned colleague of Whitlow Au. “When spinners come into the bays during the day after long nights of feeding they really need to rest. If people want to swim with dolphins, I recommend Dolphin Quest.”

Dolphin survival revolves around sensitive energy budgets. According to many marine specialists, the dolphins are leaving us. Hydrodynamics, buoyancy, thermoregulatory mechanisms, social organizations and predator/prey relations all combine with rapidly changing environmental factors—and human activities—to dictate survival.

“They live right on the edge,” says Whit Au. “There’s a lot known and a lot not known about dolphins.”

L o k a h i (h a r m o n y)

The headwind gale that blows out of the north had not yet risen the morning I rode up the shore to see John Kahele for the last time. I peddled dreamily along, eating for breakfast the little surprises I see along the way. My swim fins hung off the back of my bike like the webbed feet of a giant, blue bird.

The red bougainvillea was blooming over the gate of the local ranch, and, when I passed, the cattle bolted into the thorn bush, raising a cloud of white egrets. Exotic peacocks screamed and ran like trespassers who knew they didn’t belong there. Frightened mongoose scurried low-bellied across the road and disappeared too.

Cresting the hill before the big, long bay, there’s a march of migrating snails carrying their shells across the road like crosses. Rolling down the hill I coast for a mile, no hands, zigzagging in and out of the shadows of the Ka’ala mountains and into the shade of the last tree at the end of this paradise beach.

“You late, bra?” John Kahele had his binoculars and his swim fins out. “I goin’ miss you coastin’ down the road on your bicycle every mornin’.”

“Any dolphins today?” I was scanning the big blue for dolphin sign.

“You want me call the dolphins?” John Kahele walked out on the rocks and raised his arms and chanted something in Hawai’ian—until laughter spilled out of his mouth and his big copper belly bounced. “Nobody can call the dolphins,” he told me the day we met. “If they know you, and they trust you, maybe they will come.”

I sat down and waited. Hours passed. John Kahele talked a little dolphin story. We sat a long time in silence, watching the tour boats come and go. But the dolphins



didn’t come, and I was leaving Oahu.

About noon I peddle off. The albatross are soaring above me, and the sunshine colors of this place fill me up. I’m loving life, and I’m thinking about freedom.

“I took a 12-year-old boy who get multiple sclerosis out to swim dolphins,” John Kahele said that day. “I had one life vest and I say, ‘You wan go out and see dolphins?’ His parents was pushin’ the wheel chair on the beach and they thinkin’ I crazy, but my friend say, ‘No worries. John take plenny people out who can’t walk.’”

“So we get there and we wait. Then Moku came zoomin’ in and he jumpin’ all over and the boy was all happy. I could see he was so happy, and I move away, and there was fins swimmin’ all around him and there was hundreds of dolphins. The boy’s mother was cryin’ and all that, and the boy was so happy.”

I’ll never forget that story, brings tears to my eyes every time, because I’ll never forget how I floated over that tiger’s cave, and how the wild dolphins came on me. I’m not going to tell you about my dolphin encounter, because some things just can’t be put into words. It’s the same with John Kahele. The last thing he said to me was: “Don’t tell anyone about this place.” He looked me straight in the eye. He was serious. “Don’t mention the name...”

L o k o m a i k a ' i (t o s h a r e w i t h e a c h o t h e r)

Somewhere on the long coast of Oahu there’s a pure Hawai’ian man sitting quietly under the last tree at the end of a long, white sand beach. That be John Kahele. Now you may think I done you wrong, not tellin’ where to find him. But I think John Kahele got something to share with the world, something that might do people good, something that can’t be said in no words. And if that’s true, then nothin’ gonna keep you from him. John Kahele, he get big mana. He be talkin’ dolphin story, with the dolphins. 