

Bayswatch

*The South Australian Government recently announced two new land-based conservation parks for Eyre Peninsula's Chain of Bays, protecting habitat and wildlife including endangered sea lions and birds of prey. It was a victory for the Friends of Sceale Bay, a small group of surfers and environmentalists that has, for a decade, fought to preserve this coastal wilderness. But, as **Paul Mitchell** explains, the struggle continues.*

A 23-year-old surfer and photographer pulls his EH Holden wagon to a stop at a remote coastal wetland lake and takes in the view. It's 1990, and Grant Hobson has just driven 1500km from Melbourne to Sceale Bay, on the west coast of South Australia's Eyre Peninsula. To document the moment, he points his camera out the car window and takes a photo. He knows it's impossible, but he still tries to do justice to the environment's silence and grandeur.

Hobson has been here before, but this is his first visit alone. He's just back from Asia, where he yearned for landscapes that meant something to him. He knows he's on a formative journey, but doesn't know the photo he's just taken will be one of many thousands he'll shoot over the next 22 years; images that will play a significant role in helping defend this unique coastal ecosystem.

Armed only with a 6x7 medium-format camera, a few boxes of black-and-white film, a surfboard and a wetsuit, Hobson will spend the next three months living in a beach shack. He'll explore the Chain of Bays, the name he and the Friends of Sceale Bay, the group of surfers and environmentalists he'll later form, will give this coastline. Governments now use the same term to describe the pristine coast that extends from Streaky Bay in the north, to Anxious Bay, 60km to the south.

"Everywhere I went, I was surrounded by silence, nature and space; it was in profound contrast to Asia," the now 46-year-old Hobson describes when I meet him at his home in Melbourne's west. "I was a young photographer, interested in recording and exploring, in imagery, this coast and its inhabitants. I just soaked it up."

Hobson met local surfing legend, Bob 'Spike' Minnican, who shared with Hobson his knowledge of the waves, wind, tides...and also Cooper's Pale Ale. Minnican would later become a lynchpin in the Friends of Sceale Bay.

"Culturally, Streaky Bay [the closest town to Sceale Bay] was still living in the 1950s then. It was a wonderful Australian country fishing community, and it had this sort of 1970s surf culture interwoven with it."

Hobson fell in love with the bays and was a regular visitor for the next decade, indulging his passions for surfing, photography, free diving (without scuba gear) and recreational fishing. It was a paradise few knew about, and for years it remained unspoiled and largely untouched.

"There were no restrictions on where you could go or what you could do, so it was self-regulated. It was managed by its isolation and heat; people went there purely to enjoy it. You don't see too many local surfers trashing their place; they have an inherent interest in preserving the natural landscape and marine environment."

In order to keep the region intact, Hobson believed it needed to remain free of exploitation by the surf industry. He explains, “The surf industry takes no responsibility for the social and environmental mess it leaves behind once it has ‘discovered’ a new place. Early on there was a clear message issued to it, discouraging the use of this place as a backdrop from which to flog their sunglasses, boardshorts or whatever else they wanted to import and move.”

Early last decade, Hobson saw the landscape begin to change, literally.

“A few people started to wake up to the potential of the area in relation to the whole ‘Sea Change’ push that was happening. A lot of properties in and around the Chain of Bays area, which had been considered marginal cropping land, all of a sudden became potentially a massive bonanza for the people who owned them. So they tried to subdivide them and sell them, and build on cliff tops.”

As well as the push for such developments, an aquaculture company wanted to establish a large fish farm in the heart of Sceale Bay. Hobson, Minnican and other concerned people discussed the potential damage to the region’s flora and fauna.

“The fish farm proposal was the main thing that kicked off the Friends,” Hobson recalled. “We realised people could actually come in and destroy this environment. A lot of people said, ‘Oh, aquaculture, that sounds good – jobs, growing yellow tail kingfish, nice and clean.’ But the more we looked into it, the more we realised we were being told to host an unplumbed 20-hectare parasite-infested pig farm in our beautiful bay.”

The Friends made the important decision to inform the scientific community. This has been their *modus operandi* in environmental battles ever since, and it was vital in the effort to stop the fish farm.

“We asked marine ecologists about the impacts of marine grow-out industries on the Australian sea lions on a small island just off Cape Blanche in Sceale Bay. The CSIRO said ‘what sea lions?’”

Dr Peter Shaughnessy, a highly experienced seal ecologist, ex-CSIRO scientist and now Honorary Research Associate at the Museum of South Australia, believes the Friends’ work was crucial in saving the previously unrecorded population of the endangered Australian sea lion.

“The publicity by Friends of Sceale Bay about Nicolas Baudin Island and its newly discovered sea lion colony was important in bringing the island to the attention of the general public, and to government officers working in conservation agencies,” Shaughnessy said.

The sea lions were three kilometres from the proposed farm, a development highly likely to impact the colony. On one of the first CSIRO surveys, Hobson took a photo of a female suckling a young pup in the morning light at Cape Blanche, evidence that it was also a breeding zone. During fierce dialogue about the pros and cons of the fish farm, the image landed a major spread in *The*

Australian newspaper.

“Former South Australian premier Mike Rann made the announcement in late November 2002 [when Hobson’s photo was published] that it would be ‘reprehensible’ to locate a fish farm next to the breeding sea lions. That win really put the Friends and the Australian sea lion on the map.”

Paul Kelly sang that from little things big things grow. That’s true of the Friends, but in a different sense: the group has remained small, yet its influence has grown significantly. It is an example of how just a few committed people can make a difference for the environment.

Against often-fierce resistance, the Friends have helped win for the Chain of Bays three new land-based conservation parks, including a significant recent Government buyback of coastal land, and a six-year Federal Government Caring for Our Country Project.

“The latter is bringing the Wirangu people back to their ancestral land and seas –Wanna Munda in the Wirangu language – [helping] restore habitat and preserving the natural balance in the Chain of Bays,” Hobson said. The Friends have also been engaged in revegetation projects in the parks.

Surprised at the Friends’ successes, the CSIRO and other conservation agencies have asked Hobson how his group achieved them. He said it was through having a compact, diverse skill base – and strong visual resources. Contributions by committed individuals have been invaluable. And, of course, ‘Spike’s role at the grassroots has been vital.

Hobson says: “I’d describe him as a hard nut with a soft centre. He’s handled the type of local resistance you get in a farming and fishing community. People can be ill informed, sometimes aggressive, and ‘Spike’ is able to express our concerns calmly and clearly without fear. And that has been very important.”

Hobson is keen to emphasise the Friends’ achievements as a team effort, playing down his own role as convener and photographer. But there’s little doubt his two-decade campaign as an environmentalist and artist has been central to the Friends’ efforts.

“We have this combination of skills and I suppose I bring my abilities as a photographer and filmmaker. I’m an observer who has been deeply interested in communicating the precarious state of the amazing wealth of natural heritage in this environment.”

There is still resistance – and the struggle continues. Hobson said South Australia was the last state in Australia to declare marine sanctuary zones, adding that the Chain of Bays had been included in both Commonwealth and State marine conservation initiatives.

“We think there are just ‘more fish in the sea’, but it’s been proven, in any number of studies, that the world’s fisheries are on the brink of collapse – and some of them have *already* collapsed.” To him, it is a case of Australians taking the chance to manage what, in many cases, are pristine marine environments. “The SA Government and industry representatives met for two days in April to

discuss the locations of the sanctuary zones in the new state marine reserves. The outcome saw a radical reduction in the size of proposed zones. In the Chain of Bays marine park...we have seen around a 60 per cent reduction from the initially proposed sanctuary zones.”

This included the omission of what the Friends see as the area’s most significant marine ecological zone. “Protection has been removed from around Nicolas Baudin Island sea lion colony. This is where the majority of Australian Sea Lions are born in the Chain of Bays,” Hobson said, adding that Chain of Bays produced 12 per cent of Australian sea lion pups. “There are now only 12,000 Australian sea lions left [and] this species, unlike other fur seals, has never recovered since early sealers decimated populations in southern Australia.”

Hobson said the latest zone proposals could have been an oversight or an attempt to appease what he describes as “a very small and vocal group of amateur crayfishermen from Sceale Bay.” He adds: “We hope the SA Government can complete the good work it started back in 2002 and preserve the Nicholas Baudin Island sea lions forever. There’s still a narrow window of opportunity for the Premier and the Environment Minister to reconsider this.”

Hobson argues that the percentage the Friends were asking to be declared marine sanctuary zones in the new park were ‘miniscule’ compared to the overall areas where people could still fish. “I’ll show you any number of pictures of me holding fish I’ve caught; I love eating fresh fish and when I go to the shack the rods are front and centre. But I am aware of the situation globally, and the need to provide protection for fish breeding and foraging for our rare marine mammals.”

He says “genuine low-key ecotourism”, sustainable fishing practices and environmental protection should work together to conserve the Chain of Bays – and any other coastal wilderness.

“In the Chain of Bays you can watch the sea eagle flying, we can see the dolphins, the Australian sea lions, and learn the stories of the Wirangu people. Hopefully, we can all continue to experience the same wilderness I saw when I pulled up my car 23 years ago.”

For more information visit the Friends of Sceale Bay at chainofbays.com.au.

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