Leap of faith into the blue

Damien Murphy

When Micheline-Nicole and Curt Jenner started counting humpbacks off Western Australia, they could not spot a fluke to save their lives.

The newly married Sydney-born scientist and her American husband had been working on a research station in Maui, Hawaii, and then moved to WA in the winter of 1990, aged 25 and 27 respectively, in search of new whaling grounds. With little financial support, they built a small tin shed near the last WA whaling station at Cheynes Beach outside Albany and waited for the leviathans.

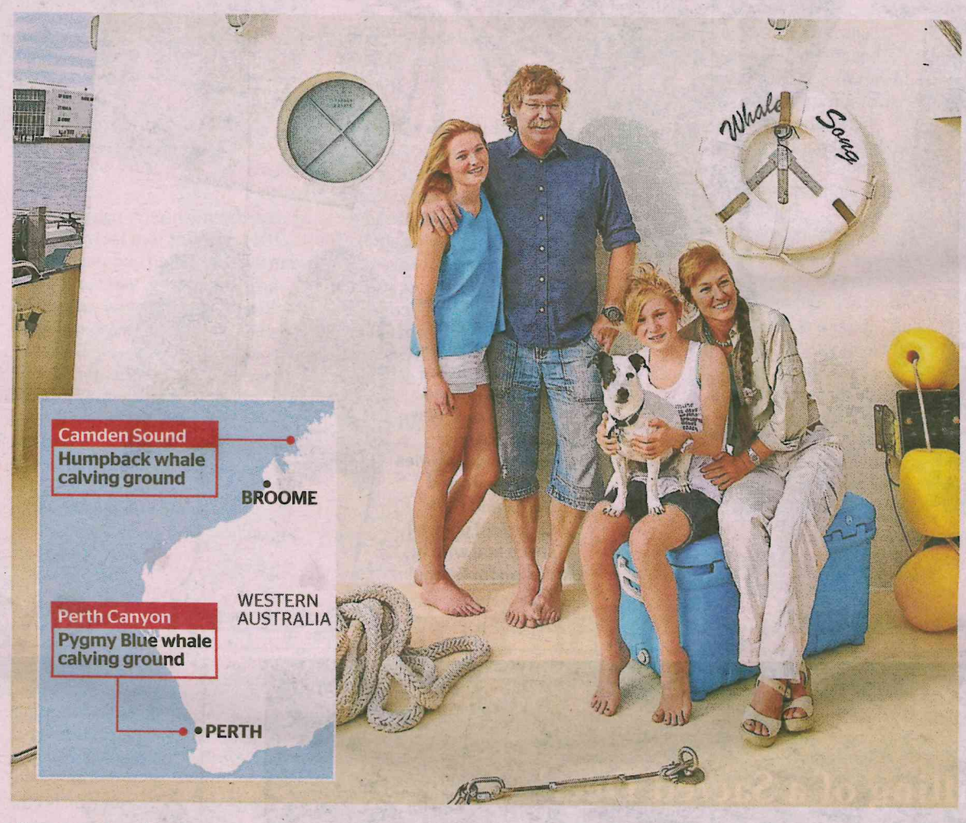
One, two, three, four days passed. Their faith flagged. On the fifth day, a humpback rocketed out of the depths.

"We'd been sitting there watching the water and wondering, fearing even, that we'd made a huge mistake. And then the humpback leaped," Micheline-Nicole recalls. "Call it our leap of faith."

Now 27 years later, the Jenners have been honoured by the Australian Geographic Society with its Lifetime of Conservation Award.

The Jenners built customised boats and raised two daughters on the water – and it's not too far a stretch to say that their work helped put whale research in WA on the map.

Not only have they identified Perth Canyon – a submerged 15-kilometre long, 1.5-kilometre deep Grand Canyon-like fissure on the edge of the continental shelf – as one of only two known high-density feeding locations for endangered pygmy blue whales in Australian waters, but they also found a precious tropical humpback breeding haven in Camden Sound, off the Kimberley coast, a discovery that they kept secret.



Conservationists Curt and Micheline-Nicole Jenner and their daughters on Whale Song, a boat they hand-built. Photos: Australian Geographic Society

The couple quietly lobbied WA governments for 15 years and in 2012 the Camden Sound Marine Park was created to protect the biggest humpback nursery in the Southern Hemisphere, with more than 1000 humpbacks found there during calving season.

The WA whaling industry stopped in 1978. Back then, conservation awareness was in its infancy and although a small band of Australian environmentalists had opposed the slaughter – it was one of Greenpeace Australia's first campaigns – the real reason the whaling station closed was an economic one.

Micheline-Nicole says humpback numbers had slumped to just 200 animals in the 1960s.

"And we knew from 1930s reports that there were 49,000 humpbacks along the coast," she says. "When we first started counting, we estimated that humpback numbers had recovered from the end of whaling: there were then between 2000 and 3000.

"Now, nearly 30 years on, we believe there about 40,000 to 45,000 out there."

The humpback renaissance has been heartening but the Jenners say pygmy blue whales are in deep trouble, their plummeting numbers indicative of catastrophe for themselves and the planet.

Curt says that pre-whaling, 150,000 pygmy blue whales swam in WA waters.

"But that's down to less than 10,000 animals. They are declining at a rate of about 10 per cent each year," he says.

Curt blames the decline on the strange correlation between whale numbers, whale diet and whale faeces.

Filter-feeding, or baleen, whales mostly eat Antarctic krill. The whales can only defecate near the euphotic zone – the top 200-300 metres of the ocean where light can penetrate – and their warm, fluid-like faeces rise to the surface before being dispersed, thereby releasing the nutrients exactly where the phytoplankton that are eaten by krill, need them.

"Less whales means less faecal matter, means less krill, means even less whales," Curt says. "Big, pelagic fish depend on krill. If their numbers crash, the whole system becomes vulnerable. And that's what's happening right now to pygmy blue whales."

Tale of two species

Pygmy blue whale
Sub-species of blue whale
- **Size** up to 21-24 metres.
- **Lifespan** 80 years.
- **Calving grounds** Capes Marine Park near Busselton and the Perth Canyon off Rottnest Island.
- **WA Population** 150,000 pre-whaling industry, now under 10,000.

Humpback whales
- **Size** 18 metres.
- **Lifespan** 50 years.
- **Calving grounds** Camden Sound off Kimberley.
- **WA Population** 1930s records listed 49,000 humpbacks but they were hunted close to extinction in the 1960s. Their numbers have recovered to close to 45,000.

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