

## CREATURE FEATURE

# helen - pacific white-sided dolphin

BY SONDI BRUNER

**The Vancouver Aquarium is one** of the few aquariums in the world to display Pacific white-sided dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*). In fact, it has been home to members of this species since the 1960s. However, in 2002, the Aquarium lost its popular longtime resident female dolphin, Whitewings, at the age of 35, leaving her male companion, Spinnaker, alone. Happily, all that changed in 2005, when the Aquarium acquired three female Pacific white-sided dolphins to join Spinnaker – Laverne, from SeaWorld San Antonio, and two animals, Helen and Hana, that had been rehabilitated to health after being rescued from fishing nets by Japan's Enoshima Aquarium.

With their shiny black backs and sleek white bellies, all four dolphins look pretty much the same, except for 19-year-old Helen, who stands out from the rest because of her pectoral (front) fins, which were severely injured when she was tangled in a fishing net.

"We don't know everything about her past, but obviously she's been through a lot," says Sherri Refcio, the Aquarium's dolphin coordinator. "She's definitely a survivor."

Deemed unreleasable back into the wild by the Japanese government because of her injuries, Helen came to the Aquarium after several years of living at the Enoshima Aquarium.

### Fast learner

When Helen first arrived at the Aquarium, she lived with her main companion, Hana, in the Wild Coast exhibit. Helen had been trained for some basic behaviours at Enoshima, but it was limited. This opened the door for Aquarium staff to begin a more detailed training program for her. She also needed to be trained to move freely through the gates between the different pools before being introduced to Spinnaker and Laverne.

**Helen's injured pectoral fins have not been an impediment to learning new skills at the Vancouver Aquarium. She's pictured here doing a tailwalk.**

PHOTO: Noel Hendrickson

Helen proved to be a fast learner. She was gate-trained quickly, allowing her to move into the main Wild Coast exhibit with the three other dolphins. Over the past two-and-a-half years, she has successfully learned many other behaviours, including tailwalks, speed swimming, breaches (big aerial moves) and slide-outs (where she slides out of the water and onto the dock).

"She's incredible," says Refcio. "Of all the dolphins we have, she's probably the one that learns the fastest. She's very energetic and motivated, and she's always eager to participate in the training sessions."

Helen is bright, curious and social. She loves attention from her trainers, especially when she receives belly rubs, full body rubs and fluke dunks, where Helen raises her tail so the trainers can push it up and down. She enjoys playing with a variety of enrichment items, like ice and balls, and she also seems to love interacting with guests (she can often be spotted looking at visitors through the Wild Coast's underwater viewing window).

As for Helen's pectoral fins, they are monitored closely for any cuts and abrasions

that could lead to infection. But other than that, her smaller fins haven't deterred her in any way.

"I really haven't seen any differences between her and the other dolphins when it comes to learning or performing behaviours," says Refcio. "She's amazing, and she's adapted really, really well. Any kind of difficulties she may have had, she's definitely overcome."

### Triumph over adversity

For staff, visitors and volunteers, Helen draws attention to the detrimental things that can happen when humans interfere with nature.

"I think that Helen is a really great example of what dolphins are faced with out in the ocean," says Refcio. "Particularly with human debris, fishing nets and things like that. She's a great animal to make people aware of what's going on out there."

And further still, Helen's ability to overcome adversity is an inspiration, showing that despite her challenges, she can thrive and live a full life, rich with vitality and purpose. ■

