

Manta Mambo

By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock



I imagine an invitation to a ballet where the theatre is in the open, the seats unreserved, neither a sound man nor wardrobe mistress were hired, the choreographer is one of the cast, the lighting is *au naturel* and the show is neither rehearsed nor repeated. The show has no producer and the makeup artists only sanitize scars or manicure wounds. Yet the show is mesmerizing with no interval and no curtain call. In fact, the human

audiences are the only ones to leave early and that is done unwillingly when, literally, their breath has been taken away and they have run out of air. The show is never advertised as the cast members perform when they feel the conditions are right yet there is no trade union dispute if they don't. These conditions relate neither to pay disputes nor working conditions but often to feasts, orgies and freebies from undersea health spas. The Manta Mambo is performed worldwide circumtropically, possibly at more than one venue at a time. The principle cast members are the ever graceful manta rays, gentle giants of the ocean and the supporting cast are interactive marine creatures.



Manta rays resemble giant underwater butterflies. The large disc shaped body is flanked by huge pectoral fins fashioned like wings. On each side of the cavernous mouth are strange flaps (cephalic fins) that curl and uncurl depending on the presence of gourmet delights. To feed, the fins uncurl forming a giant funnel that channels plankton, shrimp and small





fishes into the mouth where gill rakers sift through the waters extracting nutritious elements. Mantas are giant vacuum cleaners of the ocean. Mantas teeth have evolved



to become denticles or scales which no longer have any feeding functions. The tail is typical of most rays, however their tail lacks a sting. It is thought that mantas evolved from stingrays, sandy bottom dwellers, to become midwater and surface inhabitants. Since the sting's main function was to deter those disturbing the sand dwelling, it was no longer required. The sting rays flattened body shape was retained but the wings grew to accommodate the new nomadic lifestyle. The wing span can be as great as 9m although most attribute 4,5m width. Mantas can cover great distance and speed with a mere few gentle flaps of these wings while the flick of a wing tip enables them to perform a delicate pirouette or change direction in a ticky. Even though

they can weigh up to 1350kg, an effortless ripple of the wings enables them to hover seemingly motionlessly.

Mantas are a bit of an enigma. Little is known of their lifestyle – where do they come from, where do they go, how long is gestation or how long do they live? Scientists have accumulated few facts and many of these are disputed. One birthing theory arose in North Carolina when a harpooned manta tail-walked across the surface while being dragged towards the boat giving birth in the process. Soon tail-walking became an accepted theory of how mantas give birth – but this is the only occasion a manta birth has been witnessed and no thought was given to the stressful situation.

However, it is known from the dissection of mantas that only 1 -2 pups are born with a wing span of approximately 1,2m. Manta sex, on the other hand, has scientists

talking. It has been established that only those mantas with a wing span greater than 4m partake of sexual activities. Manta sex-shows present some impressive manta moves – which could include a repertoire of aerial aerobatics, break dancing, tail walking or even a mix of twists and boogies. Males perform brilliantly to win a female's interest. The happy couple pair





off in a *pas de deux* towards the surface. The male uses his dentricles to grasp her body firmly as he inserts a clasper to transfer sperm in the finale of the act. The couple separate with the male continuing to dance to win another brief duet with a lady.



Little is known about the mantas nocturnal habits largely because humans themselves are diurnal. Off the Kona coast, Hawaii, lights cast from Kona Surf hotel lure huge swarms of plankton to the surface. At night manta rays were seen feeding hungrily on the plankton. The feeding continued well into the night. Soon boat loads of curious divers arrived to witness the free show. The mantas were overwhelmed by the noise made by humans and eventually cancelled their nightly show at this venue. No other documented research has taken place at night.

The supporting cast members vary per show. Frequently remoras or suckerfish grip onto the bellies of the mantas. As the mantas swoop and twist the remoras' tails sway like curtains blowing in the breeze. The mantas dance continues regardless of how many remoras have latched on. Trevally kingfish



sometimes make unannounced appearances. Swimming in the slip stream beneath the giant cloak of the wings the cunning kingfish use the guise to launch ambush attacks on their prey. Juvenile golden trevallies, on the other hand, prefer to swim on the pressure wave in front of the mantas. Bi-colour cleaner wrasse, alias make-up artists, generally exhibit stage fright. These fish are tiny in comparison to the mantas preferring to stay close to the reef. The cleaner wrasse enhance the mantas ballet by preening the mantas of parasites and algae infestations. They dart about frantically near their dressing rooms advertising their grooming services. As a manta arrives, several diligent wrasse



congregate to work swiftly and thoroughly, preparing the mantas for their next act.



Their labour is so appreciated that many manta rehearse their steps near cleaner wrasse studios while waiting their turn. Swoops, waltzes, limbos and even breakdance moves and somersaults are practiced with precision.

The mantas wear no elaborate costumes for their performances yet each is distinguishable. Their colouring varies

across the oceans from predominantly phantom black underneath to albino white. Emblazoned on these backdrops are simple designs - 'fingerprint' markings. The tails are also very distinctive - some are short, some long while others are kinked or even non-existent. Ladies often bear scars from aggressive love-making by the men.

Not every patron is a friendly one. Sadly, in some countries mantas are not revered for their majestic performances but are hunted. Allegedly the wings contain tasty meat, the livers rich in oils and the skin is used as primitive sandpaper. For many years fishermen feared mantas, often referring to them as evil killers. The only logical reason for this is that a live manta landing on a small fishing boat can cause a lot of damage thrashing around. It is the mantas that should fear the fishermen. Mantas snared in fishing nets die a slow death. Generally though, these underwater ballerinas' only natural enemies are killer whales and tiger sharks who have no apparent gourmet preferences.

Today's Manta Mambo is being performed near a school of cleaner wrasse. The current is running strongly allowing the mantas to feed while being stationary for the make-up artists to do their work. Backstage, mantas waiting for their turn in the dressing room, glide through the ocean twisting and turning, spinning, swinging and doing the shimmy. Even acrobatic moves are performed as they execute cartwheels and tumbles mid water or *jeté* right out of the ocean somersaulting before plunging back in. The mantas are excited about the presence of





the opposite sex. Ladies lead the dances as the males vie for position and attention. Gracefully the mantas turn, loop the loop and glide across their fantasy stage in the ocean. The ballet is a beautiful rendition of majestic underwater maneuvers.

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