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JULY 1989

## The Destruction of Dolphins

*In spite of laws intended to protect them, federal indifference and cruel fishing methods once again endanger dolphins*

by Kenneth Brower

The online version of this article appears in two parts. Click here to go to part two or three.

OF the thirty-odd species of oceanic dolphins, none makes a more striking entrance than *Stenella attenuata*, the spotted dolphin. Under water spotted dolphins first appear as white dots against the blue. The beaks of the adults are white-tipped, and that distinctive blaze, viewed head-on, makes a perfect circle. When the vanguard of the school is "echolocating" on you -- examining you sonically -- the beaks all swing your way, and each circular blaze reflects light before any of the rest of the animal does. You see spots before your eyes.

The habitat of the spotted dolphin is clear, deep, tropical ocean. Its home waters are warm, lovely to look at, sparse of life -- a

marine desert. Spotted dolphins roam that country like Bedouins. Their oases are the plumes of upwelling and nutrients in the lee of islands; their ululations are cries rising high above the hearing range of human beings; their dunes are the blue swells. They gather occasionally in herds of a thousand or more -- several schools in a temporary federation -- but more often they are seen in bands of a few hundred. Like many of the ocean's hosts, they are fewer than they once were.

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Awaiting a tribe of spotters in their element is a peculiar experience. You hang from the surface by your snorkel, marking time with a slow churning of your fins. The swell lifts you by the hair, drops you, lifts you again. Beneath you lie two miles of ocean -- a bottomlessness, for all practical purposes, an infinity of blue. When you are new to it, the blue void has a pull. It wants you, tries to call you down. A thousand coruscating shafts of sunlight probe it, illuminating nothing. Nothing is there to illuminate, nothing to establish scale or distance. A tiny gelatinous fragment of salpa, drifting up ten inches from your faceplate, startles you. For an instant it could be anything -- a strange man, a whale, a shark.

From that lambent blue field, featureless yet somehow forever shifting, empty yet pulsing with all the imagined sharp-toothed things that might come out of it, come the spots indeed. You blink behind your faceplate, but the spots remain. They are real, not hallucinations. Around each white

dot a gray dolphin materializes. Five or six quick strokes of the flukes and they are upon you, sleek, fast, graceful legions. They come a little larger than life, for water magnifies. They animate the void. With barrages of clicks and choruses of high-pitched whistling, with speed and hydrodynamic perfection, with curiosity, mission, agenda, and something like humor, they fill up the empty blue.

The first rank of dolphins race past. Behind them a second rank of dots appear, doubtful at first, like the first stars of twilight. The dots jiggle oddly as the beaks cast about for you, and then hold steady when they have fixed on you. Another rank of dots, and then another: the society of *Stenella attenuata* sprints by in waves, the squads of adult males, the gangs of juveniles, the nurseries of females and calves.

The squads of adult males execute close, synchronized flybys and pummel you with sound -- loud bursts of echolocation that are both a threat and a piercing sonic look at you. The males acoustically "see" the air spaces of your lungs, watch your skeleton articulate. The clicks of their echo-sounding proceed from the amplifier in the "melon" -- the dolphin's bulbous forehead -- but the beak tip is so white and prominent that the sound seems to come from that. The beak is the Geiger counter; you are the uranium. As the white tip swings in line with you, the clicks come louder and faster, reach crescendo as the beak draws its bead, and

then recede as the beak swings away again.

*Tick tick tick tick*  
*ticktickTICKTICKTICKTICKtick tick.*

When a squad of males sounds you out in unison, the sensation is like equatorial rain on a tin roof: first a few scattered drops, then the downpour. You don't hear the echolocation so much as feel it. Your whole body becomes tympanic membrane. You really are, for once, all ears.

The gangs of juveniles are curious but don't come so close. They fake boldness. The nurseries keep their distance, small calves nursing on the move or swimming at their mothers' backs, stroke for stroke in perfect synchrony, holding position just above and behind the maternal dorsal fin. Occasionally a larger calf strays off to swim with a rhythm of its own. Now and again a whistling dolphin emits a long, thin stream of bubbles from its blowhole. This seems to signify mild distress, or a low-grade warning. Now and again a dolphin defecates, a slightly grayer stream of bubbles. From a distance the two sorts of contrail are hard to tell apart. If the dolphin is gliding at the moment of emission, the bubbles run out straight behind. If the dolphin is swimming, the action of the flukes beats the contrail into a wavy line.

Dolphins have no shame. They have no private moments. In courtship, foreplay, and sex they are public, and as they pass you see

snatches of dolphin intimacy, if that's the word. One dolphin in a pair will yaw sideways, its pectoral fin pointing to the surface, and then, slowing to let its partner pass above, will allow the tip of its pectoral to trace delicately the length of the partner's belly, past the genital slit. Sometimes the romance is cruder. The amorous dolphin will jam its pectoral into the vicinity of the genital slit and impatiently, with stiff-shouldered jerks, work that area over hard. Mock fights occur, irritations, moments of play. You see only fragments, bits of behavior, for the school never lingers. To the sirens of their whistling (inaudible in the higher ranges even to dogs), to the klaxons of their clicks, they race for that distant fire that oceanic dolphins are forever chasing.

The last dolphin of the last wave pumps by, glances at you in passing, hurries to catch up. Its flukes dematerialize in the blue. The bubbles hang for a while, like vapor trails after the jets are gone. Often a faint whistling is audible, diminuendo. Sometimes, when the dolphins have been feeding, a few silvery flurries of fish scales drift in their wake. The scales catch the sunlight and go incandescent. They are subject to sudden, fitful dances and accelerations, caught up in vortices of turbulence that the dolphins have left behind. They are evidence that a tribe of dolphins really did pass this way. Then, settling away from the surface brightness, the scales go into eclipse. The sunlight ceases to glint from them. The whistling

lingers on in the imagination. It haunts, briefly, the higher wavelengths of memory, and then goes silent even there. The contrails fizz out and dissipate. The ocean is empty blue again.

## **The Undercover Man**

THE BEAKS OF SAM LABUDDE'S FIRST DOLPHINS strained against the net that had formed a canopy over them. Their flukes churned the ocean white. They thronged at the surface, desperate to force slack in the net sufficient to free their blowholes for a breath. Their shrieks and squeals began high in the hearing range of humans and climbed inaudible scales above. LaBudde wanted to scream himself.

The net was brailed, or hauled in. Its red mesh was scarcely visible, and the dolphins snagged in it seemed to levitate from the sea. High above the deck the great spool of the power block, turning by fits and starts, raised and gathered the seine, conveying the dolphins -- some drowned, some still struggling feebly -- up toward the block's tight aperture. The net passed through the block, crushing the dolphins, and then slowly descended to the deck. LaBudde stepped forward with his shipmates and began disentangling dead and dying dolphins from the mesh. The dying trembled in their death throes. The dead stared with eyes wide open. LaBudde noticed that the hue of the iris was different in each animal -- dolphins are individuals

even in death. He noticed his own red arms. A dolphin, the first he had ever touched in his life, had left him bloody to the elbows.

Months later, on land, Sam LaBudde's sleep would be troubled by a recurrent dream in which injured dolphins spoke in cryptic tongues. He might have spared himself the dream, perhaps, had he given vent to his feelings at sea. He could not. LaBudde was not what he seemed -- just another crewman on a Panamanian purse seiner in the eastern tropical Pacific. LaBudde was a spy.

For reasons unclear, schools of spotted dolphins, spinner dolphins, and common dolphins travel in company with schools of yellowfin tuna. The association is commonest in the eastern tropical Pacific (ETP) -- the warm waters west of Mexico, Central America, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and northern Chile. Tuna fishermen have long made use of it, searching for dolphins in order to find fish. Until recently the presence of dolphins simply flagged the location of tuna. Dolphins are conspicuous travelers. ("*Huzza Porpoise*:"Herman Melville wrote in *Moby-Dick*, "I call him thus because he always swims in hilarious shoals, which upon the broad sea keep tossing themselves to heaven like caps in a Fourth-of-July crowd.") Spotted dolphins, which are the greatest broad jumpers of all cetaceans, raise white fountains in the ocean on coming down. Spinner dolphins, whirling like dervishes as they exit the water, make centrifugal re-entries that

scoop holes in the ocean. The holes collapse on themselves with a concussive splash that signals "Brother!" to other spinners and "Yellowfin!" to tuna fishermen.

Until recently the fish underneath the dolphins were caught by rod, line, and baitless hook. It was a fine old Stone Age method. In the Caroline Islands of Micronesia men in outrigger canoes have fished that way for millennia. The lures are iridescent pearl shell. The hooks are turtle shell or steel. No bait is necessary. The pounding outrigger and hull beat up a froth that attracts the tuna, bringing them right up under the stern. The outrigger pounds the sea, the captain mutters his fish magic, the crew yells itself hoarse, the poles dip and rise as the tuna bite at everything and fly aboard in silvery arcs. The dolphins accompanying the fish, too smart to go for baitless hooks, are not much inconvenienced -- unless it is by the loss of their cold-blooded companions and whatever symbiotic advantages the relationship offers them.

All this changed in the early 1960s, with the application of purse-seining techniques to tuna fishing. Since then any dolphins sighted in the ETP have been rounded up with "seal bombs" (underwater explosives that originated in the days of the California sardine fishery, when they were used to discourage seals from raiding the nets) and speedboats and encircled by a mile-long fence of net, its upper edge buoyed by a line



of floats -- the "corkline" -- its lower edge hanging several hundred feet deep. Cables draw the bottom of the seine tight, trapping the dolphins and any tuna swimming underneath. Toward the end of each "set" on dolphins the crew is supposed to follow a procedure called backdown, which is intended to allow the dolphins to escape over the corkline of the net, but often -- in darkness or on high seas, from equipment failure, human error, or some unexpected panic by the dolphins -- something goes wrong and dolphins die. As a rule only a handful drown, or dozens, but occasionally, in what are called disaster sets, hundreds die, even thousands.

The 1960s were catastrophic for dolphins. By the end of the decade between a quarter and a half million dolphins were being killed annually in the ETP. Hardest hit were spotted dolphins, next spinner dolphins, and then common dolphins. Since 1960, according to the best available figures, six million dolphins have been killed by purse seiners in the ETP.

But the real number exceeds six million. National Marine Fisheries Service figures make no allowance for mortality among injured, exhausted, or separated animals. Those bloody dolphins Sam LaBudde pulled from the net, for example -- animals with broken beaks, or with pectoral fins torn from their sockets -- are not counted as dead if they show any signs of life. No allowance is made for shark attacks on hurt, exhausted,

or disoriented dolphins as they leave the net, though such attacks are common. No allowance is made for the stress on and fragmentation of dolphin society after months, years, and now decades of repeated sets. "The moot point is, whether Leviathan can long endure so wide a chase, and so remorseless a havoc," Melville wrote. His concern then was for the great cetaceans, but today the same moot point might be made about the small.

The magnitude of the dolphin slaughter of the 1960s, once it became known, was a driving force behind the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. "It shall be the immediate goal," the MMPA stated, "that the incidental kill or incidental serious injury of marine mammals permitted in the course of commercial fishing operations be reduced to insignificant levels approaching a zero mortality and serious injury rate." To reach that goal in the ETP a schedule was established for decreasing the allowable dolphin kill each year, a research program was funded for the development of dolphin-saving gear and techniques, and an observer program was set up.

This is how things stand in the minds of many today -- the legislation enacted, the problem solved.

In fact, before the ink was dry on the MMPA, the act was being compromised and eroded. The tuna industry has never ceased its direct assaults and end runs on

the law. The government agencies charged with policing the fishermen have been shamefully negligent. The fishermen were given until 1976 before the first quota, an allowable dolphin kill of 78,000, took effect. (This was called a grace period, though that hardly seems the word.) Thus for the first four years of its existence the Marine Mammal Protection Act was nothing of the kind. For the next few years the dolphin kill did decline steadily, as stipulated by the MMPA. (In 1975, before quotas, 166,645 dolphins died in U.S. nets, by the conservative official estimate. In 1977 the official underestimate was only 25,452.)

Then came the Reagan era, and the decline ceased. In 1984, under tuna-industry pressure, the MMPA was amended so that the year's kill quota of 20,500 would apply to every year from then on. The original goal, a dolphin kill "reduced to insignificant levels approaching zero," was abandoned. Under Reagan, funds for research on dolphin-saving gear were greatly reduced, regulations were relaxed, enforcement was softened. Since the MMPA's passage at least 800,000 dolphins have died in U.S. nets alone. The dolphin kill by tuna fishermen in the ETP continues to be the greatest slaughter of marine mammals on earth.

The tuna-dolphin dilemma demonstrates, better even than the archetype, the inexorable dynamic of what Garrett Hardin

has called "the tragedy of the commons." The renewed controversy is a nice lesson, too, on the tenuousness of conservation victories. (Environmental battles are won sometimes, but never the war.) The decline of the dolphins is another illustration of what may prove to be the greatest environmental threat of all: the short attention span of modern man.

SAM LABUDDE IS NOT A SPY IN THE JAMES BOND mold. He is a slender Norwegian-Cherokee of 140 pounds and somewhat more than middle height. He was born in 1956 in Madison, Wisconsin, and moved early in his childhood to southern Indiana. He grew up a Hoosier, at the edge of the Bible Belt, far from the sea. In elementary school music class he was a patriot. He *requested* "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "The Marines' Hymn," and his voice rose loudest of all ("I loved believing in something"). By the time LaBudde left high school, his homeroom teacher could not get him to stand up for any of it, not even the school song. He himself is puzzled at the transformation. "Partly I think it was an awareness of my own heritage and what had happened to the American Indians in this country. It's essentially the same thing that's been done to the land." One thing about his boyhood was peculiar: he hardly grew. On graduation from high school he was scarcely five feet tall.

Graduating, he embarked on one of those

American odysseys: six months working in a factory, a couple of semesters of college, escape from Indiana, a year in San Francisco, odd jobs in Seattle, tree planting in the Cascades, seismic work in the Rockies. Then his pituitary kicked in, and his growth was suddenly vertical as well as geographical. If his life had direction, he thinks, it was movement away from humanity. He liked nature better than man. In his convictions he became an environmentalist. The convictions were formed not by books or tracts but by experience of the world.

"Sometimes, tree planting, we'd drive an hour and a half before sunrise, just to get to where we were planting trees that day. Then you'd come back in late afternoon. The country was all just bombed and gutted. Clear cuts. You can't find any virgin timber in the Cascades. Everywhere you go, you see giant stumps, ten, twelve, fifteen feet across, but you never see *tree* that big.

"I climbed the Grand Teton. I got up there and all I could see was fire. I think I counted eight fires burning from Idaho across Wyoming and up to Montana that day.

Everywhere. It seemed the land had just been *used*...used and abused."

In search of unabused country, he migrated north to Alaska, driving up the Al-Can Highway in winter. He spent four years in

Alaska, working as a machinist's apprentice, a marine engineer, a commercial fisherman, and a seismic crewman again.

"I had a good job," he says, of this second stint of seismic work. "We were on the North Slope, five or six miles offshore on the pack ice. I'd go out in a vehicle behind the surveyors, who were on foot, and check the depth of the ice to see if it was safe for the vehicle in which I was driving to be on top of it." LaBudde's seismic crew was the first to enter the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to prospect for oil. The bad karma of that invasion is balanced, he hopes, by the quarter million Douglas firs he had planted earlier in the Lower Forty-Eight.

In 1984 he left Alaska. "I'm rarely satisfied with where I am," he says. "I haven't had a home since I was eighteen. I haven't really been settled anywhere. I've always wanted to have a home, but I haven't found anything that seems right." On impulse he drove a motorcycle from Alaska back to Indiana. Many of LaBudde's projects have begun in impulse. Impulsiveness lies alongside wanderlust in a spot close to his heart.

He went back to school -- courses in biology, photography, silversmithing -- and finished a four-year undergraduate degree in two years. Then came another period of being at loose ends: apple picking in Wisconsin, a motorcycle trip to the Florida Keys to learn scuba diving, an interlude

trapped in the Keys ("I was waiting tables, doing double shifts in various restaurants, trying to get the hell out of Florida"). The heat and boredom of the Keys triggered an outburst of resumes, and one of these landed him a job as a National Marine Fisheries Service observer on a Japanese trawler in the Bering Sea.

In the Bering Sea, LaBudde decided that what he really wanted to do was work on rain forests. In the summer of 1987, after his NMFS debriefing in Seattle, he cashed his Bering Sea paycheck, climbed into his battered Volkswagen Rabbit, and headed in the general direction of South America. He attempted, unsuccessfully, to climb Mount Rainier, and then, fairly easily, scaled Mount Shasta. He spent a month crisscrossing the Sierra Nevada. Then he glanced into his wallet and realized that he was nearly broke.

"I thought, *San Francisco*--isn't that where all the environmental heavyweights are? So I went to the Nature Conservancy. Very white-collar. 'Well, fill out a form, this is what we have.' They didn't have anything. Nobody there was really willing to talk. So I went over to Greenpeace. They wanted me to work as a canvasser. I thought, Hey, I have experience in a whole bunch of things! I'm a biologist! I need experience in rain-forest issues. So I put a dollar in their donation box and walked out the door."

He dropped by Earth Island Institute, a San

Francisco umbrella organization -- or seed log, perhaps -- for a number of new environmental concerns. One of these, Rainforest Action Network, sounded promising, and he went in to see about a job. Randy Hayes, the founder and director, was on the phone, as usual. Killing time while he waited, LaBudde picked up a copy of *Earth Island Journal*.

"It was the dolphin issue, with the purple cover." he says. "I was just amazed. I was a fisherman, a biologist. I thought I was informed about environmental things. I knew about the depletion of the ozone layer before most people did, and about the destruction of the rain forests. But I had thought whales and dolphins were sacrosanct species, above abuse. Nobody had told me they were being captured in nets, with speedboats and explosives and helicopters. "

Why, LaBudde asked, weren't they telling anyone? They were trying, David Phillips and Todd Steiner, of Earth Island, protested. (They had, after all, produced the very article that this stranger, the Sierra dirt still dark under his fingernails, was holding in his hand.) Earth Island had the facts on the slaughter, Phillips and Steiner said. They had a lot of dry documentation. What they needed was film. Well, LaBudde wondered, couldn't someone get on a tuna boat? He himself was a former fisherman and NMFS observer; he could probably get aboard.



In the following days LaBudde talked the idea over with Phillips and Steiner and with Stan Minasian, the director of the Marine Mammal Fund, another outfit based in San Francisco. LaBudde conferred with William Perrin, the NMFS biologist who had first brought the tuna-dolphin problem to world attention, back in the 1960s. ("He warned me about ending up in concrete galoshes," LaBudde says.) Stan Minasian, more than the others, seemed to believe that LaBudde might pull such a mission off, but neither the Marine Mammal Fund nor Earth Island had the money to help finance it. If LaBudde succeeded in getting aboard a tuna boat, they suggested, then they might be able to get a video camera to him, but that was the most they could do for him. LaBudde still smarts a little at this marginal vote of confidence.

"He was a drifter type," David Phillips remembers. "He looked like he hadn't changed his clothes in a couple of weeks. He had this battered old Volkswagen and he was living out of his car. When he said he was headed down to Ensenada to get on a boat and he went out the door, Todd and I looked at each other and said, 'Sayonara.' What were the odds?"

### **Aboard the Maria Luisa**

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1987 LABUDDE DROVE HIS OLD Volkswagen across the border. His first night in Ensenada he slept on the beach flats south of town. In \_ the

morning he woke to Mexican voices -- six or seven women and their children rooting in burning mounds of garbage for food. He rose, brushed off the sand, and drove to the waterfront to look for work.

At the gate to the docks a work permit was required for entry. LaBudde sneaked in, as he would during the next few days of job hunting, by walking in around the breakwater. Later he discovered that the guard on early-morning duty was an old man who didn't care about permits. If he arrived early enough, he could stroll straight in. For three weeks he drifted from boat to boat, trying to find work. His Spanish was terrible. The fishermen were a varied lot, speaking dialects from all over Hispanic America and Spain. When he asked a captain about a job, he could never be sure whether the answer was yes, no, or maybe. His hopes settled finally on the *Maria Luisa*, a boat of Panamanian registry. The captain, if he understood the man right, always seemed to be telling him to try again in three days or a week.

When not on the waterfront, LaBudde hung out in Ensenada. He was on foot now -- a friend had driven his car back to the States - - and his funds were low, but he survived. "You can live on about two dollars a day in Mexico," he says. "It's not easy -- you have to eat a lot of fish tacos and sleep on the beach . but it can be done." Passing the time, he started writing a novel along the lines of *Watership Down*. The heroes were

hummingbirds, and the story told how their rain forests were being destroyed.

The tuna captains were curious: why would a former Alaskan fisherman like him, a man who could make \$4,000 a month in Alaska, want to work on an Ensenada boat for 30,000 pesos a week -- about \$15? Because he was tired of American life, LaBudde would answer. He was burned out on the United States and wanted to go to the Andes. On a tuna boat he could work his way closer to those mountains while learning Spanish and practicing a trade he knew. It was not a bad story -- there was more than a little truth in all its parts -- and LaBudde's resume was fairly impressive. He had been a commercial fisherman and a machinist. As a mechanic, he pointed out, he had the advantage of literacy in English, the language of the manuals for the American outboard motors that powered the seiner speedboats.

The *Maria Luisa's* captain finally gave LaBudde an unequivocal no, in spite of that. (The man had good instincts, perhaps.) The boat's owner, a Basque lawyer from Panama, was visiting at the time, and LaBudde went over the captain's head to this man. On the one hand, the move was a good one, for the owner hired him immediately. On the other hand, the captain never forgave him and for the next six weeks at sea hardly spoke to him.

Twenty-four hours before the boat's

departure LaBudde caught a bus to the border, rode the trolley into San Diego, and called Stan Minasian in San Francisco. "Stan, listen, I think I can swing a video camera," he said. "It's got to be small, and it's got to be here in San Diego early tomorrow." Minasian replied that he already had a camera picked out, an eight-millimeter Sony Camcorder. He would buy it the next morning and airfreight it down. LaBudde got a room at the Y and took a cab the next morning to the airport. The camera was supposed to arrive at noon, but it missed the first flight. The second flight was supposed to get in at 2:00, but that flight was delayed.

"I was bouncing off the walls," LaBudde remembers. "It was getting late, and I still had a hundred miles to go back to Ensenada. I called Stan and asked him to wire some money. I was going to have to take taxis all the way back to Mexico."

The plane finally arrived at 3:45 and then sat for a time on the field. At the airfreight desk a friendly man from Trinidad and Tobago had just come on shift, and LaBudde explained his problem in some detail. Perhaps the West Indian had always liked the dolphins around Trinidad and Tobago. Perhaps he just liked spy stories. He waved LaBudde aboard his pickup, and they intercepted the baggage cart on the tarmac, just as it was about to disappear into the catacombs of the terminal. The man lifted off LaBudde's package and drove him

out front, where LaBudde caught the first of his cabs to Ensenada. He arrived at the dock eighteen minutes before the *Maria Luisa* was to sail. The port authority was completing its final review.

The seiner put to sea on a Friday, an inauspicious day for sailing, and the *Maria Luisa* would prove, indeed, an unlucky vessel. As they left the harbor, LaBudde took a deep breath and brought out the camera. He'd be wise, he thought, to habituate the crew to it early. "It's a little thing," he says. "It's less conspicuous than a thirty-five-millimeter camera, because you can hold it with one hand and keep eye contact. It was *festive*." The Sony, he explained to his shipmates, was a present his wealthy retired father had bought his peter-do-well son.

In the job he had signed on for, LaBudde never did do well, and he did not last long in it. "I was a speedboat driver. I was supposed to go out and help round up dolphins with bombs. In the speedboats you have headsets on, and the captain can talk to all the drivers. But my Spanish wasn't good enough. I couldn't understand the captain, especially when he got mad. His name is Perico, which means a little bird, a canary. He'd get mad and start screaming, and I wouldn't understand a word that was coming out of his mouth."

That Perico's squawks confused LaBudde was just as well, for in a speedboat he had

no way to accomplish his secret mission. He was transferred to deck duty, which served his purposes better. "We went out for a month, and made only one set on dolphins. The set was an absolute disaster. I wasn't going to film the first dolphin set. I hadn't been filming much with the camera -- I wanted to sit on it and try to keep it cool. I couldn't very well bring the camera out the first time we made a set on dolphins. Except that I did. It turned into a disaster set so fast. I got out the camera, and stood there next to the first mate, who was a Basque, the brother-in-law of the owner. He'd turn around and look at me, and I'd drop the camera down and act real casual. I'd give him a look like, *Isn't this amazing?* Then I'd put the camera back up."

#### *THE SEINER'S STERN SHUDDERS*

*VIOLENTLY AND then shudders again, as if the boat were firing off a salvo. The ocean lights up in flashes of yellow and red. Then the frame steadies, a finger finds the color-balance button the ocean shifts blue again.. (The salvos and pyrotechnics were all in the technique of the cameraman.) The "panga," the heavy skiff that will anchor the net, goes off the stern. The seiner pulls away from it, paying oat net. The big yellow floats of the corkline come to life and began snaking overboard.*

*Scene shift: Speedboats are inscribing white semicircles on a calm ocean, herding dolphins. The camera is steady and sure now Scene shift: The dolphins are massed*

*inside the net. At least a thousand are in the school, maybe two thousand. At the moment they seem reasonably calm. They are spinner dolphins. Their triangular fins break the surface by the score and then cat back under.. Scene shift: The dolphins are in a panic, hundreds of them canopied in the middle portion of the net. The net is all white explosive spray and chaos. At this distance no one can be sure what sort of animals are roiling the sea. It looks as if someone were trying to drown a regiment of cavalry. White gulls hover, excited. A frigate bird drops down to have a closer look.*

"The camera was moving around," LaBudde says of this first footage. "I had to do real short hits on stuff. I was on the deck crew, twenty people were running all over the place, and I had to go down and start pulling dolphins out of the net. I got good shots of the canopy, but I didn't get a lot of it." One to two hundred eastern spinner dolphins died, trapped under the canopy, in that first set. When the carcasses had been disentangled from the net and dumped, shark bait, the crew had their catch -- a single yellowfin tuna.

The seiner's luck did not improve. The *Maria Luisa* passed schools of skipjack but did not bother to set on them. Those schools were small fry. The quest was for *aleta amarilla*. "There's no status or honor to catching anything besides the big yellowfin with dolphins," LaBudde says. "There's this

big machismo associated with dolphin fishing. The smaller species of tuna, even though you get almost as good money for them these days, are just 'trash.'"

In her crew list the *Maria Luisa* was an allegorical vessel, as multinational as the *Pequod*: Mexican, Costa Rican, Nicaraguan, Venezuelan, Peruvian, Portuguese, Paraguayan, Basque, Hoosier. That varied crew liked LaBudde. The captain detested him. Only one man, as far as he could tell, ever grew suspicious of him. This was LaBudde's watch partner, a Mexican, the one crewman besides himself who spoke any English. "He got homesick," LaBudde recalls. "He played sick so he could go home and see his wife. Lying on his bunk for a week, pretending to be sick, he had a lot of time to think. He started asking stuff like 'What are you doing here? What are you up to? I know you're up to something.' I'd just blow him off. That was easy, because he was real crazy. He knew the words to every Beatles song ever written. He didn't understand them all, but he knew them."

In Panama the *Maria Luisa* dropped off the malingering Beatles fan and then returned to sea for another two weeks. The fishing continued bad. The food was awful.

"We called our cook 'Juan Papas' ['John Potatoes'], be cause we got two kinds of potatoes with every meal. And greasy red meat with some kind of terrible salad. The



crew was really burned out on him, and he was really burned out on cooking."

LaBudde began coveting the job. He had several motives. He and his shipmates would eat better, he figured. He would move higher in the ship's hierarchy -- the cook rules in the galley, subservient there to no one, not even the captain. As cook, LaBudde would have locked cabinets in which to secure his video camera. As cook, he would have no duties on deck during sets on dolphins, which would free him to film the sets. When Juan Papas asked for a day off, LaBudde volunteered to fill in for him.

"The first thing I ever made for the crew was chicken," he remembers. "I'd never cooked a chicken in my life. I made six of them. This is where waiting tables at college and down in the Florida Keys paid off, because I knew what good food was supposed to look like. I made it up as I went along. They kept saying, 'No, Sam, really, where did you learn to cook?' I told them I just made it up as I went along, *and it was true*. I was a vegetarian. I'd go down to the freezer and I'd see these twenty-pound hunks of dead animals frozen solid. I don't even know what animal it comes from, or what part it is, or anything about what to do with it, except you've got to thaw it out and cut it."

LaBudde figured out how to cut red meat, tenderize it, cook it. At each meal he would set out eight or ten different dishes, twice

what Juan Papas had offered. Unlike his predecessor, he exercised foresight: everything came up at the same time and was hot when the crew sat down. In the climactic ten minutes over the big grill, LaBudde ordered everyone away in his primitive Spanish. It was frantic, creative, fun.

The navigator, a 300-pound Mexican, became a fierce advocate of LaBudde as cook, and the rest of the crew were rooting for him. Juan Papas, the sort of man content to peel potatoes for hours, was happy to accept a demotion to galley hand. LaBudde had positioned himself where he wanted to be. "I spent some time cultivating an eccentric personality, " he says. "The crazy cook. The big knife in your hand. It's easy to do. I'm real inconsistent in my personality anyway. I'm very uneven. Highs and lows all the time. And when you're not fluent in a language, you can hide behind your ignorance. People have a harder time reading who you are and what you're thinking."

The *Maria Luisa* continued to find no fish, however, and eventually this produced a hitch in the new cook's plans. The boat was called back to Panama, and Perico, the captain, packed his bags. The captain was LaBudde's enemy but had proved himself no enemy of tuna. LaBudde celebrated, but not for long. Perico's replacement was a huge Basque. This man's appearance, for Samuel LaBudde, was as disquieting as

Ahab's had been for Ishmael. The big Basque's name was Joseba.

"It's late at night," LaBudde remembers. "They're out drinking the national drink of Basqueland. It's flavored with something terrible, twisted, the last thing you would imagine flavoring liquor with. Damn! I can't remember the name."

That would be *izarra*, I suggested. The word means "stars" in Euskara, the strange, anomalous, non-European tongue of the Basques. The liqueur is flavored with the flowers of the Pyrenees. The green variety drunk by men is 100 proof. The name refers, maybe, to the private constellations a drinker sees after consuming enough of it.

"No, that's not it," LaBudde said. "It's flavored with something crazier than that. Some kind of a nut. Anyway, the new captain shows up. He's a big Basque, about six four. A giant son of a bitch. "

"So you're the gringo," Captain Joseba said to LaBudde. With that he turned his back and began talking in Euskara to his compatriots.

LaBudde was having trouble enough with Spanish. Euskara -- the tongue of the ancient Iberians, according to one theory; of a lost tribe of North African Berbers, according to a second; of the drowned continent of Atlantis, according to a third -- was opaque to him. But he understood the

body language. On learning that the captain intended to find a new cook, he was depressed but not surprised.

His popularity with the crew, fortunately, was such that he was given a two-day trial run as cook for the big Basque. He rose to the challenge, and the two days proved enough. "I did my best to keep the captain out of the kitchen," he says of the uneasy truce that followed. "Took coffee and rolls up to him on the bridge every morning. Keep him up there. If he didn't have to come downstairs for coffee, I never had to see him."

Despite this separation of powers, occasional arguments arose between the master of the ship and the master of the galley. LaBudde did not peel his potatoes, naturally; he simply scrubbed them -- all those vitamins in the skins. After his third meal of unpeeled potatoes Joseba noticed what he was eating and threw a fit. The captain felt about potato skins, apparently, the way the cook felt about Basque liqueur.

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