This book is dedicated to the scientists who have devoted their lives to the study of the dolphins around our shores and who, through their efforts, have helped to better protect them.
I would first like to thank the Lion Foundation which provided financial support for the writing and production of this book, and continued to do so despite delivery dates being extended.

I would also like to thank the Environmental Defence Society, and in particular chairman Gary Taylor, who supported the project from its inception and enabled me to free up the time necessary to write the book, particularly when the final deadline drew close. My colleagues from the Society, Kate Mulcahy, ably assisted with the research and collation of material. She was also the lead author of our joint policy report on marine mammals titled Wonders of the Sea.

Numerous people generously gave their time to be interviewed for this project and I would like to thank them all. Without them there would have been no book. They include Alan Baker, Scott Baker, Zoe and Les Battersby, Lars Beyder, Paul Bingham, Fiona Black, Kathryn Blackmore, Laura Boren, Phil Brown, Dennis Buurman, Chris Carter, Martin Cawthorn, Simon Childerhouse, Rochelle Constantine, Sean Cooper, Wayne Costar, Derek Cox, Rohan Currey, Steve Dawson, Wade Doak, Alex Dobbins, Ewen Fordyce, Greg Funnell, Jim Fyfe, Jo Halliday, Geoff Hamilton, Peter Hawes, Edward Heke, Greg Horobin, David Laist, Malcolm Lawson, David Lundquist, David Lusseau, Emmanuelle Martinez, Sue Macdonald, Kimberley Muncaster, Chris Pugsley, Geoff Rennison, Christine Rose, RS Rowe, Eugene Sage, Karsten Schneider, Elizabeth Slooten, Karen Stockin, Greg Stone, Rob Suisted, Ken Swinney, Anton van Helden, Ingrid Visser, Adrian Walker, Richard Wells, Ian West, Jim Whitehorn, Felicity Wong, Bernd Würsig and Bob Zuur. In addition Rebecca Hamner, Timothy Markowitz and Ker Volkerling provided peer review comments.

The New Zealand Society of Authors accepted me into its mentor programme in 2011 and Julia Milen provided invaluable comments on early chapters of the book.

My husband, Charles Crothers, ran his critical eye over the manuscript and helped me to restructure the material. My mother, Margaret Peart, gave the book an initial proof read and I would like to thank her for all her support of my projects over the years. Jan Rhodes transcribed many of my interviews. Jane Parkin did a fantastic job editing my manuscript and tightening up my writing. Robbie Burton at Craig Potton Publishing was very supportive of the project and proved excellent to work with on the production of the book. Arnott Potter and Jane Connor helped assemble the photographs.

My daughter Tanya put up with me talking about dolphins incessantly for several years and took it all in good heart. She will be pleased, as am I, that the book is now done.
New Zealand has an abundance of dolphins around its shores: five resident species, the common dolphin, bottlenose dolphin, dusky dolphin, orca and Hector’s dolphin; and a sub-species of the Hector’s dolphin known as Maui’s dolphin. Various other dolphins pass through New Zealand waters from time to time. They include the Fraser’s dolphin, rough-toothed dolphin, striped dolphin, hourglass dolphin, spectacled porpoise, southern right whale dolphin, and the long-finned pilot whale (a dolphin, not a whale), large numbers of which regularly strand along the country’s coastline. The Ross’s dolphin, one of which famously made its home in the Marlborough Sounds in the late nineteenth century, is also still an occasional visitor to New Zealand. But it is the resident dolphins that take centre stage in this book – the species we see most often in our everyday lives, and the ones most closely studied by scientists here.

Dolphins are related to porpoises and whales, which all belong to the animal kingdom order of Cetacea. Porpoises have body parts which are differently shaped from those of dolphins, and none are resident in New Zealand. Whales are often (but not always) larger than dolphins. Baleen whales have thick keratin hairs instead of teeth, and two blowholes. Although many whales live in social groups like dolphins, they tend to show less interest in humans. It is the high sociability of dolphins, and their interest in interacting with people, which makes them particularly intriguing.

This book largely focuses on these human–dolphin interactions and the development of science to better understand human impacts on New Zealand’s dolphin populations. While the next section contains a short summary of biological information on resident species, the book does not attempt to address dolphin biology in any depth.

Part One is called ‘getting to know each other’. It is about dolphins seeking out people and people seeking out dolphins. It begins by describing the early encounters with Pelorus Jack during the late nineteenth century and Opo in 1955, when whaling was still carried out in New Zealand and dolphins were considered by many to be little different from fish. These two dolphins challenged the prevailing view that sea creatures were mere resources to be exploited. They suggested that humans might forge a very different and more positive relationship with marine mammals.

New Zealanders’ awareness of dolphins increased significantly during the early 1960s, thanks to the screening of the movie *Flipper*, and its subsequent TV series, about the adventures of a boy and his family who developed a friendship with a bottlenose dolphin in Florida. The dolphins which played the role of Flipper were in fact captive, and were part of a flourishing marineland industry which started in the USA, then spread to Australia and elsewhere. Observing the success of these ventures overseas, some enterprising New Zealanders decided to establish marineland here, first at Napier and then at Mount Maunganui and Orewa. These enabled many New Zealanders to see dolphins up close for the first time. But the keepers struggled to keep their captive dolphins alive, and only the Napier marineland survived until the end of the twentieth century.

With the growth of environmentalism and the anti-whaling movement in the 1970s, there was a marked change in the public view of dolphins and their close relatives the whales. This was assisted by early work on the intelligence of dolphins undertaken by USA-based scientist Dr John Lilly which suggested that they were much more similar to humans than previously thought. Reflecting this shift in public sentiment, New Zealand passed legislation banning the hunting of whales and dolphins in 1978.

During the same decade, New Zealand underwater diver and author Wade Doak became inspired by Lilly’s work and started seeking out New Zealand dolphins in the wild. Wade trialled innovative ways of communicating with these remarkable animals, and achieved some success. He published widely about his experiences, and many other New Zealanders went on to have personal interactions with wild dolphins. Meeting dolphins ‘up close and personal’ became a highlight of many people’s lives. For some, it was the beginning of a passion, a romance, even a love affair with a member of another species. Others established a strong spiritual link with dolphins – a profound bonding which they struggle to describe in words. For Māori, the connection between human and dolphin has long been extremely deep, with some iwi believing that dolphins are the very embodiment of their ancestors.
The trend of interacting with dolphins in the wild spawned a whole new industry, that of taking tourists to swim with dolphins. Initially started in Kaikoura during 1989, dolphin swimming soon became hugely popular and spread to other locations including Akaroa and the Bay of Islands. The growing ability of people to interact with dolphins in the wild, and greater sensitivity to animal welfare issues, led to the loss of public support for captive dolphin facilities. The Napier marineland finally closed its doors in 2008 after the death of Kelly, New Zealand’s last and longest-serving captive dolphin. Numerous people had delighted in the spectacular dolphin shows, but many animals died prematurely during this uneasy chapter in New Zealand’s relationship with its marine mammals.

In light of the remarkable affinity so many people have with dolphins, Part One closes with a chapter probing the issue of what it is that makes them so different from other wild animals we encounter. It traces the evolutionary path which dolphins have taken over the past 50 million years and describes current scientific understandings of dolphin intelligence. Dolphins have been taught to recognise words and sentences, and they display sophisticated cognitive abilities. This has led some to argue that dolphins should, as highly intelligent, self-aware beings, be given greater legal recognition than other animals, something closer to that enjoyed by humans.

Part Two of the book is titled ‘Learning to share the sea’. It’s about New Zealanders developing the knowledge and will to live with dolphins well. It’s about the challenges we face if we are to co-exist successfully with our dolphins into the future. Scientific knowledge about New Zealand’s dolphins has been hard won. It has required a group of tough and dedicated people willing to devote their lives to the study of animals in wild, often wet, cold and even dangerous conditions. But what these scientists have revealed has been quite remarkable.

Little research had been carried out on New Zealand’s dolphins until the mid-1980s, when students Steve Dawson and Liz Slooten undertook the first comprehensive survey of Hector’s dolphins. Their subsequent research at Banks Peninsula revealed some highly disturbing information. Hundreds of dolphins were being killed in set nets each year, and the population was declining. After the establishment of the Department of Conservation (DOC) in 1987, management response was swift. The following year, the first marine mammal sanctuary in New Zealand was put in place around Banks Peninsula to protect the Hector’s dolphins. But the dolphins were still being caught in nets in other parts of the country, and it took years for protection to be extended. It is still only partial.

The Banks Peninsula sanctuary was highly controversial when first mooted, but it proved to be the making of the little town of Akaroa. It raised the profile of the small endemic Hector’s dolphin, and tourism flourished. The Bay of Islands also quickly became the focus of dolphin tourism during the 1990s. The prime target was the small groups of bottlenose dolphins which frequented the Bay, and in numbers had increased exponentially, DOC came under strong pressure from commercial interests to grant permits – and often did so. Constant disruption of dolphin pods by tourist and private boats may have led to a declining population. Current research suggests that fewer dolphins are now visiting the Bay. Another isolated population of bottlenose dolphins lives on the ecological edge in the remote Doubtful Sound. It is also in trouble. A likely combination of tourist boat traffic, previous fishing activity and increased freshwater flows from the Manapouri power station has led to fewer calves surviving their first few months of life. A voluntary code of practice is now in place, which is designed to reduce interaction between dolphins and vessels. But compliance has been patchy, and the long-term survival of the dolphins remains in question.

Further north, the expansion of aquaculture in the Marlborough Sounds is threatening the welfare of a group of dusky dolphins which frequent the Kaikoura coast. Each winter a couple of hundred dolphins make the journey north to Admiralty Bay to feed on the plentiful schools of fish there. By 2000, aquaculture proponents had sought consent to fill the Bay with mussel lines – fixtures which scientists concluded would exclude the dolphins from the area. The Environment Court has so far turned down consents in Admiralty Bay on the basis of this science, but pressure to expand aquaculture is increasing, and the future for the dolphins in this area is still uncertain.

Large schools of common dolphins used to be a frequent sight around our coast but are now more rare. It was not until the late 1990s that any dedicated research was undertaken on them, perhaps because we have taken such familiar dolphins largely for granted. At the same time as scientists started focusing on these animals, the jack mackerel fishery began ramping up off the south-western coast of the North Island. Large factory trawlers were targeting the same fish as the dolphins, with disastrous consequences. Hundreds of dolphins have died in trawl nets during the past decade. The industry has now taken steps to reduce the bycatch, but dolphins are still dying.

It was only in 2002 that the Maui’s dolphin was confirmed internationally as a distinct subspecies. The small dolphin lives only on the west coast of the North Island, and numbers have plummeted over the past 40 years. The latest research indicates that there are only 55 adults surviving and the population is still in decline. Extinction is a very real risk. Although set netting has been excluded along part of the coast to protect the dolphin, the protection does not yet cover the Maui’s entire habitat. There is ongoing controversy over the best strategy to save the dolphin, with fishermen resisting further restrictions on their activities, and the government adopting a ‘balancing’ rather than precautionary approach to the crisis. A ministerial decision on the issue is imminent.

Like a successful marriage, co-existing with dolphins requires us to be sensitive to the other’s needs. It requires a willingness to share resources. At times, it even necessitates giving up certain things. Enduring relationships aren’t built on selfishness and greed, but on sharing and respect. As the chapters in Part Two of the book reveal, developing such a relationship with dolphins in New Zealand is still very much work in progress.

Dolphins are extraordinary creatures, and we are very fortunate to share our seas with them. But we do need to look after them better. The final chapter of the book sets out how we might achieve this.
**HECTOR’S DOLPHIN**
*Cephalorhynchus hectori hectori*

This dolphin is short and stocky. It has a steeply tapering nose, very little beak and features a distinctive rounded black dorsal fin. The sides of the head, flippers and dorsal fin are black. The body is grey, with a mainly white underside which patterns into grey along the flanks.

**Range**
Lives in shallow water, usually less than 100 metres deep. Normally found only in the South Island where there are 3 distinct populations – on the east, west and south coasts.

**Population size**
7,270 individuals.

**Size**
Grows to between 1.2 and 1.5 metres long.

**Life span**
20-25 years.

**Reproduction**
Females first give birth to a calf at 7–9 years of age and typically have one calf every 2–4 years. A female Hector’s dolphin will usually have 4–6 calves over her lifetime.

**Feeding**
Feeds on small fish, squid and bottom-dwelling invertebrates.

**Behaviour**
Swims in small schools of 2–30 individuals. Attracted to boats.

**Conservation status**
Endemic, nationally endangered.

---

**MAUI’S DOLPHIN**
*Cephalorhynchus hectori maui*

This dolphin is short and stocky. It has a steeply tapering nose, very little beak and features a distinctive rounded black dorsal fin. The sides of the head, flippers and dorsal fin are black. The body is grey, with a mainly white underside, which patterns into grey along the flanks. It is slightly bigger than the Hector’s dolphin and has a larger beak, but the two subspecies are not normally distinguishable without genetic analysis.

**Range**
Lives in shallow water, usually less than 100 metres deep. Found only along the west coast of the North Island. The largest numbers are found between Kaipara Harbour and Aotea Harbour.

**Population size**
55 adult individuals.

**Size**
Grows to between 1.2 and 1.7 metres long.

**Life span**
20-25 years.

**Reproduction**
Females first give birth to a calf at 7–9 years of age and typically have one calf every 2–4 years. A female Maui’s dolphin will usually have 4–6 calves over her lifetime.

**Feeding**
Feeds on grey mullet and other small fish, squid and bottom-dwelling invertebrates.

**Behaviour**
Swims in small schools of 2–30 individuals. Attracted to boats.

**Conservation status**
Endemic, nationally critical.
BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN

*Tursiops truncatus*

This dolphin has a long, blunt beak and a prominent dorsal fin. Its back is light or dark grey, and grades to white on the underside. The mouth curves into a permanent grin. Older animals often have nicks out of their dorsal fins and scars on their skin.

- **Range**: There are three or four populations of the dolphins which live in Northland, the Marlborough Sounds, Fiordland and around Stewart Island.
- **Population size**: Northland 446 individuals, Marlborough Sounds 211 individuals and Fiordland 205 individuals.
- **Size**: Grows to between 1.9 and 3.9 metres long.
- **Life span**: Up to 50 years.
- **Reproduction**: Females first give birth to a calf at five to 13 years of age and typically have one calf every 3–5 years. Calves suckle for around 2–3 years.
- **Feeding**: Feeds on fish, squid and bottom-dwelling invertebrates.
- **Behaviour**: Swims close to shore in small schools of up to 30 animals.
- **Conservation status**: Nationally endangered.

DUSKY DOLPHIN

*Lagenorhynchus obscurus*

This dolphin has virtually no beak and a blunt dorsal fin. The back and tail are coloured bluish black, the underside is white, and there are tapered diagonal stripes along the side.

- **Range**: Found mainly around the South Island, lower North Island and the sub-antarctic. Rare north of East Cape.
- **Population size**: 12,000 to 20,000 individuals.
- **Size**: Grows to between 1.6 and 2.1 metres long.
- **Life span**: Around 30 years.
- **Reproduction**: Females mature at 7–8 years of age. Calves are weaned within 3 years.
- **Feeding**: Feeds at night on deepwater fish found in the deep scattering layer. In Admiralty Bay, hunts cooperatively for schooling fish.
- **Behaviour**: Seen in large schools of up to 1,000 individuals or more. Very acrobatic.
- **Conservation status**: Not threatened.
**COMMON DOLPHIN**

*Delphinus sp.*

This dolphin has a long beak, a low, smoothly sloping head and a high dorsal fin. The topside is purplish black, and there is a distinctive criss-cross or hourglass pattern on its flanks in grey, white and a yellowish-tan. There is also a patch of black around the eyes and a black spot on the end of its snout.

**Range**
Found throughout New Zealand waters, usually within a few kilometres of the coast. Often seen in Northland, the Hauraki Gulf and between Hawke’s Bay and Kaikoura.

**Population size**
Unknown.

**Size**
Grows to between 1.7 and 2.4 metres long.

**Life span**
Typically just over 20 years.

**Reproduction**
Females mature at 6–7 years of age and calve every 1–3 years.

**Feeding**
Feeds on small schooling fish. Often hunts cooperatively.

**Behaviour**
Can be found in large schools of over 1,000 animals. Associate with dusky dolphins and pilot whales. Often bow ride alongside vessels.

**Conservation status**
Not threatened (but population size or trend unknown).

---

**ORCA OR KILLER WHALE**

*Orcinus orca*

The body is torpedo shaped, with a fat pointed head and large rounded flippers. The dolphin’s most remarkable feature is a very large triangular dorsal fin which, in a male, can reach up to 1.8 metres high. The top of the body and head, dorsal fin, flippers and tail are black. The underside of the body is largely white, with a white blaze just above the eyes.

**Range**
There are 3 populations in New Zealand – one off the North Island, one off the South Island and one that moves between the two regions.

**Population size**
150 to 200 individuals.

**Size**
Grows to between 7–8 metres long.

**Life span**
Females can live up to 80 or 90 years, and males reach 60–70 years of age.

**Reproduction**
Females first give birth to a calf at 11–16 years of age and then do so around every 5 years. Calves are nursed for at least a year. Females are reproductive for about 25 years.

**Feeding**
Feeds on rays, fish and squid. Also eats other marine mammals and seabirds.

**Behaviour**
Acrobatic, and often seen breaching and slapping flippers.

**Conservation status**
Nationally critical.
PART ONE
GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER
The sea – it is immense, largely unknown and unpredictable. New Zealand is completely surrounded by it. For land-based humans, the sea can evoke a range of responses. There is the delightful sensation of salty liquid tingling on our body as we swim, play and sport in the shallows. There is the refreshing sense of freedom and escape as the stresses of everyday life waft over the horizon on salt-laden breezes. And there is the feeling of respect and awe in the face of something so vast and untameable.

Creatures that live in the sea can raise very different emotions. Some are to be feared, like the great white shark which lurks in the deep and is known to fatally attack humans. But most do not harm us. Indeed, the enormous variety of life which has evolved in the sea is a source of wonder and delight for those who don a diving mask and venture below the surface. But what if one of those creatures from the deep consciously seeks out humans – not to attack, but to interact, to socialise, even to play? Should that creature still be hunted? And what kind of creature is it?

Ngāti Kuia talk of a special dolphin, one who guided their earliest ancestor, Matua Hautere, to Te Hoere (later renamed Pelorus Sound) in his waka. Other Māori recall their ancestor Ruru, who killed a dolphin and was punished by having to take on the animal’s form. Ruru was trapped forever in a dolphin’s body and regularly met waka as they came and went along the coastline.

Captain Backstrom was skipper of the small coastal steamer Wainui which had a regular run between Wellington and Nelson. One day, probably during 1888, Backstrom glimpsed something he had never seen during his long years at sea. The steamer had just completed the crossing of Cook Strait and was skirting around the outer edges of Pelorus Sound before heading through French Pass, south of D’Urville Island, on its approach to Nelson. Suddenly a large white ‘fish’ about four metres long appeared on the portside of the vessel and started surfing along in the bow wave. It leapt out of the water and dived under the boat, before reappearing on the starboard side, leaping up again and splashing in the waves. It seemed to be enjoying itself. After about 15 minutes of scooting along with the boat, the ‘fish’ disappeared as suddenly as it had arrived.

Backstrom was intrigued. What kind of animal was this and why was it following his ship? He was even more mystified, but delighted, when the white fish joined the steamer the next day and then the day after that. Backstrom began to keep a special lookout for it, noting that it appeared regularly whenever the Wainui chugged past Pelorus Sound but always disappeared before the vessel reached French Pass. The white fish started to join other steamers plying the same route. Backstrom wrote to Union Steamship Company officials in Wellington to report its activities.

Passengers on the steamers were also delighted by the creature, and word of it soon got around. People made the voyage between Wellington and Nelson especially to see the extraordinary large white fish. A ship’s purser who worked on the Cook Strait run, Mr Massey, claims to have been the first to name the fish ‘Pelorus Jack’ – ‘Pelorus’ for its location and ‘Jack’ as the name commonly given to whales at that time. Pelorus Jack was assumed to be male but ‘his’ sex was never confirmed.

Pelorus Jack’s fame spread far and wide. Travellers came from overseas to see for themselves ‘the most mysterious fish in the world’. On the overnight voyage, passengers would wake in the middle of the night to ensure they didn’t miss the spectacle.

There was much speculation as to why Pelorus Jack regularly met the steamers and followed them along their path. Was he lonely and in need of company? Did he enjoy rubbing his skin against the hull of the vessels to dislodge barnacles? Or did the steamers churn up squid for him to feed on?

The growing importance of Pelorus Jack to the country’s nascent tourism industry did not escape the attention of the bureaucrats in Wellington. At that time, New Zealand still had an active whaling industry and there were no laws preventing the killing of marine mammals. What
if someone shot or harpooned Pelorus Jack for sport? Or what if a collector bagged him? There were rumours that several European museums were offering large sums of money for the animal’s preserved body. The country could easily lose a major tourism drawcard.

People had already tried to shoot Pelorus Jack, but luckily he had not come to harm – so far. A passenger on the old coastal steamer Rotoroa fired several shots and claimed to have struck the animal. After that incident, Pelorus Jack never showed when the Rotoroa steamed past. It seemed he could identify individual vessels by the different sounds of their engines and propellers. In another incident, a passenger aimed his rifle at the animal and was about to shoot when he was accosted by the ship’s crew and forced to disarm and retreat to his cabin.

In 1903, Reverend Daniel Bates was working as a clerk in the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts. Bates had a great interest in the natural world. He heard about Pelorus Jack and thought that the animal merited legal protection. He persuaded his boss, Superintendent T E Donne, that this was a good idea. The law did not contemplate a situation where a fish was protected as a kind, and not to any individual fish. There is therefore no power to issue the proposed Order in Council to protect “Pelorus Jack” by name. The law did not contemplate a situation where a fish would be valued as an individual.

As far as the department’s officials knew, such a thing had never been attempted before. Nonetheless, they began to investigate the feasibility of passing protective regulations under the Sea Fisheries Act 1894. Could they protect an individual ‘fish’ under that legislation? They sought advice from Crown Law officers and the answer that came back was ‘no’. The lawyers concluded that the power to prohibit the taking of any fish in the legislation refers to fish as a species or kind, and not to any individual fish. There is therefore no power to issue the proposed Order in Council to protect “Pelorus Jack” by name. The law did not contemplate a situation where a fish would be valued as an individual.

This meant that, to protect a specific fish under existing law, the government would have to protect its species. But first the bureaucrats would need to determine what species Pelorus Jack actually was, and that wasn’t going to be easy. The animal moved so quickly, it was hard to get an accurate description of him. Scientists of the day were used to identifying marine creatures from carcasses and skeletons, which they could examine at leisure in their laboratories, not from fleeting glimpses in the wild. The few photographs of him that existed were blurred and indistinct.

The officials consulted Sir James Hector, recently retired long-serving director of the Colonial Museum. For decades Hector had been the foremost scientific expert in New Zealand, and already had two marine mammals named after him: the Hector’s dolphin and the Hector’s beaked whale. Based on Pelorus Jack’s reported white colouring, Hector advised that the creature was an Antarctic white whale (Eschrichtius), a species thought to live only in Antarctica. In his view, Pelorus Jack was probably the only member of his species in New Zealand waters. It is unclear what Hector based this advice on, but it seems unlikely that he had seen the animal himself.

Pelorus Jack clearly had a dorsal fin, something missing on beluga whales. In addition, Beluga whales were only found in northern hemisphere Arctic waters, not in Antarctica. Despite this discrepancy, government officials proceeded to draft regulations which prohibited the taking of Antarctic white whales. Clearly not wanting to impede the killing of white whales elsewhere, they confined the restrictions to ‘Cook Strait and adjacent bays, sounds and estuaries’. The officials apparently saw nothing wrong with hunting others of Pelorus Jack’s kind. Another incident, a passenger aimed his rifle at the animal and was about to shoot when he was accosted by the ship’s crew and forced to disarm and retreat to his cabin.

Other scientists were not so sure that James Hector was right. On 16 September 1904, an article appeared in the Grey River Argus reporting that Captain Hutton, president of the New Zealand Institute, had ‘recently made a discovery’ regarding Pelorus Jack. Finding that the animal had been ‘wrongly classified in genus beluga as a white whale, he has transferred the creature to genus ziphiscavirostris, believing him to be a goose-beak whale’. The paper went on to advise, ‘He forms his opinion largely on a letter from a gentleman who has seen “Pelorus Jack” eight times, and states he has a dorsal fin. This fin excludes him from the family of white whales.’

But Reverend Bates, who was director of the Meteorological Office as well as holding a position in the tourism department, had yet another view. On 27 January 1904, he had written to the Marine Department expressing his opinion that Hector and Hutton had both got it wrong. Pelorus Jack was not a white whale and neither was he a goose-beaked whale. Bates thought he knew what the correct species was. But before expressing a final opinion, he wanted to observe the unusual animal himself.

After further investigation, Bates concluded that the animal was a Grampus griseus, commonly referred to as Risso’s dolphin. His identification was definitively confirmed when an unusually sharp photograph of Pelorus Jack was compared to the description of the Risso’s dolphin in The Royal Natural History, an authoritative publication of eight volumes co-authored by naturalist Richard Lydekker of the London Natural History Museum.
The Risso’s dolphin is unusual-looking, lacking a beak and having a large ‘melon’ on top of its head. Uncommonly for dolphins, it also has few teeth—usually none on the upper jaw and only a small number at the tip of the lower jaw. Risso’s dolphins are rarely seen in the South Pacific and only a few have been spotted in New Zealand waters. In his 1990 edition of Whales and Dolphins of New Zealand and Australia, marine mammal scientist Alan Baker advised that only 14 Risso’s dolphins had ever been reported in the country, six of which became stranded in Whangarei Harbour in January 1983 and died.14 Regulations to protect Pelorus Jack were finally promulgated on 26 September 1904. These were carefully worded to cover the dolphin irrespective of whether he was legally a fish or a mammal. Only ‘fish’ could strictly speaking be protected under the empowering legislation, so it was uncertain if the regulations could ever have been enforced. Nevertheless, they stated:

1. During the period of five years from the date of the gazetting of these regulations it shall not be lawful for any person to take the fish or mammal of the species commonly known as Risso’s dolphin (Grampus griseus) in the waters of Cook Strait, or of the bays, sounds, and estuaries adjacent thereto.

2. Any person committing a breach of this regulation shall be liable to a penalty of not less than five pounds and not more than one hundred pounds.

Although the regulations protected Pelorus Jack from marauding hunters, they could not protect him from passing ships. In the summer of 1905, Pelorus Jack apparently came too close to the steamer Penguin while he was gambling in the bow wave. The front of the boat hit him, carving out a long gash along his side. The wound eventually healed, leaving a scar, but from then on Pelorus Jack gave the Penguin a wide berth.15 Year after year, Pelorus Jack met the steamers on their inter-island voyages. His fame spread far and wide. In early 1906, a letter appeared in the London Daily Mail informing readers about ‘a wonderful New Zealand fish’ who ‘is always in attendance as a sort of pilot’. The writer acknowledged that few people believe so improbable a fish yarn until they have seen Jack with their own eyes; but his bona fides is attested by the fact that he has a Government paper devoted to himself.16 A few years later, in 1910, The Illustrated London News featured a full-page portrait of Pelorus Jack on the front page of its Christmas Eve edition.17 Postcards showing an image of ‘The only fish in the world protected by Act of Parliament’18 were also widely distributed. Obtaining the images was difficult, and involved ‘hanging over the rail of a vessel with a camera about the size of a shoebox’.19

Then the unthinkable happened. In March 1911, the Marine Department received an urgent telegram from George Webber, a settler living adjacent to French Pass. The body of a dolphin had been found on D’Urville Island. It had been dead for more than a week and showed signs of mauling by sharks. Webber had seen Pelorus Jack alive numerous times, and he was sure that this was the same animal.20

Grief at the news of Pelorus Jack’s death was palpable. A particularly poignant eulogy was published in the Sydney Sun:

Pelorus Jack has gone ... Take him for all in all, he was the most cheerful and companionable creature in all the wide seas. He came to the passing steamers seeking no personal gain. He asked for no food, and sought no protection. He was a kindly, lonely cetacean, who sought company of men and ships before that of his own kind. May his spirit have peace in some sea paradise where good whales and gentle dolphins are made happy for ever21

But then came reports that the dolphin had been seen again alive and well. On 24 April 1911, the order in council which prohibited taking Risso’s dolphins in the Cook Strait area was renewed for another three years. Reverend Bates believed this was insufficient and pressed for special legislation to protect the dolphin for the rest of its life and provide for stronger penalties.22 Nonetheless, it was not long before Pelorus Jack was gone for good. The last reported sighting of him was made at the end of April 1912 by Captain Vickerman. He saw Norwegian whalers operating in the area on the same afternoon. Had the dolphin been harpooned? Or had he finally died of old age? After all, he had been following vessels for more than twenty years and was probably a mature animal when he was first spotted in about 1888. No one would ever be certain of the cause of his disappearance.

When it became apparent that Pelorus Jack was no longer frequenting his normal haunts, the New Zealand Times published an article in his honour:

Pelorus Jack has rightly been termed one of the wonders of the world. Many visitors to New Zealand have made him one of the ‘sights’ to be viewed during their itinerary, and many who at first were sceptical as to the existence of such a creature have gone away convinced... Pelorus Jack is beloved by all seafaring men whose ships he has befriended, his coming formed a pleasant break in the monotony of the daily round of toil. If he is dead, more’s the pity, if he has been slaughtered, more’s the shame.

The dolphin was never seen again, but for years government departments received requests for information about him from overseas. Best-selling author of popular fiction, Nellie Scanlon, reported in the Dominion on 6 May 1925 that during an extended tour abroad she found ‘the greatest
curiosity in regard to “Pelorus Jack”, especially in America, and also in France. But some found the story of the dolphin so incredible as to be unbelievable. In America, Nellie Scanlon was unexpectedly asked to speak to a gathering of 4,000 women. ‘On the spur of the moment she chose as her subject “Pelorus Jack” and related faithfully a tale of his strange and wonderful doings. Her audience listened silently until the end of the story and then simultaneously burst into a roar of laughter – probably thinking this the tallest “fish story” they had ever heard.’

Years later, there was still differing opinion over what species Pelorus Jack actually was. Maybe he wasn’t a Risso’s dolphin after all. In his 1972 publication, Whales, dolphins and seals, English marine mammal expert David Gaskin expressed the view that he was almost certainly a bottlenose dolphin. This was based on his understanding that bottlenose dolphins were known to accompany vessels from time to time and also that they were fairly common off the Marlborough coast. But New Zealand marine mammal scientist Alan Baker strongly refuted this view in an article he published in 1974. He compared a photograph of Pelorus Jack with that of a captive Risso’s dolphin in Japan which was taken from a similar perspective. They looked identical.

Irrespective of his species, Pelorus Jack had fundamentally challenged late nineteenth-century perceptions of the relationship between humans and marine life. Up until then, creatures in the sea were something to be exploited, either for food or other marketable goods such as skins, oil and bone. Now a seemingly intelligent and friendly ‘fish’, regularly seeking out human interaction, had prompted not only international interest but widespread revulsion at the idea of harming or killing him. But the hunting of other marine mammals was still legal, and widely considered to be a legitimate business activity. It would be many decades before this would change.
Half a century after Pelorus Jack had plied the waters of the Marlborough Sounds, much had changed in New Zealand. The country had largely recovered from two world wars and a major economic depression, and was entering a golden age of beach culture. Paid holidays were now a legal requirement for workers, and many New Zealanders were spending their summer holidays close to the sea – sunbathing, swimming, surfing, boating and fishing.

The post-war period also saw the beginnings of underwater diving as a sport in New Zealand. In 1943, Frenchman Jacques Cousteau had co-developed the self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (scuba), enabling humans to swim freely underwater without the need to surface regularly for a breath. Cousteau popularised this new activity though his numerous books and films, but local import controls meant that for many years scuba gear could not be bought in New Zealand. Keen ‘do-it-yourselfers’, however, started building their own equipment, often by adapting wartime gear. Much of the early diving activity was focused on fishing with underwater spear guns, but the new capability to see underwater also started to change perceptions of the sea itself. It was not just somewhere to hunt fish: it was a place full of amazing creatures which appeared in all kinds of sizes, shapes and colours. It was a place where humans could start interacting with marine life, including dolphins, on its own terms.

Tradition tells of the great Polynesian navigator Kupe leading the first humans into the long narrow flooded river valley of the Hokianga Harbour. The light reflected off Te Ramaroa mountain helped to guide them safely inside. The harbour was named Te Hokianganui-a-Kupe (the place of Kupe’s great return).

One day in early 1955, three bottlenose dolphins surged through the breaking waves at the entrance of the Hokianga Harbour. They glided past the mountains of golden sand piled up by the Tasman Sea and into the sheltered waters of Omapere Bay. There the small group rested, fed and played. Local fishermen, seeing three dark dorsal fins skimming along the surface, assumed that they were sharks. Before the week was out, a local lad got out his rifle and took several shots at the dark moving shapes in the water. Two of the dolphins disappeared, probably killed by the bullets. One remained.

At that time, a modest retirement and holiday settlement called Opononi was perched between the southern shores of the harbour and the steep hills behind. A narrow metal road ran through the township, hugging the edge of the harbour. On the landward side of the road, facing the bay, was a large two-storey Kauri-clad Victorian hotel where the town’s residents frequently congregated to enjoy cold beer. Directly in front was a long wooden wharf running out into the bay, a spot favoured by local children for fishing. Just a short way up the road, to the north, was a gently curving white sandy beach where families swam in clear sheltered water during the summer months. Clustered around the hotel were the tearooms, a post office, a store and a petrol pump.

The lone survivor of the group of bottlenose dolphins which had entered the harbour was barely a year old and motherless. She started following the fishing boats that regularly headed down the harbour and out to sea, keeping some distance away, and parting company well before the boats negotiated the rough harbour entrance, seemingly reluctant to broach the big waves which formed a wall between her and the open ocean. Then, while waiting for the boats to return, she would mull around on the north side of the harbour near Rangi Point.

Fishermen started to look out for the dolphin when they headed out for the day. She gradually became more confident, swimming closer to the boats. One crew member placed an oar in the water, perpendicular to the side of the boat, and the dolphin seemed to enjoy rubbing her back against it. Then someone tried rubbing her sides with a mop that was used to sluice down fish waste, and the dolphin seemed to delight in this too. Initially the dolphin was known as Opononi Jack, after the name of the township, but the name was soon shortened to Opo. It was some time before Opo was discovered to be female.