

Discovering the secret life of Port Phillip Bay has changed the world for **Sheree Marris**. The author and documentary filmmaker runs her own environmental communications business and this year established a marine trail – and she is only 27. Here she tells how it all happened for her.



**W**ho could have imagined that an animal with female and male sex organs in its neck would have inspired a fulfilling and rewarding career?

This intriguing sea slug or nudibranch was painted the most brilliant yellow and blue that I had ever seen – something you would expect to find on the Great Barrier Reef. But I found it in Port Phillip Bay.

I was so excited by my precious discovery that I wanted to run out and shout about it.

My mission and thirst for knowledge had been set. I was going to educate the world about our incredible marine life, so it was off to university to study aquatic science.

The discoveries I made only got bigger and better. I found that our marine environment rivals anything that land can throw at it. The tallest mountains and the deepest canyons are found in the ocean.

Our Bay boasts stunning underwater kelp forests, bright sponge gardens, vast sandy plains and seagrass meadows that are nurseries for numerous fish and other marine life.

And this magic isn't restricted to Port Phillip Bay. You can be immersed in it just about anywhere along the Victorian coastline, from Wilson's Promontory, Phillip Island and Apollo Bay to Warrnambool.

But our marine environment is under considerable pressure from fishing, pollution, coastal development, stormwater runoff and other activities.

My greatest fear is that future generations will not have the same magical experience that I had, and features that make the southern shores unique will be destroyed.

Most people assume that the Bay has the odd fish but is basically void of life and colour. It is difficult to try to get people to care for something they know nothing about, or to convince them to look after a slimy fish or an animal that crawls along on one big sticky foot.

**TOP True colours:** The astonishing sea slug or nudibranch is a wonder of the Bay

**RIGHT High achiever Sheree Marris** has been dazzled by the colour and life of Port Phillip Bay



We need to realise we have just as much impact on an environmental, social and economic scale, and we need to engage people so they will want to protect and conserve the marine environment for future generations.

although an animal that throws its stomach over its food may not be your ideal dining partner.

People commented that they didn't realise our Bay was so vibrant. This is the best compliment. My aim had been achieved, and people's eyes were opened.

Projects such as these will ensure that future generations enjoy the same discoveries that I made. (Nothing beats seeing children's faces light up when you tell them, for example, that sea cucumbers vomit up their intestines when threatened.)

**'My greatest fear is that future generations will not have the same magical experience that I had, and features that make the southern shores unique will be destroyed'**

A great way to achieve this is through television. You can educate people without them knowing it, by relating it to their everyday lives, making it relevant to them, and entertaining them – by making the environment fun and sexy. The coverage, exposure and sheer number of people you can reach are enormous.

I was lucky enough to write, present and help produce a documentary on the marine life in Port Phillip Bay.

The documentary used quirky facts to highlight the parallels we have with the inhabitants of the underwater world. Like us humans, marine animals need to work, travel and eat,

Another great way to ignite the interest of people is first hand. This is where the idea of *The Octopuses Garden* was born. It is a marine trail, located at Rye Pier on the Mornington Peninsula.

Visitors follow bright and bold interpretive signs on the pylons, which take them on a 200-metre journey of discovery. The shallow and clear waters make it a safe snorkel for the entire family and swimmers of all levels.

The marine environment is beginning to get the recognition and attention it deserves, with the Victorian Government establishing a comprehensive system of marine parks. These will protect and preserve unique marine habitats and animals, and increase fishing stocks in surrounding areas.

We need to place enormous effort into ensuring that marine education becomes a permanent feature of the Victorian curriculum for primary and secondary schools. After all, it is from here that the environmental ambassadors of the future will emerge.

So get out and explore. It's there and it's ours to enjoy. Go for a walk along the beach, fossick among the seaweed, along rock platforms, or come and explore *The Octopuses Garden* and "Sea for yourself". I guarantee you won't be disappointed.

*Sheree Marris is the Victorian Young Achiever of the Year. She also won the Young Australian of the Year environment award. Her two-part documentary, Visions of Blue, screened on Network Ten in August.*



[www.visionsofblue.com.au](http://www.visionsofblue.com.au)

**8. Horsing about**  
 One of the most exciting creatures in the Bay is the horseshoe crab.  
 • Horseshoes are named after their shape.  
 • They use their scapulae (the tail) to grab onto rocks and have a sense of touch for walking on the seabed.  
 • Male horseshoes have a pouch-like structure where they store the egg sacs to be laid on the seabed.

**1. The Octopuses Garden**  
 The Octopuses Garden is a marine trail located at Rye Pier on the Mornington Peninsula.  
 • Shady places - a clever place to hide.  
 • Overhangs - providing food and cover.  
 • Sponge gardens - a mass of places to rest.  
 • The pylons - a great place for octopuses to grow, feed and mate.  
 Keep your eyes peeled for the elusive Octopuses Garden. It may be hidden right under your nose.

**Signs of life:** Some of the information available as part of the marine trail at Rye Pier (below). The trail is believed to be the first of its kind in Victoria



# Inspiring voyage