

## SEA LIONS: LIFE BY A WHISKER

**(whooshes)**

**(roaring)**

**(waves crashing)**

**(bright, contemplative music)**

**[Narrator]** On the far side of the world, where the Australian desert meets the great Southern Ocean, lives a family that have never been seen before.

We'll call them the Whiskers. And today, they're welcoming a new member to their colony. This is Otto.

That's short for Otaria. It means "little ear." She's an Australian sea lion. And this is her story.

**(bright, contemplative music)**

**(waves crashing)**

While her mother takes a well-earned rest, Otto has breakfast. Then, it's time for little Otto to learn a big lesson.

**(vocalizing)**

Her name. It's a unique call and response, shared solely by this mother and pup.

It's one of the strongest bonds in the animal kingdom.

**(vocalizing)**

A bond her life will depend on. Because apart from her mother, no one else is looking out for her.

**(waves crashing)**

Well, almost no one.

This is Marine Park Ranger Dirk Holman. He's out here to do a survey of the sea lion colony.

**(dramatic music)**

But a giant cliff face, with no way down, makes collecting data a difficult task.

Dirk used to fish these waters. Now, he has dedicated his life to protecting them.

And the latest drone technology is helping him survey areas for the very first time.

**(tentative music)**

Australian sea lions are one of the most endangered, marine mammals on the planet.

So when counting these pups, every pup counts. Dirk's got a lot of coast to cover.

He's responsible for an area called The Great Australian Bight.

**(bright, inspiring music)**

It's his job to monitor, protect, and manage an area the size of Texas.

It is home to some of the last Australian sea lion colonies, anywhere on Earth.

And he'll patrol it, alone.

Otto's mother has been feeding her for 10 days straight. Now it's time for her to feed, leaving baby Otto behind.

**(suspenseful music)**

**(waves crashing)**

One misstep here could be her last.

**(water bubbling)**

**(waves crashing)**

**(bright, uplifting music)**

**(splashes)**

But not to worry, this isn't her first rodeo. Her ancestors have been fishing these waters for over 5 million years.

Awkward on land, she is as graceful as a ballerina under the waves.

But like all marine mammals, she will have to come up for air.

Over the next few days, she'll dive almost constantly, searching for food. She'll spend over half her life down here.

Yet much of what an Australian sea lion does below the waves remains a mystery to science.

**(waves crashing)**

Back on land, Otto is facing some challenges of her own.

**(birds squawking)**

**(grunting and growling)**

**(suspenseful, expectant music)**

Territorial bulls are one of the biggest dangers to juvenile sea lions.

**(scary music)**

**(grunting and growling)**

Otto could easily get trampled.

**(grunting and grumbling)**

**(tentative music)**

Luckily, she's found a good place to hide. She's also found something else.

**(cooing)**

A buddy.

**(slow, bright music)**

He's a boy the same age, and like Otto, he's seeking shelter until his mother returns.

**(splashing)**

**(dolphins chatter)**

Unlike dolphins, Otto's mom is hunting alone, foraging for food and avoiding predators.

Although fast and agile, sea lions have a weakness.

They stink. The oil in the sea lions' fur leaves a trail, a trail that attracts one of the ocean's greatest predators.

**(suspenseful, expectant music)**

Great white sharks have been patrolling our waters for over 10 million years.

**(slow, mystical music)**

In that time, they've developed a super sense.

A sense of smell 10,000 times stronger than our own.

As it swims through the water, it sways its head to sense the direction of its prey.

**(low, ominous music)**

It can smell a sea lion miles before it can see it.

With 300 teeth, this great white is a ferocious predator.

But they are not the greatest threat to sea lions. We are.

**(eerie, reverberant music)**

Giant, micro-thin nets are extremely efficient at catching our food. But they also entangle sea lions. Otto's mother will never see it coming.

**(bright, whimsical music)**

**(waves crashing distantly)**

**(snoring and grumbling)**

Unaware of the trouble at sea, Otto is busy making new friends. This might look like a quarrel, but it's a behavior called thigmotaxis, an instinctive need to be close to each other.

**(cooing)**

It's kind of like a cuddle for sea lions.

**(kisses)**

For sea lion pups, touching and friendship is almost as important as food.

**(light, whimsical music)**

**(passes gas)**

Well, almost.

**(waves crashing)**

Elsewhere on the cliffs, older pups have begun exploring the paddling pools.

**(bright, adventurous music)**

Just like us, sea lions have to learn how to swim.

**(splashing)**

**(mystical music)**

These safe, shallow pools will allow the to build up their strength for the open ocean. It's learning through play.

It has been four days since Otto's mom left to find food.

**(squeals longingly)**

Unable to survive long without milk, all Otto can do is wait.

**(thunder rumbles)**

If her mother is not home soon, she could be in real trouble.

**(thunder rumbles and claps)**

**(bright, hopeful music)**

As dawn breaks on the fifth day, a familiar face breaks the surface.

**(splashing)**

**(joyful music)**

**(waves crashing)**

She's exhausted.

**(birds squawking)**

But still has one task left to do.

**(whines)**

Finding Otto.

**(emotional music)**



**(whining)**

**(squeals)**

**(bright, jovial music)**

**(cooing)**

Finally, Otto can feed and her mother can rest. They're safe, for now.

**(wind whistles faintly)**

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for their species.

**(waves crashing)**

This coast used to be home to hundreds of thousands of sea lions before they were hunted almost to extinction.

Dirk's latest survey reveals there are now less than 12,000 left.

Even though they're a protected species, in the last decade, their numbers have dropped by 25%.

**(slow, sober music)**

**(buzzing)**

And they're still declining.

**(waves crashing)**

It's a problem he's determined to solve.

A quest that will take him to the far side of the world.

**(thunder claps)**

**(contemplative music)**

**(whirring)**

**(hopeful music)**

Not long ago, California sea lions also faced extinction.  
But now, they've made a full recovery.

Dirk is here to find out how.

**(slow, contemplative music)**

It's a puzzle with many pieces and one just washed ashore.

Every year, hundreds of California sea lions get into trouble along  
the coast.

Some are injured, some are caught in nets.

And some, like this one, are orphaned.

**(light-hearted, upbeat music)**

Lucky for him, help is on the way. Dirk has joined a team of  
volunteers.

There are thousands of them along the California coast, looking out for stranded pups.

This sea lion couldn't be in better hands, or headed to a better place.

**(light-hearted, upbeat music)**

**(distant squealing and grunting)**

This is The Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito. It's the largest marine mammal hospital in the world.

**(cage squeaking and rattling)**

When it comes to rescuing sea lions, no one is doing more.

**(beeping)**

And first up, is a check-up.

**[Doctor]** So weighing in at 26 pounds, Dirk, let's get him over to C2, and we'll take a closer look.

**[Dirk]** Hi there, little guy, you are one lucky sea lion.

**(squealing)**

**(simple, ringing music)**

**[Narrator]** A dedicated team of veterinarians and volunteers will check every new arrival for injuries and more serious troubles.

**(hopeful music)**

Luckily for our rescued pup,

**(squeals)**

he's just hungry and a little lonely. And the folks at the MMC can fix both.

**(bright, playful music)**

After getting the all clear, it's time to meet his new buddies.

**(splashing)**

He'll stay here playing and feeding until he's fat.

**(splashes)**

And fit.

The Marine Mammal Center rescues, rehabilitates, and releases hundreds of sea lions a year.

**(uplifting music)**

And for those who might need a little extra help, there's fish school.

**(splashing lightly)**

The center looks after any marine mammal that needs help, from elephant seals to harbor seals.

From cute to, well, you know.

**(grunts and squeals)**

Dirk will stay at the center to find out how it fits into the larger puzzle of species recovery.

**(playful, energetic music)**

It's important work because sea lions eat the same fish we do, and swim in the same waters, which means making an ocean safe for sea lions is making an ocean safe for us.

Sea lions are not the puppies of the sea.

They are the watchdogs.

**(music resolves excitedly)**

**(waves crashing distantly)**

Back in Australia, Otto is learning, too.

**(slow, bright music)**

After feeding on nothing but milk for months... she's a lot bigger.

With a shiny new coat and with the help of her mother, she's about to learn what it really means to be a sea lion.

**(slow, uplifting music)**

It's time to join the colony and head out to deeper waters.

**(calm, tentative music)**

**(splashing)**

Every sea lion colony has its own unique culture. Each generation teaches the next, which means Otto's mother will teach her everything she needs to know, including how to hunt.

**(whimsical, expectant music)**

Lesson number one, bubble blowing. It's a sneaky trick to flush out prey from the seaweed.

She'll learn where to forage, what to feed on, and how to catch it.

She'll find her food on the sea floor.

But it's not always easy.

This decorator crab is the king of crafty camouflage.

**(bright, whimsical music)**

She'll even snack on the occasional shark.

At this age, she's as clever as a four-year-old human.

And just as curious.

This might look like a game of hide and seek, but it's a hunting technique called catfishing.

**(playfully suspenseful music)**

She'll hide among the weeds, waiting for prey to pass, but it requires a lot of patience, something Otto doesn't really have.

What she does have is millions of years of adaptations to help her survive in this underwater world.

**(mystically ominous music)**

The claws that helped her ancestors to climb trees, are now flippers that will propel her through the water.

Her whiskers help her to find the biggest and tastiest fish sensitive than a cat's.

Her eyes have developed special optics that allow her to see in the dark.

She'll use all these adaptations when hunting for the ultimate prize...

Cuttlefish.

With three hearts, eight arms, and green blood, dinner doesn't come any weirder than this.

Made up of over 80% water, they're an important source of hydration for Otto if she can catch them.

They can change colors and contours to mimic their surroundings.

**(ominous, mystical music)**

And communicate in ways we're yet to understand.

They are one of the most intelligent invertebrates in the sea. It's a battle of the brains.

And for now, she's been outsmarted.

**(simple, bright music)**

It's Dirk's last day at the center, and he has one task left to do.

**(bright, hopeful music)**

It's time for our rescued pup to go home.

**(engine starts)**

It's an important day, not just for the sea lions, but also for the volunteers who helped make this release possible.

These are the last friendly faces they'll see, the last cage, and the last goodbye.

**(hopeful, emotional music)**



For these lucky sea lions, it's a rare second chance at life and a chance for Dirk to witness humans at their best, helping animals overcome the worst.

**(waves crashing)**

Finally, they're on their way.

**(splashing)**

Back in the water, these sea lions are heading to a place like no other.

**(bright, mystical music)**

Forty miles off the Californian coast, these are The Channel Islands, five national park protected islands, surrounded by pristine marine sanctuary.

**(birds squawking)**

It's a haven for all life living here.

**(slow, bright music)**

**(exclamatory squealing)**

Home to one of the largest sea lion rookeries in the world.

**(waves crashing)**

**(fun, upbeat music)**

The beaches here are brimming with these barking beach bums.

They're living the California dream. Sun, sea, and surf. The perfect place to call home.

It's a pinniped paradise.

Another piece of the recovery puzzle is hidden here, beneath the waves.

**(slow, mystical music)**

This is giant kelp. The ocean's kelp produces more oxygen than the Amazon rainforest, and shelter for a rich tapestry of life.

Over a thousand different plant and animal species live here... all depending on these life-giving fronds.

Dirk is here to uncover its mysteries, and research the relationship between the marine sanctuary and the wider sea.

**(slow, mystical music)**

**(splashing)**

The sanctuary an area that is fully protected and set aside for conservation, acts like a nursery, seeding the wider sea.

As numbers of fish in these areas increase, so do those in the surrounding waters for hundreds of miles, feeding those at the bottom of the food chain to those at the top.

The sea lion recovery here in California, is proof that protected waters work.

It's time for Dirk to go, and with him, the building blocks for an epic recovery.

**(tentatively excited music)**

Dirk has to make sure that any new protected waters here work for humans and sea lions.

It's a hard task, but history has proven that if we work together, we can make it right.

**(slow, uplifting music)**

**(splashes enormously)**

**(sings)**

Just one generation ago, humpback whales were almost extinct. But thanks to a whaling ban, they've made a full recovery.

**(singing)**

**(slow, melodic music)**

There are now over 40,000 humpback whales along the West coast of Australia.

It's the largest population on Earth.

**(whales singing)**

As the ocean changes, so too are humans. Once predators, we're slowly becoming protectors.

**(whales sing)**

Dirk is back at the cliffs where Otto was born,  
and there are hardly any sea lions left.

As the ocean changes under human pressures, prey is harder to find, weather is becoming more extreme, and the risk of entanglement looms.

Entire colonies can disappear in a season.

**(contemplative music)**

Dirk's received word of a possible new colony on a nearby island.

**(bright, hopeful music)**

He's hopeful, but it's an unlikely place. to find the Whiskers.

**(waves crashing)**

It's little more than barren rock.

**(hopeful, heartfelt music)**

They're here.

Thankfully, the Whiskers have found a new place to call home.

And with the help of people like Dirk, let's hope they get to stay.

**(bright, excited music)**

The sea lions of our oceans need our help.

They need safe waters, a clean environment, and for us to care.

As the watchdogs of the sea, we need them too.

After all, their ocean is our ocean.

Their story is part of our story, and there's still time to change how it ends.

**(music resolves simply)**

**(wind whistles faintly)**

Dirk is doing a final count to see how many of the colony have survived the move.

**(waves crashing distantly)**

**(warm, heartfelt music)**

He's happy to see Otto. And it looks like she's not alone.

**(vocalizing)**

The story of this new mum and pup has just begun.

It's the story of life, by a Whisker.

And as the Sun sets on their new-found sanctuary, there's one man who's still keeping watch.

**(vocalizing distantly)**

**(warm, heartfelt music)**

**(dramatic, hopeful music)**

**(music resolves triumphantly)**