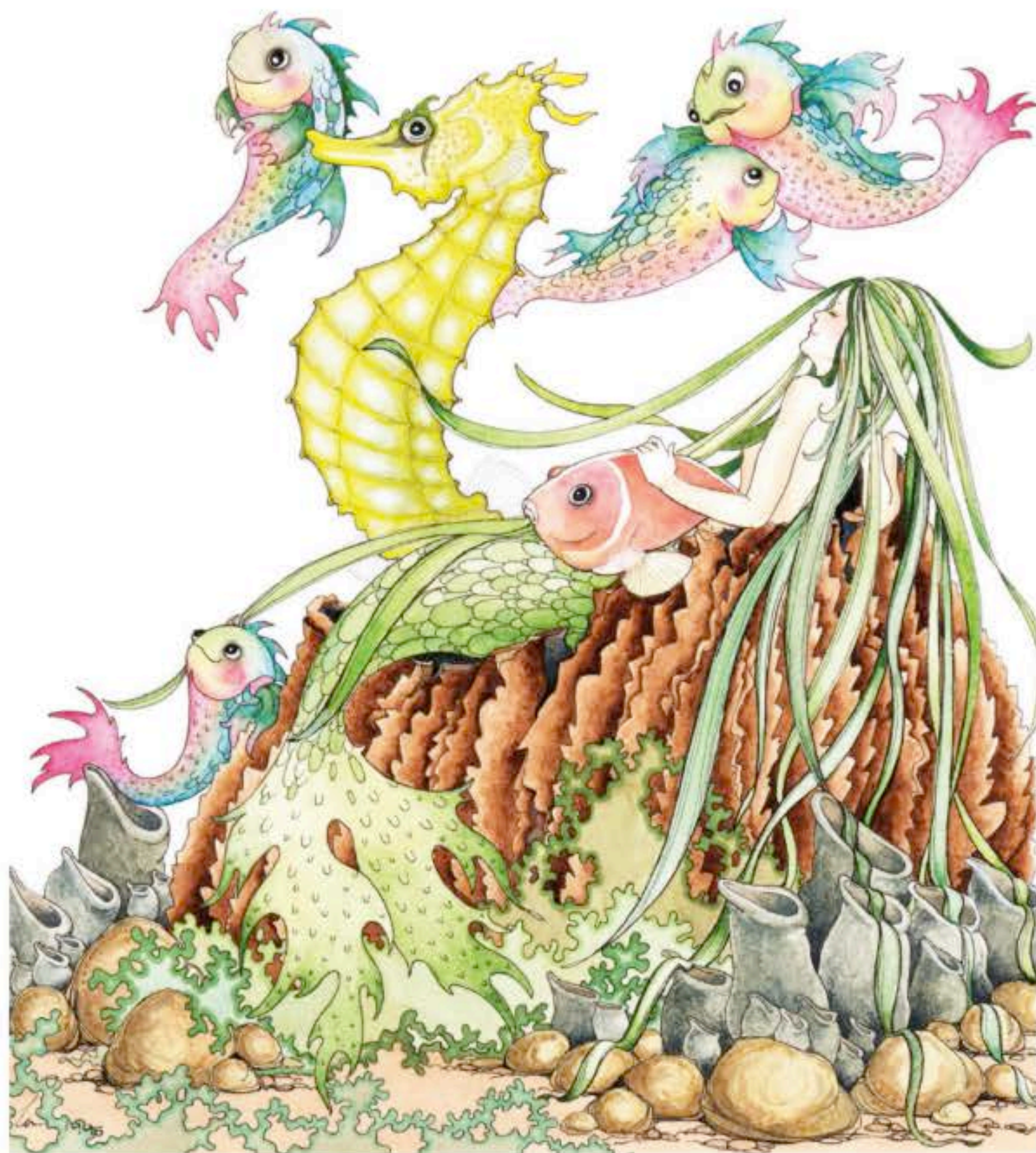


Water people

Story by **Emma Masters.**



Page left: Valerie will be bringing a selection of her illustrations to the Water People exhibition being held in Victor Harbor at the Coral Street Art Space in late May. Above: Valerie with a potato cod on a dive during the filming of one of their documentaries. Photo courtesy **Ron & Valerie Taylor Productions.**

Valerie Taylor is known the world over for many things – an award-winning diver, a trailblazing underwater filmmaker and a passionate marine conservationist. But what often appears as a footnote in her long list of accomplishments is her artistic flair and ability.

As she explains over the call of a persistent kookaburra outside her Sydney home, drawing and painting is something she loved long before she fell head over heels for the deep blue sea. 'I was born in Sydney in 1935, but we happened to be in New Zealand when war broke out and we couldn't come back, so I was educated over there and when I returned I got my first good job drawing comic strips,' Valerie explains.

'It was a time when there was no television, and comic books like *Foxy Fagan* and *Bugsey Bear* were popular and we had Prime Minister Robert Menzies who said, "If it can be done in Australia, we don't import it", so we were copying American comics,' she continues. 'I also did the children's page for *The Courier Mail* and *The Sunday Telegraph*. It was something I could do anywhere, so even when I started diving I kept drawing and did for about 20 years.'

Valerie closed the book on illustrating comics around 1968. By then, she'd been diving for over a decade and was a member of the local spearfishing club, where she met her husband Ron. Their shared love for the underwater world saw them turn their attention to capturing film of life beneath the surface. In 1969 they worked on the seminal

documentary on great white sharks *Blue Water, White Death* (released in 1971), which caught the attention of Steven Spielberg, who invited them to consult on *Jaws*.

Both films saw Valerie and Ron bring crews to South Australia, which she says is home to some of the best and most diverse diving in the world – quite the accolade coming from such an experienced and celebrated underwater explorer. 'South Australia has some of the most amazing, colourful marine life, interesting animals that you don't see anywhere else, especially around the jetties,' she explains. 'If you're looking for colourful beauty, you've got it. If you're looking for strange fishes, you've got it. If you're looking for big sharks, you've got it. If you're looking for sweet, kindly sea lions, you've got it. It's as diverse as the Great Barrier Reef but you have a problem.'

Her statement appeared to be a clever segue to discussing her affinity with one of the most feared animals on the planet, which call SA home. I gingerly respond, 'Great white sharks?' 'No,' she says, gently berating me. 'They just add to it. I'm talking about cold water. Last time I went diving there was for a film series called *Coast* and when I came out of the water I was so frozen with arthritis I couldn't even take off my weight belt. I needed a bowl of hot water for my hands so I could work again.' She was 83 at the time.

Lucky her hands warmed up because when she's not in the water or campaigning to save marine species and habitat, she's using them to paint and draw. Even though Valerie quit her job illustrating comics, she never stopped drawing or painting and she's bringing a selection of her work to the Water People exhibition being held in Victor Harbor at the Coral Street Art Space in late May. >



Top: One of Valerie's whimsical watercolour paintings depicting the undersea world. Above left: Young Valerie in her famous brightly coloured wetsuit. Photo courtesy Ron & Valerie Taylor Productions. Above right: Valerie Taylor and Timothy Johnston on the night they first met (she came to Tim's exhibition).



Some of the pieces are whimsical watercolour paintings from her *Melody the Mermaid* children's book, depicting a mermaid's adventures of the marine world. 'You might see a mermaid nursing a fish or tickling the nose of a seahorse and the fish are usually correctly drawn but sometimes I make them up. They're the kind of paintings people like for children,' says Valerie. 'There'll also be paintings of great white sharks taken from my photography, but they'll be realistic. No mermaids.'

Valerie is also collaborating with her good friend and artist Timothy Johnston on a large piece. Tim, or TJ as his friends call him, founded CollaborOCEANS in 2019, a group that brings creatives together to inspire action to protect oceans and marine life. A year later he opened an art gallery in Sydney, and the two first met not long after that.

TJ says Valerie was introduced as 'Queen of the Oceans' and it's a title and tradition he continues to this day. 'She's one of the longest living divers and ocean advocates, has one of the rarest ocean conservation awards ever given and is the first woman to swim open water with great white sharks. And to be as kind and as fierce as she is, she's a queen in her own right,' he says.

The two immediately bonded over their passion for art and the ocean and they're combining their mutual passions in their joint piece for the Victor Harbor exhibition. TJ says the work will involve a series of Valerie's photos interpreted through his abstract approach to painting

nature. 'I have done some really abstract interpretations of corals, reefs and aerials of deserts and I really wanted to sort of showcase that part of my work,' he says. 'I love vivid colours and want to draw people into the story of beautiful sponge corals from around South Australia and Valerie has taken photos of the Australian sea lion around Hopkins Island in the Spencer Gulf.'

'In one she has on a vivid wetsuit and is holding a sea lion, so I'm utilising that as inspiration, especially because the protection of the species was made possible through her advocacy,' TJ continues. Valerie explains she has seen colonies on Hopkins Island reduce from hundreds to dozens. 'They're found nowhere else in the world outside SA and Western Australia and they're the most endearing wild animal you could ever meet,' Valerie says. 'They're as cute as a koala but the koala is nervous of you, whereas the Australian sea lion wants to sniff you, it'll hang on your flippers and try and play with you.'

Valerie and Tim's works will be exhibited alongside local Fleurieu artists Chris Summer, and Chris DeRosa as well as some emerging artists. There will also be a screening of the documentary *Playing with Sharks* at Victa Cinema and signed copies of a book on Valerie titled *An Adventurous Life*. A fitting title to celebrate the life of one of Australia's living treasures.

This exhibition will play a vital role in this year's Winter Whale Fest and Welcoming of the Whales Ceremony. 🐋

