

Season 7, Episode 101 "Seas the Day"

Megan Feighery: From Wyoming Public Media, this is HumaNature, real stories where humans and our habitat meet. I'm Megan Feighery. This time, my childhood dreams come true as I talk to a real life mermaid,

Emma Harper: And then I got in the water. And everyone went quiet. And that's why I know mermagic is real.

MF: Emma Harper grew up in a landlocked part of England about an hour's drive from the sea. But she always loved the water.

EH: I was a little bit like the baby off you know, the Nirvana album. I just would float underwater quite happily, with my eyes fully open, and I was that child that would be in the bath, just looking at my mom from underneath.

MF: Emma's love of the ocean followed her into adulthood.

EH: Even to the point that when I went to university in Edinburgh, and I would do event management jobs and PR and try to do normal jobs. But I remember getting in trouble on one campaign. I was late. And they wanted to know why I was late and why I was so wet. And I'd gone I just gone for a dip. Gone for a swim, got completely distracted.

MF: She eventually got married and had three boys. But Emma knew something was missing. She needed to be near the ocean.

EH: I go to bed at night and I dream of the sea. I just dream of water and I hear water. The sound of water just calms me.

MF: So she and her family moved to Cornwall, it's in the southwest part of England. Emma is now minutes from the ocean. And that works out well. Because Emma is a mermaid

EH: When you become a mermaid, you really can fly. I purchased a monofin and would disappear in whatever body water I could and pretend to be a mermaid. We all secretly want to be lost as a creature that's so connected to the earth, it's part of it. It's total fantasy mythology, sort of escapism. And I fully admit that it's completely and utterly surrendering yourself to your environment and to your basic animal instincts of your body. It's the peace, even the light is diffused by the water. And then you see a skull and fish just shooting through like sparkles. And oftentimes go down just wedge myself in between rocks and just sit there and the stiller I am, the more things come and say hello. Then I fly, and I will flip and I will spin.

MF: Emma calls herself Mischief the Mermaid. And while it can seem like all fun and games under the water, being a mermaid requires a lot of skill. Emma spends six hours a week doing rigorous cardio to keep herself in shape. And she's an experienced free diver. She can dive to

depths of 65 feet and hold her breath for up to four minutes. The Cornish coastline is stunning, white sandy beaches surrounded by towering rugged cliffs. It's a popular place for surfing and extreme sports. But it can be harsh and unpredictable. Winds from the Atlantic ocean can be fierce and rip tides are common. Emma is very safety conscious when she swims and for good reason.

EH: There's one beach called Maenporth that is generally regarded as a really safe, really good swimming beach. But when it's at low tide, and when the sea is up and there's an easterly wind, oi it gets a battering and it's got one heck of a rip. And I went out with my friend Tracy in her new mermaid tail that she had not actually worn before. This is when you need to appreciate that buying the right tail for the right environment is so vital. And she did not have the right tail. The wind picked up, we started getting pulled into this rip. And I remember just thinking, this is gonna look really bad for mermaids everywhere. But luckily, I know how to swim out of a rip. That's part of my training. I was able to tell Tracy, bless her, to the side of the rip and get out of it. It is terrifying how quick conditions can change here. Cornish seas are insane. One minute and they can be flat as a pancake and stunning and the next minute. You're in a turner painting, do you know what I mean? And the power and the waves. I mean, this is why our coastline is so amazing and striking and stunning, but it's because it's been battered. It's been absolutely wildly winded and waved.

MF: As you might imagine Emma gets a lot of attention every time she dons her tail and goes out for a swim. And a lot of it is positive. But not all. Emma says she gets a lot of criticism from people who think she's wasting her time and lying to children.

EH: It does make me a bit sad when people really want to say, well, mermaids aren't real and you're not real. You're a fake. And I'm like well, I'm having my happiness is real. And the smiles and the children's faces are real. You're not really a mermaid your just a middle aged mum that wears a costume. I get that all the time. And then I'm like, alright, we'll come in to see remake Come, come watch me and see.

Then I go into the waves and if you can imagine entering like a slug. So like I can walk began like a seal. And then I got in the water. And everyone went quiet. And that's why I know mermagic is real. And I love it. I'm getting older and I'm not going to be able to do it forever. But I definitely feel that when I go for my big sleep, I will have no regrets and be really happy to think that there are hundreds and hundreds of mermaids swimming all over the world.

MF: Emma also does underwater modeling, sometimes in her mermaid fins and sometimes in these beautiful flowing gowns. The pictures are gorgeous and ethereal. But Emma says they take a lot of work, and they can be dangerous at times, even for a trained professional like herself. On one particular shoot, Emma was in Mexico. The water was crystal clear. Emma was captivated by it and lost herself in it.

EH: Never experience water clarity that clear in my life. So I'm in a full evening gown doing underwater ballet. Sank all the way to the bottom, looking up with no air in my lungs and a dress.

MF: Emma was deep beneath the surface and running out of air. But it's dangerous to ascend too quickly. Bubbles can form in the blood which can cause excruciating pain, paralysis, and sometimes even death. It's commonly referred to as the bends. But she was also running out of air and in danger of drowning.

EH: There is that element of terror, this could go wrong. I might not get home. And I remember thinking if I panic, and I start moving frantically. Then I will pass out and I won't get to the top. I had to have a moment of sort of calm and I remember thinking you're a mermaid mate. Just chill out and just really slowly work your way up. And that's what I did because I didn't have any fins on. So I just very slowly did the sort of dolphin kick towards the surface which, so far away. I was thinking it's so clear, I can't tell where it is. But luckily the warmth of the sun hit the top of my head and I realized I was at the surface. So I tilted my head back and took a very slow breath in.

MF: Emma wasn't alone on that trip. She had a team of people taking photos from above on a boat, but none of them knew what had happened.

EH: They all say they think they also I was that I was fine. That was just what I did. In actual fact that had my own little existential crisis

MF: Dangers aside, the sea is Emma's happy place. One of her favorite parts is all the marine life she encounters. The Cornish Sea is home to fish and sea horses, dolphins, whales. Emma has even swam with the beautiful blue shark, an experience she calls magical, but the animal encounter that stands out the most? Seals

EH: In Cornwall, we have a fantastic population of seals. So I was having one of my training swims there with my friend Tracy, who I call a seal magnet. Whenever she's there, the seals come and these whiskers were tickling my toes. The whiskers progressed to little nibbles on my toes. So obviously this is making me squeak and as I was looking down my goggles, this little face appeared in front of me. Real little puppy face. And I thought oh, there you know this is not good. You should be going and getting food. Where's your mom? Oh. So I started sort of trying to spin away but I kept getting nips. I couldn't get away from them. And I didn't realize I thought it was one, but it ended up being two little pups. They were playing with me like they probably would do with them with a mom. But they were that age where their mom will have left them now. Which is a little bit hard to take. No go and find fish. I can't be your mum.

What I hadn't realized is that this swell had built up and my friend Tracy completely lost sight of me because she phoned the Coast Guard straightaway. But then did spot me appearing and I'm like Tracy, help, I can't get away. Even when I came out the water they followed me out of the water. She's got a video of me literally like absolutely worn out. Screaming trying to get away from them. But yeah, the Coast Guard was fine, we phoned them back and said oh well she was just being chased by seals.

MF: Riptides, seals, the bends, it's all just part of being a mermaid. And Emma wouldn't trade it for anything. In fact, she wants to inspire as many people as possible to give it a try. She'll sometimes do meet and greets on the beach, allowing anyone to come and chat with her about mermaiding.

EH: People traveled sort of four or five miles, drove to stand and queue on a beach just to come and say hello. And that blew my mind. It's just the commitment that people have to the Mermagic. It's okay sometimes to put adulthood to one side and enjoy it. So I have 50 year old ladies coming down and visiting me from Wales running down the harbor saying I've come all the way from Wales. And I'm like, wow. And then you've got little ones too. I've sort of grown up with from when they were little babies that were put on my tail and you know, now they're starting school or they've, you know, they're sending me stories that they've written about me. I'm quite happy to think of myself as that little old, eight year old lady with sort of gray hair sat on a rock saying hello to all the little ones that she's met that aren't so little anymore. It would be lovely.

MF: Emma gets so much joy from the sea and it's important to her to give back. She wants to see the sea to remain beautiful.

EH: I've been known to get my divers knife out quite often and sort of cut quite a few things free and we drag a lot of old netting. It is not done on purpose necessarily, but it becomes detached from their boats and then they're left just trapping marine life.

MF: Ocean conservation is one of Emma's passions. She's been caught on fish hooks, tangled in fishing lines, and even caught in a net.

EH: It was set up for a film. They just wanted this video and his image of a mermaid being caught. It was in between two boats and I was under the net. And they were looking down. But obviously, it's in Cornwall and so it moves and intertwines, and it wraps around you. I felt safe. But seeing it from a perspective of sort of trapped creature was pretty grim.

MF: Emma doesn't necessarily consider herself an activist but she wants to raise awareness. Pollution alerts have been on the rise at many of Cornwall's most popular beaches, and it's due to sewage allegedly being released into the water.

EH: The truth of it is that there's lots of people in positions of power that know what damage is being done, but due to financial implications are doing nothing about it. It's just old fashion fairytale good guys bad guys. This is why me the magic mermaid thing is necessary because it packages some home truths and realities that everybody needs to learn about, in a way of happiness and hope. You get to tell stories and create your own little folk lores that help children of the next generation learn about why it's so important to listen to the sea. We need to acknowledge what it needs us to do to help it. I mean, the end result ideally would be is that we have the next generation is inspired by visuals by stories and learning about conservation and learning about why it's so vital that we read the news and speak for our oceans. You can't put on

mermaid tails and and not know what we're on about when it comes to saving the seas. It's all linked again, isn't it? It's that big black hole Whirlpool of it all coming together.

MF: Emma is so passionate when she talks about the ocean and mermaiding. It's infectious. As she was talking, I was also scrolling through her Instagram feed. The photos are beautiful. But one really stood out to me. In it Emma is wearing a white top and this gorgeous yellow ballgown skirt. She's floating in the sea and the fabric is flowing around her. A school of black fish is swimming past and the light makes everything look like a painting. It's magical.

EH: And I just was flowing completely weightless in space. The water was really clear. The sun was rising. So the light was just gold all around me. I just remember thinking this is like being in a dream. I'm like actually living a dream. In that moment was like, Yeah, I'm a mermaid. Yeah, yeah, um, definitely a mermaid.

MF: I was still thinking about Emma long after our interview was over. I went back and looked at her pictures a lot, just marveling at how serene they were. And I thought a lot about mermaids. I grew up near the ocean, but I've never donned a tail. Yet, the more I thought about it, the more I remembered just how much I loved mermaids growing up. Every time I was in a pool or in the sea, I would swim with my legs together, propelling myself through the water like Madison from the movie *Splash*. I know I wasn't the only kid to break the surface of a pool by dramatically flipping my hair like Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*.

Legends of mermaids and mermen have captured the human imagination for 1000s of years and span the globe. They're often harbingers of misfortune and death, luring sailors to a watery grave. But many cultures see them as symbols of beauty, wisdom and health. They've been known to help people in distress and even heal the wounded. The ocean is so vast and mysterious. It's estimated that less than 10% has been mapped and explored. Who knows what species have yet to be discovered? I don't know if mermaids are real. What I do know is watching videos of Emma swimming in the sea in her gorgeous gowns and glimmering tails is as real as it comes. It's where she belongs. And I told her that

EH: Maybe a little mermaid magic scales snuck in somewhere. So I think...dare I say it. I think I really do believe in merfolk. First time I said that.

MF: Our storyteller today was Emma Harper. If you're ever in Cornwall, head down to the coast, you may just spot Emma diving in and out of the waves. This is the final episode of our season. But don't worry. Another one is coming your way real soon. In the meantime, keep a lookout for bonus content and make sure you're following us on social media. We're @humanaturepodcast on Instagram and Facebook. On Twitter. We're @humanaturepod. That's HumaNature. One word one "n." I'm Megan Feighery. This episode was produced by me with help from Steven Carroll. Our theme song is by Caught A Ghost. HumaNature is a production of Wyoming Public Media.