



THE **ECO** WARRIOR



LAGUNA BEACH'S JAMES PRIBRAM DIDN'T ASK TO BE THE GUY FIGHTING FOR YOUR NICE DAY AT THE BEACH, BUT HE'S IN THE TRENCHES JUST THE SAME.

BY TERENCE LOOSE

I drive a 1994 Ford Bronco, with the big engine. My truck gets around 11 miles to the gallon, downhill with a tail wind, leaks oil, and usually has some rendition of "Wash Me!" scribbled in the dirt covering it. Why is that important? Because this was the car I used to pick up James Pribram, a professional surfer from Laguna Beach better known as the Eco Warrior. Not the Eco Lover or the Eco Negotiator or the Eco Nice Guy Who Plays with Puppies. The Eco Warrior. In other words, since 2006, Pribram has made his living traveling the globe following his passion for preserving the beaches and oceans by doing such things as canoeing down rivers through rain and snow, sailing through storms in the Atlantic and paddling – unarmed and with a bunch of vegetarians – into a place called The Killing Cove. So I was legitimately concerned about what his reaction would be to being picked up by a guy who was essentially aiming a 5,000-pound dirty bazooka at his beloved environment.

"Hey, I drive a Chevy Tahoe," he tells me a few minutes later when I apologize for my ride. "But I have a surfing school and drive my parents everywhere. Some people just need big cars. I use a product called Ethos, which cuts down on my truck's emissions and improves its gas mileage. My point is, start small. Just do something." It's important to note that when he says this, he is anything but dogmatic. In fact, it's more like an encouraging coach telling a player who just fumbled on the one yard line that he did a great job getting so close to a touchdown in the first place and he's sure next time he'll score. I make a note to buy some Ethos; tally another small victory up for the Eco Warrior.

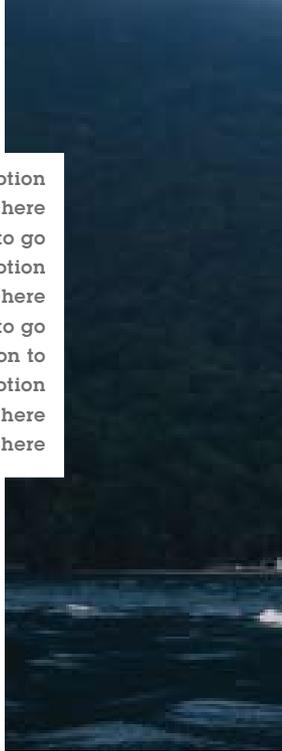
And while Pribram will take these small conquests, he's much more about the big picture and attacking the larger problems facing our beaches, oceans and the critters that inhabit them. As for the Eco Warrior tag? Don't let Pribram's affable demeanor and ready smile fool you: the title fits. Pribram gets in the trenches.

A perfect example is his 2007 trip to Japan with fellow professional surfer and founder of Surfers for Cetaceans Dave Rastovich. Actually, trip is a misnomer; it was a bona fide mission to stop the horrific killing of tens of thousands of pilot whales, dolphins and porpoises each year in what is now infamously referred to as The Killing Cove in Taiji, Japan. Taiji is a small fishing town that makes millions each year off the sale and slaughter of cetaceans. Fishermen in skiffs herd small whales and dolphins into a tiny cove by banging metal rods together underwater, thus disorientating the marine mammals, which rely heavily on sonar to navigate. From a cliff nearby, sea life park representatives bid on the mammals, paying up to \$500,000 per animal. When the bidding is done, the remaining whales and dolphins are forced into an adjacent cove, conveniently out of sight from the public, where they are killed with spears and knives, then butchered for their meat, which is sold throughout Japan.

Of course, you could say that the dolphins get the last laugh since, due to increasing human pollution, their meat is so riddled with mercury that mercury poisoning from eating dolphin meat is a genuine concern and has resulted in horrible genetic birth defects. But people such as mammal-butcherer fisherman and



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members of the Yakuza – the Japanese mafia, which rumor has it is in on the take – tend not to care about such long-term health risks. In fact, until this practice was brought to the attention of the world, the Taiji local government had plans to make dolphin meat a mandatory lunch for elementary school kids. This is meat that has tested thousands of times greater than even Japan’s official acceptable mercury contamination limit. All this was documented in the 2009 Academy Award-nominated film for Best Documentary, *The Cove*, but a few years ago when Rastovich, Pribram and a handful of other surfers flew to Taiji and paddled surfboards out to The Killing Cove to form a circle, it was still unknown to the world, and therefore seriously dangerous.

“Out of all the actions I’ve taken part in, that was by far the scariest. By far,” says Pribram. “We paddled out with cameras, into the gut of their operation, and basically said, ‘Hey, you are being watched.’” That’s when the real danger began. Armed and angry fisherman and police met them on the shore; then, after being allowed to return to their hotel rooms, rumors of Yakuza contracts and death threats went down. It was a very tense time, and there was no guarantee Pribram and the other protesters would get out of the country. “We were hiding in stairwells, changing our plane flights... basically, we fled the country,” says Pribram.

Mission Accomplished

A partial list of Eco Warrior missions:

2010

Joined a Five Gyres Institute expedition and sailed a boat from Brazil to Cape Town, South Africa, across the Atlantic Ocean to document the South Atlantic Gyre.

2010

Paddled a kayak down the Atchafalaya River 180 miles and 6 days, enduring rain and snow, in order to highlight water and soil samples connecting rivers and oceans.



RIDING THE TRASH WAVE

The Taiji protest paddle may have been Pribram's most dangerous mission, but certainly not his most taxing. His latest escapade holds that honor. In late 2010, Pribram joined a 13-man crew aboard a 72-foot sailboat to sail from Brazil to South Africa (a 32-day open ocean crossing) in order to collect data and samples of the South Atlantic Gyre, what media reports have described as a "floating island of plastic garbage the size of Texas." Incredibly, the gyre had never been researched in person; the proof of its existence only documented via satellite data.

But Pribram believes that for accuracy these things need to be seen by the human eye. "Ten days into the trip I was still waiting to come across this huge plastic trash island the size of Texas, what the media keeps blasting out," says Pribram. "But [the gyre] isn't that at all." The gyre is actually billions of tiny particles of plastic, the degraded waste of a species in love with their plastic water bottles and plastic-wrapped plastic toys. There are some intact examples of these objects marring the picture perfect surface of a deep blue sea out there – bottles and bags and toddler's toys – but the more alarming aspect of the gyre is what is not seen immediately, what showed up in the sailboat's small trawl collected each day. In other words, as horrifying as the media's Floating Plastic Texas-sized Island sounds, the reality is much worse,

much more difficult to deal with. An island could be "swept up," collected, contained. Try sweeping up billions of microscopic particles being tossed around a thousand miles offshore. "That's why it's so important for people like me or Marcus Eriksen and Anna Cummins of the Five Gyres Institute to go on these missions. Someone has to go out there and see what's really happening, whether it's real or not," says Pribram, who credits people such as Eriksen and Cummins as the real Eco Warriors.

But again, getting evidence of these things is not easy, and there's nothing like a 28-day sea voyage from Brazil to the southern tip of Africa to prove the point. The sail was fraught with heavy weather and at one point, just seconds after clipping himself in with a life vest tether, Pribram was washed across the decks by a breaking 18-foot wave and badly injured. "If I wasn't clipped in, I would be gone. Getting washed over 1,000 miles out at sea is like falling off a 1,000-foot cliff. You're not coming back."

2009

Flew to Chicago to fight to have surfing legalized and worked with Chicago locals Jack Flynn, Mike Killion, Todd Haugh, and Michigan advocate Vince Deur.

2007

Along with fellow pro surfer Dave Rastovich Hayden Pantierree, Elizabeth Lucas, flew to Taiji, Japan to paddle surfboards into the now infamous Killing Cove to protest the slaughter of dolphins, porpoises and pilot whales.

2007

Flew to Canary Islands and led efforts to convince government officials to save waves – and lives – by moving the location of a proposed harbor, which would destroy a favored wave and would be directly in the path of storms.



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THE ART OF WAR

As hairy as those situations are, however, one gets the sense that Pribram enjoys trench warfare. It's certainly true that he respects those who are there beside him. He just thinks there should be more of them, sponsored by companies. "Every [surf] company has a big wave specialist, an air guy, a [Championship Tour] guy. Every company should have an Eco Warrior," says Pribram, who is sponsored by O'Neill, XS Energy Drink, Boost Mobile, and Laguna Beach's Pacific Edge Hotel. Pribram also has no sympathy for false claims of green. "So many companies spend millions of dollars marketing an image of being green when they're not," he says. "I call it barketing."

It should be pointed out that, though far from Pribram's vision of a corporate army of Eco Warriors roaming the planet fighting the good fight on the surf industry's dime, there is, if you will, a small division of special ops. Rastovich, a respected voice in the "blue" movement, is sponsored by Billabong. Patagonia backs the Malloy Brothers; Quiksilver and Body Glove sponsor Reef Check. The list goes on.

Still, it's only a metaphorical drop in the ocean, and other so-called environmentalists' barketing is particularly annoying to Pribram since some have slung that criticism his way, accusing him of selling out. They've even come up with a catchy little slur: The Ego Warrior. And though Pribram claims that these arrows fly straight over his head, they do make him bristle. "I had a person close to me call me a wannabe, and that affected me," says Pribram. "Then I thought, 'Wait, I'm pretty sure I was in Chicago to legalize surfing; I'm pretty sure I sailed to the South Atlantic Gyre. And I'm definitely sure I was one of the guys in Taiji, Japan.' So I just think that when you follow your passion and put yourself out there, people are always going to take cheap shots

at you. The important thing is not to let their negativity stop me from doing what I do. What I don't get is people thinking just because I have sponsors that pay me to do what I love that it somehow discredits me. I mean, at the end of the day, we all have to make a living."

FROM PRO TO ECO

And in truth, Pribram is not much of a warrior to begin with. He won't shy away from a fight and admits to being blunt and opinionated, but he's also one who strives for solutions, not salvos. "I understand that there are two sides to every issue," he says. "There are the environmentalists who want to preserve and protect our beaches and oceans and there are the business interests who, like everyone else, want to make a living. So to me, it's about finding solutions and compromises that work for both sides."

If that sounds more like a politician than a warrior, it's not wholly surprising. Pribram never trained to be the Eco Warrior; it was never his plan to market himself as an environmentalist or spokesperson for the ocean. In fact, his dream – which he realized – was always to become a professional surfer.

Pribram grew up in Laguna Beach, virtually on the sand at Agate Street. Each morning, the first thing he'd do is hit the deck and check the conditions; that told him what kind of day it would be. Good waves equaled good day. Surfing was all he ever wanted to do. "Surfing didn't even seem like my choice," says Pribram. "It chose me."

Of course, surfing had a little help from Pribram's older brother John, one of Agate Street's best surfers. When Pribram was six years old, his brother took him out to the line up – then promptly took off on



THERE ARE GREAT PEOPLE EVERYWHERE DOING GREAT WORK, SAYS JAMES PRIBRAM. ACTUALLY, IT'S THEM WHO INSPIRE ME.



a wave and left Pribram to fend for himself. Terrified, Pribram somehow caught a wave, stood up, and rode it all the way to the beach.

Then he ran to his mom crying, thus getting his big brother in big trouble.

"But that was the beginning of my surf career right there because when I calmed down I remembered how great it felt to ride that wave," he says. Five short years later, at age 11, Pribram won the Brook Street Pro Am. He did the same the following year, then made the U.S. national team (NSSA) two years running and finally turned pro in 1990. He surfed on the pro tour until 2001, but in 1997 a life-threatening infection would change everything and plant the seeds for his second career as the Eco Warrior. While giving a friend a surf lesson at Doheny State Beach, Pribram sustained a small cut on his wrist. It was little more than a scratch so he thought nothing of it. But a few hours later, the cut was swollen, red and incredibly painful. A doctor friend looked at it and told him to get to the emergency room immediately.

Next thing Pribram knew he was flat on his back with multiple I.V.s sticking out of him; he had contracted Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), an antibiotic-resistant strain of staph infection. The emergency room doctor told him he was lucky he came in when he did; had he waited eight hours longer, Pribram would likely be dead. "That changed my life," says Pribram. "The thought that you could go from enjoying a beautiful August morning at the beach to a few hours later ending up in the emergency room and coming within a few hours of dying blew me away. It made me more of a spokesperson for the beaches and oceans."

After speaking out at a city council meeting and being quoted

on the front page of the local paper ("What good is the beach if we can't enjoy the ocean?"), Pribram got increasingly involved in beach cleanups and ocean water quality issues. Soon he was doing speaking engagements and surfing contests took a back seat to environmental issues. In 2001, he retired from professional surfing and a year later started the Aloha School of Surfing, a business that is still running. His environmental work continued, however, and surf companies liked what he was doing out of the water as much as what he did in the water. First OP, now O'Neill, sponsored him to be both a pro surfer and their "environmental guy." XS Energy Drink and Boost Mobile followed. "People think I had this grand idea to reinvent and market myself," he says. "I wish I did, but really, like my pro surfing career, it just happened."

With the help of sponsors, Pribram started the Eco Warrior project in 2006. He isn't rich – or on his way there – has a limited travel budget and picks his fights carefully. But Pribram is garnering attention for his efforts. In 2007, he received Surfrider Foundation's John Kelly Award, their most esteemed environmental prize, and just a month ago he received Laguna Beach's Athlete of the Year Award.

"I'm honored that people are paying attention to my work," says Pribram. "It's not so much about the award, though. It's more that it lets me know that I'm doing something that might inspire and motivate people to make a change. Because really, this whole thing is to spotlight other Eco Warriors around the world. Everywhere I go there are amazing people doing great work. Actually, it's them who inspire me."