



DUNE IVES. PHOTO
BY ADAM DILLON

THE FINAL STRAW

The Lonely Whale Foundation is an organization cofounded by Adrian Grenier. Its executive director Dune Ives discusses the damage plastic straws are doing to our oceans.

By MARIA KOWALSKA ELLEBERG

In the vast depths of the oceans, a lone whale sings his eerie melody, calling out for a mate that probably can't understand him—his song of solitude is completely off-key. He sings at a frequency of 52 hertz, which is a lot higher than whales normally do. Since a group of scientists first heard his cry in 1989, “Whale 52: the world’s loneliest whale” has become increasingly famous. Perhaps not an A-lister like the sad orca from *Free Willy*, but a lot of people have heard of him. That image of a whale floating around in the blue vastness calling out to a mate that can't hear him is a powerful one.

That is why the name The Lonely Whale Foundation is such an ingenious, savvy pick for a group working to save the oceans. Founded in December 2015 by actor and activist Adrian Grenier (of *Entourage*) and former head of entertainment at Alldayeveryday Lucy Sumner, the group has fought tirelessly for oceans and marine life, raising awareness and showing a variety of ways that people can make an actual difference. “The name comes from the documentary created by our two cofounders

who were searching for the loneliest whale in the world,” Dune Ives, executive director of Lonely Whale, explains. “They started a Kickstarter campaign to produce the film, and we instantaneously gained 35,000 new followers on Instagram. People started sharing their own stories of feeling isolated and asking how they could be involved. We knew then that in this whale we had a powerful character that sparked real empathy.”

Dune Ives is quite the powerful character herself. Not only does she have a Ph.D. in psychology and a background as head of Paul Allen’s Vulcan Philanthropy, she also grew up in Alaska in a one-room cabin without electricity or indoor plumbing. She and her mother grew most of their food on their own. “I appreciate warm showers more than most because I didn’t have them as a child. When you grow up with an understanding of what nature can give you, as well as its harsh realities and fragility, then I think you are always an environmentalist.”

These days she spends a lot of her time in hotels and on the road,



PHOTO COURTESY OF LONELY WHALE

working tirelessly for Lonely Whale and healthy, thriving, and, most importantly, plastic-free oceans.

Trying to fix the problems and threats that the oceans are facing—created and maintained by us—can be quite a daunting task. “The issues are so big and heavy that when you’re faced with facts like ‘by the year 2050 there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish,’ you just want to throw your hands up in the air and go ‘I don’t

even know where to get started with that,” Dune tells me when we are chatting over Skype, throwing her hands despairingly in the air. But overall she has an overwhelming positive attitude. “I have been overly optimistic, but I’m much more realistic now. Still, when I see companies like McDonald’s making a commitment to have 100-percent sustainable packaging, it gives me a lot of hope. There is enough hope to make it not feel insurmountable.”

By adapting the same policies as commercial companies, the Lonely Whale Foundation has managed to create a unique way of marketing ocean health. “We wanted to test the theory that if we acted in the same way as brands do when marketing a product, then maybe we could speak to the hearts and minds of individuals,” says Dune. “In Lonely Whale, we have created a brand for the ocean. We make campaigns that get people so excited about the opportu-

nity to help save the ocean that they just can’t help but get involved.”

The campaigns are positive, solution-oriented, and very hard-hitting. They make you feel like the fact that you brought your own bag to the supermarket or told the bartender that you prefer your gin and tonic without a straw, thank you very much, actually makes a lot of difference. Instead of feeling bad about all the things you *should* do,

PHOTO BY SHAWN HEINRICHS



you feel really good about the things you do right—a strategy that seems to be working.

Another key to the success of Lonely Whale is collaboration. On all campaigns, from creating a clock that counts down the time left to save our oceans to a water bottle campaign that’s currently in its earliest stages of development, they never work without a partner. “We have to collaborate. At Lonely Whale, we call it ‘radical collaboration.’ We have to bring down the silos and stop feeling like we are the only ones that have the answer. We don’t care who gets credit for what happens. We don’t. We just want change to take place.”

At the moment Lonely Whale is working with the UN and many different NGOs, but also with companies like Dell. “It’s great to see these large corporations coming together. I think we are going to build a strong community of corporate leaders that can make a difference, not just on one product, but through the entire corporation.”

Over its short life span, Lonely Whale has created some rather impressive initiatives, like the Strawless Ocean Initiative, encourag-

ing people to stop using single-use plastic straws. Why plastic straws? Well, 500 million of these tiny plastic tubes are used every day in the U.S. alone, and due to their size, they are rarely recycled—meaning that many of them end up in the ocean.

A major part of that initiative is the #stopsucking campaign. The viral challenge is championed not only by Adrian Grenier but by people like Leonardo DiCaprio, Amanda Seyfried, and Neil deGrasse Tyson, who have all pledged to stop using straws too. They actually managed to ban all straws from Seattle.

“I can tell you for certain that we removed 2.3 million plastic straws in Seattle during the month of September alone during our ‘Strawless in Seattle’ campaign, because most of them are in the basement of my house,” Dune says. “There are so many straws!” And in true Lonely Whale collaborative spirit, the straws are not going to stay hidden in Dune’s basement forever: They have a new and bright future ahead of them, as longtime collaborator Van de Sant is going to make them into furniture.

lonelywhale.org