

## ► DirecTalk



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## Golden Trevally

Reach and pull. Reach and pull. Banderas Bay provides for an optimal swimming environment. I glanced at my watch and regaled in the endorphin induced euphoria associated with a personal challenge of a 30-min, nonstop swim using only the American crawl. My open eyes endured the sting of salt water as I cruised the 200 m back to shore hoping to catch a blurry glimpse of nearby underwater marine life. Then the most amazing thing happened. A tiny, perhaps 3-cm golden hued fish appeared out of nowhere. It seemed to be escorting me as it swam a few inches from my face the entire journey back to shore. I attributed the experience to some hallucination, or possibly an omen or symbol from beyond.

Several years later I again tested my endurance, this time in Papagayo Bay. Lather, rinse, repeat. A 30-min swim, followed by an exhausted return to shore. True to form I kept my eyes open under water and remarkably once again a single small, brilliant yellow fish appeared inches from my face. My committed escort kept me company to the shallows where it reluctantly drifted off to the depths as I approached the black volcanic sand. A golden escort in Banderas Bay was a magical moment that I felt was a personal sign. Twice? Some other explanation needed unearthing.

Indeed, the escort service I experienced is evidently common and known among the snorkeling and diving community. Juvenile golden trevallies accompany larger fish, sharks, and jellyfish as a form of defense and provide a secondary dining benefit. Marine

*Transactional effectiveness has replaced relational chemistry.*

biologists recognize that large pelagic marine creatures leave behind a mess when capturing and consuming a meal, providing fast food for the trevallies. Those little yellow fish weren't a message from the heavens, they were honoring their survival instincts in the hope I would leave behind some uneaten morsels for their breakfast. Nonetheless, those two moments are joys that bring me a salubrious reminder that keeping my eyes open for golden things can bring meaningful experiences. I had one of those experiences with Dr. Hank Koren and his wife Donna.

Dr. Koren and Donna are the case definition of golden: in age (octogenarians), in character, and in their shared commitment to improving the world around them. After exchanging emails with Dr. Koren for almost seven years, I made a pilgrimage to Belleair Beach, Florida, in early October 2021 to visit in person and soak in the lifetime of reflections from an individual who made countless contributions to environmental health. Dr. Koren is recipient of the Walter S. Mangold and the Davis Calvin Wagner Sanitarian awards, he has been recog-

nized with four distinct National Environmental Health Association presidential citations, is a diplomate laureate of the American Academy of Sanitarians, and the author of 22 books. Soak that in.

Dr. Koren's passion for environmental health is contagious. He regaled me with the story of his life and professional challenges, his work with communities, and his strategies for success. He possesses the wisdom of an elder and the curiosity of a child. I was reminded that almost nothing we encounter today is markedly different from those struggles of an earlier era. The names and dates have been substituted, but the politics, arguments, and solutions are eerily similar. If you doubt me, please read an account of the 1918–1919 flu pandemic. The principles of self-quarantine and closure of nonessential businesses were indispensable to bending the curve of the influenza pandemic 100 years ago. Sound familiar? Professional giants have much to offer, but are we listening and heeding their sage advice?

Dr. Koren shared a poignant story about working with at-risk communities in support of rat control in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He first met with, listened to, and addressed nonenvironmental health community concerns before embarking on the rodent mitigation program. His commitment to addressing community priorities first created the trust that eventually led to a successful public health intervention. As risk communication expert Dr. Vincent Covello once said during a training

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program I attended, “People don’t care what you know until they know that you care.”

A critical element of this story is centered on the authority, responsibility, and influence Dr. Koren was provided outside the domain of traditional public health. In this case, he was successful in amending alarming local policing practices. In other words, the careful exercise of influence in centers of power adjacent to the public health universe, law enforcement, gave rise to conditions resulting in a successful environmental health effort. I asked Dr. Koren if his community priority first approach was a result of his nature or if he was nurtured to employ such a strategy. He seemed uncharacteristically stumped and reflective by my inquiry, but only momentarily. Dr. Koren proceeded to generously share credit for the idea with inspired professionals he had the privilege of working with.

My two hours in person with Dr. Koren and Donna evaporated much too quickly. As I pulled out of their driveway and merged into



*Dr. David Dyjack with Donna and Dr. Hank Koren during their visit in October 2021. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.*

traffic enroute to Tampa, I was inspired by the words and insight of these two national treasures. I also pondered what I observe to be the distance between us in American society that has been created in large measure by social media and exacerbated by the pandemic. The result is a collective dulled moral imagination. I see the effects all around me. Transactional effectiveness has replaced the relational chemistry that once upon a time bound us and our communities together—the type of relational chemistry Dr. Koren emphasized as critical to progress.

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl wrote, “Between stimulus and response there is space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.” We should endeavor to learn from the role modeling of Dr. Hank Koren. To remain curious. To honor other’s priorities while remaining true to your own. To be a good follower as well as a good leader.

Golden escorts, whether they are people or fish, reveal themselves at unexpected moments. Let’s keep our senses open to them, particularly during times when the sting of the surrounding environment might encourage us to do otherwise. They remind us in this time of public health disruption that beauty, wisdom, and courage are abundantly available to us if we use our power to search them out. 🐟

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## NOMINATIONS OPEN!



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