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For Once-Hated Killer Whales, Changing Attitudes Mean New Friends

By WALLACE TURNER, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

LEAD: For \$20 you can adopt Mozart. Or Mata Hari. Or even Opus. But you won't be subsidizing a composer, a sexy spy or a comic strip penguin. You get a killer whale, maybe 25 feet long and weighing four tons. Awkward to hold in your lap.

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The adoption program, which has raised more than \$100,000 for research in three years, is only one example of a change in attitude in recent years toward a mammal once despised.

The image of the killer whale, commonly known in Northwestern waters as the orca, has also been polished by the Whale Museum, founded here in 1979 by the Moclips Cetological Society, and by extensive research on the mammal since 1974 from the Pacific Biological Station at Nanaimo, British Columbia. #6,000 Adoptive 'Parents'

The adoption program has attracted more than 6,000 people, paying \$20 each, said Rebecca Swing, assistant director of the Whale Museum.

"That money goes for our research program," said Susan J. Vernon, executive director of the museum. "It makes up about 15 percent of our income. But the program brings us and the whales closer to people, too. Some touching things come out of it. The other day an older couple asked about their whale. 'How is he doing? Is he in good health?'"

Such affection and concern represent a dramatic reversal from the old days, when fishermen hated orcas and shot them for destroying their nets and consuming and frightening fish. A Star Aquarium Attraction

Then came a period when the killer whales were captured for commercial exploitation. Aquarium operators realized in 1964 that an orca on display meant money in the bank. A killer whale that had survived a harpooning became an international celebrity in an aquarium in Vancouver, British Columbia, where it lived for three months. Scientists knew so little about orcas at the time that only upon the death of the whale, which they called Moby Doll, did they discover that it should have been called Moby Dick.

That demonstration of commercial value led to a netting frenzy that threatened the survival of the orca herd in Puget Sound, said Richard Osborne, research director for the Whale Museum.

"They captured 60 whales out of the population here before netting was stopped in 1976," Mr. Osborne said. "Only now is the Puget Sound-San Juan Island herd getting back to where it was."

The adoption brochure lists 78 whales. A separate orca population lives in Canadian waters between northern Vancouver Island and the mainland. A Horrifying Capture

Ralph Munro, who played a major role in stopping the orca netting, recently recalled a sailing trip in 1976 when he saw orcas being trapped off Olympia, Wash. "It was terrible to watch, to hear the whales scream as they tried to escape," Mr. Munro, now the Secretary of State in Washington, remembered. "We were horrified at the cruelty, at the bombs in the water, the nets, the fright of the whales."

Acting in part on Mr. Munro's account, Slade Gorton, then Washington Attorney General and later a United States Senator, sued successfully to force release of captive animals and to block further netting in Puget Sound. Netting has also stopped off British Columbia. Aquariums are now supplied from Iceland.

Under the direction of Dr. Michael Bigg of the Pacific Biological Station, research scientists in 1974 began photographing the killer whales and can now recognize individual orcas from a glance when the animals surface briefly to breathe. Size, shape of the dorsal fin and slight differences in markings help in recognition.

"J-10 is the mother, J-20 and J-22 are her children and J-19 is a young male that belongs to another female in the J Pod," Mr. Osborne said of a group of four whales a watcher boat followed recently off Whale Watch Park on San Juan Island. The scientists generally use letter-number names. But for adoption purposes, the four whales are called Tahoma, a 24-year-old captured and released in a netting

operation in 1972; Ewok, an 8-year-old male; Oreo, a 4-year-old male, and Sachi, whose mother is Mama. Big Appetites Reported

An orca's gestation period is 16 months, and the whales are eight feet long and weigh 800 pounds at birth. Mr. Osborne said they eat from 5 percent to 10 percent of their weight a day - everything from small fish to other mammals such as porpoises, seals and sea lions. Whalers have described watching orcas attack and destroy great whales by ripping out their tongues and lips.

The only attack on a human was in 1972, when a surfer off Big Sur, Calif., was badly bitten.

Mr. Osborne said the orcas' social structure is matriarchal. "The males may go into another family or another pod to breed," he said. "But when they're through, they go back home to Mom."

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