

Killer Whale Deaths off U.S. Northwest Coast Leave Islanders Perplexed

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SAN JUAN ISLAND, Washington—It sounds like a bad night at the bingo hall as heavy-hearted researchers at the Center for Whale Research list lost friends of recent years.

There are dozens: J-18, the male that washed up off Vancouver last March with an open ulceration; L-51, a reproductive female, and L-97, her young calf; K-4, a grandma that would have been a great-great-grandma if she had lived.

"We have had so many losses, I thought, 'Well, we are at the bottom,'" said Astrid Maria van Ginneken, a professor from the University of Netherlands who has been volunteering at the center for 15 years, helping to document the southern resident "J," "K," and "L" orca pods.

That bottom gave out recently when the center announced another seven killer whales missing in action, presumed dead, thus reducing the local population of killer whales to a precarious 78.

"I thought, 'Oh God! This can't be true,'" van Ginneken said, her voice a whisper. "I thought, 'Where is this going to end?'"

It was a question on everyone's mind this week as eco-attuned islanders mourned the iconic animal that should symbolize all that's right in their clean, green world. Suddenly, it seems to symbolize all that is wrong: dwindling runs of the orcas' favorite salmon; toxins dumped in the water that accumulate in the animal's fat.

"It's sickening; it's sad," said Carey Worthen, docking in Friday Harbor on his 36-foot Maine lobster boat. "And the season's not over yet. I'd be surprised if we don't lose another one or two whales."

Widespread Sympathy

On an island where orcas rival dogs as man's best friend and even hard-core scientists can get teary talking whales, the news hit hard.

"It's a real blow to the heart to realize that the family of whales is eroding," said Gary Boothman, the mayor of Friday Harbor, which is the county seat for the San Juan Islands. "It seems to be a symbol that a lot of things we've taken for granted are slowly going away."

Boothman likened the loss to the death of a "dear friend." Others used spiritual terms to describe their affinity to the orcas, which have returned to the waters of Haro Strait to feed each spring for some 10,000 years.

"I was flabbergasted," said Michael Niedzielski, who tends bar at the Front Street Ale House, an English-style pub with handcrafted beer and well-rubbed brass mermaid fixtures. "You can call it psychic or whatever, but it's like they are our kindred spirits."

"It's like losing your family," said Bill Wright, owner of San Juan Safaris in Roche Harbor. "We gauge our life by when the whales come and go. It's like summer solstice to us."

It's also like bread-and-butter. Images of orcas adorn tourist mugs, T-shirts, even the ferry dock in Friday Harbor. Whales are big business. Whale-watching is big business. Losing the pods could be devastating. Some estimate the hit would be as high as \$40 million a year.

The deaths aren't official until the end of the season in September. But already, funereal activities are under way. Sympathy e-mails have arrived at the Center for Whale Research from as far away as Japan and New Zealand. The seven animals are already X'd out of the official Orca Survey Field Guide.

"It's so painful to have to take their photos off the wall," said Kelley Balcomb-Bartok, who was 13 when his father, Ken Balcomb, started research at the center. He grew up with the whales. He has watched them die off. "Everyone's walking around in a funk here," he said.

Van Ginneken estimates the chances of the whales returning at less than one percent. Rich Osborne, research director at the Whale Museum, holds no hope at all. "For those of us who study these whales, it's for sure," said Osborne, who expects the catastrophic dive will ensure passage of endangered species protection for the orcas next spring.

Gone are three adult males, one adult female, and three calves. Some researchers suggest the losses could negatively affect the larger population. "There's good reason to believe that the more you lose, the more you lose. When social structure is damaged, the death rates may go up," said Mark Anderson, who heads Orca Relief, an organization that petitioned San Juan County to prevent boats from "chasing whales."

Causes Unknown

Everyone on this island is searching for answers to the question, What's killing the orcas? There are theories, countertheories, postulations, and refutations, but no firm answers. Among the suspected causes are these:

Toxins: Blubber sampling has shown the southern orcas have the highest levels of PCBs of any marine mammal. The toxic industrial products, used in electrical equipment until the 1970s, accumulate in the orcas' fat, and can mobilize into the bloodstream, weakening immune systems and hampering reproduction.

Fish: Logging, dams, and development have contributed to the demise of the Northwest's once-healthy stocks of salmon, the orcas' preferred meal. Some scientists theorize that orcas are turning to bottomfish that dwell in contaminated sediment.

Predators: Some whale observers speculate that the local orcas, on their ocean-going travels, may be the victims of transient or offshore orcas that kill and eat marine mammals, including gray whales and blue whales.

Prey: One researcher postulates that the local orcas may be breaking from normal pattern and killing marine mammals for food, possibly the sickliest animals, which are the easiest to catch.

Drift nets: Could the orcas become entangled in the thousands of miles of abandoned drift nets floating in the open ocean? Or in the drift nets of active fishing vessels? Some people argue that's the case.

Boats Also Blamed

The most heated discussions center on the whale-watching boats, private and commercial, that dog the whales, dawn to dark.

Several studies have suggested that an increase in underwater noise from boat engines and depth finders may be damaging orcas' hearing. Orcas rely on hearing to navigate, communicate, and hunt. And some scientists question whether the press of whale-watching boats may stress the animals.

But studies on the effects of vessels remain inconclusive. Whale-watch operators complain that, unlike toxins or dwindling resources, they are visible targets. In fact, they argue, they are educating the public to the plight of the killer whale.

Many of the boat operators, who grow as intimate with the orcas as the scientists who study them daily, are pessimistic about the return of the missing seven. "This is really unprecedented. Something very strange is happening," said Mike Bennett, owner of the Mosquito Fleet.

Researchers hope the bad news is a wake-up call, and not a death knell. But it's hard to be optimistic when so many of the world's most closely watched whales—considered family on this island—are dead.

"We spend our lives trying to be part of their lives, but it puts you in a vulnerable position," Balcomb-Bartok said. "It makes you wonder—should we dissociate ourselves from our friends, to protect our own emotions?"

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