

## Orca Lummi presumed dead at 98

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Saturday, August 16, 2008



They call her Lummi, a matriarch's matriarch, the unquestioned ruler of her 19-member, multigenerational brood. When Lummi breaches and resoundingly splashes down on her side, every family member drops what he or she is doing and swims to her.

Orcas - killer whales, as they are mistakenly called - have been likened to wolves. They live in pods of related animals, dominated by the alpha female. Lummi has played that role for the K-pod, which summers in the once salmon-rich waters around the islands in northern Puget Sound, for all of the 32 years that scientists have been studying the pod.

But this year, she did not return with the pod from their southern sojourn, and the scientists fear she has died. There's no way to be sure of her age. Based on the knowledge that she was beyond breeding age when they first saw her, scientists estimated her birth year to be 1910, which would make her 98.

### Long lives

Female orcas in the wild live to 80 (males to 50), so Lummi was truly venerable. Like everyone who lives long and travels widely, she had seen a lot, and her experiences guided her leadership of her pod.

Lummi could predict where salmon would be when the waters cooled or warmed, and lead her family unerringly to the schools that sustained them. She knew the coastal currents, the unique sounds made by the surf crashing on the rocks at each point along the coast, and the sounds that echoed back from the bottom. This knowledge created what we would call maps in her memory that guided the family's journeys.

With her mother's family gathered in a close group to assist the birth, Lummi was born folded in half after 17 months in her mother's womb. She quickly unfolded to her full 8-foot infant length as she was nudged to the surface by an aunt to take her first breath, and then she was assisted back to her mother to nurse.

She continued nursing for a year and rarely left her mother's side in that time. When the pod swam anywhere, she was kept protected inside a circle of adults. The survival rate of young orcas to the age of 6 months is 50 percent, so each new calf is precious.

From watching the other orcas, scientists reckon that Lummi had her first pregnancy at age 12, but her calf didn't survive. It wasn't until she was 15 that she had her first successful birth. Instinct and her



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close-knit family taught her how to be a mother.

For the next 25 years, she and her family traveled as her great-grandmother guided them. Salmon schools dwindled in size, but Grandma was still able to find fish.

When the pod came upon a school of salmon, they spread out and herded the fish into a tight group, then quickly ate all they could get down.

Spanish whalers called orcas "whale killers," and some are. Lummi's cousins in the L-Pod prey on migrating gray whale calves every spring off Monterey.

Long before Lummi was born, humans became her species' primary predator. People began killing orcas (which are really big dolphins, not whales) on sight, a practice that continued until the later half of the past century. But as the humans began to value the remaining few orcas, they stopped shooting them, and the predators became captors instead.

### **Aquarium performers**

In the '60s and '70s, more than 100 orcas became performers in aquariums. I've read stories of a pod following a captive orca, calling out to it as it was towed to a loading dock.

It's likely that Lummi was one of those who followed as a brother, sister, daughter or son was hauled off, because her summer waters were a favorite for the aquarium hunters. More than 50 orcas, half of the world's performers, were taken from the three southern pods during the capture era.

Not long after those experiences, Lummi became the matriarch of her family. It must have taken her a fair amount of time to learn to trust humans. How long did it take her to understand that the people on these new boats came with flash bulbs rather than nets and wanted to protect her family?

Lummi's daughter is her likely successor. While these days humans are mostly her protectors, she now must lead her family to food that is becoming scarce. As the closure of the California salmon fishery attests, there aren't many salmon out there anymore.

Officially, Lummi's fate remains unknown. If she is not seen by December, she will be declared dead by her human watchers. Her family will already be following the new matriarch of K-Pod.

Freelance writer "Digger" Jerry George sends his journal "letters" home to the Bay Area wherever he happens to be observing nature. He has come to rest for the time being on the Swinomish Indian reservation in the Puget Sound. E-mail him at [home@sfnchronicle.com](mailto:home@sfnchronicle.com).

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This article appeared on page **F - 4** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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