



Too Close for Comfort: Orcas, Boats Struggle to Share Space

Boating Rules Considered to Protect Newly Endangered Species

By MIKE GUDGELL

SAN JUAN ISLANDS, Wash., July 7, 2006 — - How do you protect an endangered species when it's a valuable tourist attraction?

That's the predicament in Washington State's San Juan Islands, where there are more commercial whale watch boats than there are orcas. That's created problems for the star attraction in this natural wonderland where the orcas often give onlookers a show worthy of their captive Sea World and Marineland cousins.

When good weather brings out private boats, there can be 100 or more boats trailing a dozen of the "whales." Orcas are often called killer whales, which is wrong times two. They aren't technically whales and their "killer" reputation is based on fear, not reality.

When people come out to see these "whales," they are viewing mammals that were recently added to the endangered species list, posing a challenge for the government agencies and the fish and wildlife agents who are trying to determine how to protect what is a popular tourist attraction.

Beloved Mammals' Changing Habitat

The orcas of the San Juan Islands are among the most-studied marine mammals in the world. Seasoned whale watchers can easily identify each family or pod.

"Granny" runs J pod. She's 90 years old. Lummi, the matriarch of K pod, was born in 1910. Girls rule in this world. The newest one to arrive, K-39, is a few weeks old. Scientists hope the youngster's aunts will help her teenage mom, because in the past few years some of the young ones haven't survived because of their changing environment.

Orcas have some of the highest levels of concentration of toxins of any living creature. Samples from dead whales have contained levels of PCBs and other chemicals hundreds of times the maximum safe level for humans.

But that's not the only threat to their survival. They eat wild salmon and there aren't as many of them as there were just a few years ago.

"We can't get rid of the toxins right way, it will take decades to increase the numbers of salmon ... but right now the least we can do is leave them alone," says Birgit Kriete of Orca Relief. Her organization advocates watching from shore.

As for the salmon, the undersea cupboards aren't exactly bare, but the orcas have to work hard to survive, and increased tourism is adding an unexpected challenge.

Orcas hunt salmon like dogs in a pack, using a series of clicks and squeaks to communicate with each other as they try to locate salmon and other fish. But the cacophony of boat engines and propellers from the whale watchers, some say, makes the hunt more difficult.

Kari Koski, of Washington State's Sound Watch, helped start a campaign to educate boaters. She's been "out on the water" for 13 years meeting boats and passing out voluntary guidelines to help the orcas.

In this region, brightly colored Sound Watch boats are a common sight. Koski and her colleagues are now joined more often by Washington State Department of Fish and Game officers or agents from National Marine Fisheries, because the orcas were recently put on the endangered species list.

The federal government is trying to come up with new rules or laws that will protect these "killer whales" who mingle with fishing boats, pleasure craft and commercial shipping.

"It's an extremely difficult problem for enforcement," said Special Agent Brad Vinish of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "It's dangerous and expensive."

And both the boats and the whales, or orcas, have rights. Koski acknowledges you "have to be realistic."

"It's a tragedy of common tenancy," says Koski. "You can't just shut down boating."

Some of the proposals that will be discussed in meetings around the region next week that could take affect next summer, are creating "no go" zones -- areas where commercial whale watching is banned, restricted or limited. Another idea is giving whales, or orcas, a day off once or twice a week.

"I'm not sure how you'd do it in a way that would work for the whales," adds Koski.

There are many groups in the area that are dedicated to saving, or helping, the killer whales. The distinctive black and white marine mammal has been an icon in the Northwest since before the area was "discovered." They are revered by the American Indians who live in the region.

The difficult question is how do you save the whales? When a decision is made, it will be Special Agent Vinish's job to enforce the law.

As he puts it: "It's great to enjoy the resource, but we don't want interaction that is going to hurt the resource in the long run."

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