

Sea Green
By Jackie Hildering

Grandmother Whale

"Tsitika" is a killer whale estimated to be sixty-two years old. She is known to have four surviving offspring and five grand-calves. This family group (matriline) of ten is always together, led by grandma. Such is the way of the inshore fish-eating kind of killer whales dubbed "Residents".

Tsitika has not had a calf since 1989 (when she was around 40) and she may live to age 80. In these post-reproductive years, she aids the survival of her population through her knowledge: how to mother, forage, make the distinct calls of her matriline and further preserve the culture that makes these killer whales successful as salmon-snackers.

She also must have the knowledge hard won from having survived the human misconception and demonization of her "killer" kind.

She survived the perception that killer whales were expendable; that there were thousands of them and that they deserved to be shot since they all competed for "our" salmon. In 1961, the Department of Fisheries even placed a machine gun at Seymour Narrows with the intent to use it in a killer whale cull.

Tsitika wasn't taken into captivity when that was our way. "Moby Doll" was the first killer whale to survive in a tank . . . for eighty-seven days in 1964. Back then, we didn't even know enough to recognize that this whale was a juvenile male – no doll at all. In 1970 alone, ninety whales were captured. Twenty-five percent of them had gunshot wounds.

As of the early 1970s, Tsitika would often have her picture taken by Graeme Ellis and the late Dr. Michael Bigg in their quest to identify her kind as individuals and get an accurate census. Dr. Bigg would designate her as "A30" and prove that there were very limited numbers of killer whales in BC. This would lead to killer whales no longer being shot at nor being put into captivity.

Ultimately, Dr. Bigg would also learn that these limited numbers make up three distinct kinds of killer whale (ecotypes) comprising four populations that do not mate with one another: Northern Residents and Southern Residents (inshore fish-eaters); Transients (mammal-eaters) and Offshores (offshore fish-eaters). Tsitika belongs to the Northern Resident population which is more often found in the area to the North of Campbell River.

As of 1980, whale watching began. Tsitika would now be shot at with cameras.

Her voice would also be captured using underwater microphones. This would lead Dr. John Ford to discover that Northern Residents have a different language than the other populations. In fact, every Northern Resident matriline sounds different allowing the whales to judge degree of relatedness and avoid inbreeding.

In 1999, all BC's killer whale populations were finally recognized as being "at risk" but it was not until 2004 that Canada would have legislation to protect them under the Species at Risk Act.

We humans have come a long way from the demonization and overt exploitation of killer whales but . . . not far enough. There are still many ways to kill a whale and destroy an ecosystem.

The current federal government has attempted to remove habitat protection from the Species at Risk Act. British Columbia is one of only two provinces in Canada that still does not have an endangered species law.

We continue to threaten the "Resident" killer whales prey with non-precautionary, non-ecosystem based "management" practices. We flirt with the health of the wild salmon which are not only food for Resident killer whales but, in fact, the lifeblood of BC's marine ecosystem; the food of wolves, bears, eagles, seals, sea lions, dolphins, porpoise, First Nations culture and the economy of coastal communities. The epitome of being non-precautionary is allowing open net-cage Atlantic salmon farms on the out-migration routes of wild juvenile salmon. Among the many problems with these open systems is that they serve as a transmission vector for disease and parasitic sea lice. Juvenile chum and pink do not even have the protection of scales when they emerge from rivers and humanity lays out a source of parasites in their path.

Furthermore, our consumer driven society continues to fill our oceans, and therefore the whales, with fat-soluble, persistent toxins of human origin such as PCBs, DDT, brominated fire retardants and more (as proven by Dr. Peter Ross of the Institute of Ocean Sciences). These toxins never go away, are carried into cold areas, suppress immune and reproductive systems and build up in the food chain.

The health of killer whales populations, therefore, continues to serve as a clear indicator of human ignorance and disconnect from Nature.

Want to save the whales and therefore ourselves? Recognize that all environmental problems are the result of only four things – our absence of precaution; using too much (especially too many chemicals); lack of connection to Nature and not believing we are empowered to make a difference.

Please reflect: Who's the real "killer" and what can you do to create positive change?

Jackie Hildering is biologist, avid diver and marine educator living on Northern Vancouver Island. She is dedicated to creating environmental awareness and positive change. For what you can do see www.earthlingenterprises.ca.