

For Whales' Sake
By Jackie Hilderling

Humpback SPLASH

Humpback whales . . . glorious giants weighing up to 40,000 kg with baleen-hung jaws that can filter the ocean of some 20,000 liters per mouthful; 5 m long wing-like pectoral fins; astoundingly acrobatic and a testimony to the resilience of nature.

They were intensely whaled both locally and globally. It is estimated that 90% of the world's humpbacks were killed, reducing the N. Pacific population to some 1,400 animals in 1966.

But they're back folks, with a SPLASH, to the waters of British Columbia.

They are believed to have travelled here from warmer waters where they have their calves with less threat of transient (mammal-eating) orca. Humpbacks do not feed in these warm waters so when they get to our colder, richer area - they are hungry! Our local observations confirm that many do not continue their migration further north but repeatedly use our area as a summer feeding ground.

This is known since humpbacks can easily be identified as individuals. The markings and shape of each humpback's tail is unique and the tails are often raised prior to longer dives.

Local humpback ID photos collected from 2004 to 2006 became part of the SPLASH project, an international collaborative aimed at better understanding the humpbacks of the North Pacific. SPLASH = **S**tatus of **P**opulation **L**evels, **A**bundance and **S**tructure of **P**opulations of **H**umpbacks.

The results of SPLASH bring the happy news that there may now be some 18,000 to 20,000 humpbacks in the North Pacific. The study confirms that about 50% of humpbacks winter in Hawaiian breeding grounds.

The research also suggests that most feed in the high North but that some 3,000 to 5,000 humpbacks feed in the SE Alaska to N. British Columbia area with another 200 to 400 animals using the S. British Columbia / N. Washington region.

Outside of the encouraging news that humpback abundance is on the rise, there was another finding in which I took great personal delight. Many of the humpbacks identified in the summer feeding areas, could not be found in the winter breeding areas. That's right – we humans can't find where all the humpbacks (giants who breathe the very air we do) are going.

Surely this should create a SPLASH in recognizing the need for humility and precaution in how we treat our oceans.

For further information including vocals, the SPLASH report, conservation concerns and ID catalogues, see www.earthlingenterprises.ca.

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