

For Whales' Sake **By Jackie Hildering**

Spilt Whales

Never will I forget August 20th - the day of the diesel spill in the Michael Bigg Ecological Reserve at Robson Bight.

As members of the whale-watching community around Telegraph Cove, we would see the lopsided barge after it lost its logging equipment load; inhale the diesel fumes as we brought in media to create awareness about the disaster; and watch a variety of wildlife swim through the immense slick.

We knew that the whales would not smell the fuel and how drawn they are to the Reserve area. The threatened population of Northern resident (salmon-eating) killer whales has the culture of rubbing on smooth, black stones. The Reserve houses the beaches they use most.

Killer whales were in the area at the time of the spill; the OrcaLab would even record their calls punctuated by the crashing of the equipment. During the first night, some 60 whales would repeatedly travel through the slick.

My worst dose of reality occurred some 18 hours after the accident. I watched the A30s, from a 60-year-old grandma to a 1-year-old calf, forage for salmon through the rainbow sheen of diesel. The clean-up crew had only just arrived on scene.

At the time of writing, there are still so many unanswered questions about the continued threat to the ecosystem. Are there still up to 19,000 litres of fuel trapped within the equipment? Will Coast Guard undertake the underwater inspection needed or will this only be done thanks to the fundraising efforts and ethics of nonprofit groups?

Will we embrace the necessity of protecting the habitat of animals at risk and that the Reserve must therefore become a true sanctuary? The land mass is protected as a BC park but the ocean area falls under federal jurisdiction. There is no recourse against boats traveling through it and commercial fish openings allow 100+ boats into "The Reserve".

And will we learn from this disaster, acknowledging the risks that oil exploration and transport would bring to our coastline?

Let something positive come out of this or we are only left with so many reasons to cry over . . . spilt whales.

Jackie Hildering is biologist, avid scuba diver and marine educator who works out of Telegraph Cove