

## STYLE &amp; CULTURE



Photograph by STEPHAN MICHAELS

**REROUTED:** In September, members of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation band guided Luna into open waters temporarily.

# It's hardly black and white

When a wayward orca adopts local residents as 'friends,' human cultures clash. Now science, spirituality and commerce are at an impasse.

By STEPHAN MICHAELS  
Special to The Times

**A** Gold River, Canada sport fisherman was out on the water in August when a young killer whale suddenly approached his 20-foot craft and began to push against the auxiliary engine. The whale pushed hard enough to break the propeller. The frightened angler gunned his main engine and fled. Back at the dock, the skipper of a gillnet boat reported that he too had come close to the orca, though he had found joy in the encounter.

"He was swimming right alongside the boat all the way in and surging in the wake," he smiled. "It was pretty neat." Interactions like these have become common over the last 4½ years in Nootka Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Canada, ever since a baby orca adopted the waters as its new home. There are some, though, who aren't sure their new resident is a good fit.

"What's exhilarating for some could be terrifying for others," says Bill Shaw of Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans. "It's fear of the unknown." Like many who live in the remote inlet town of Gold River, British Columbia, Shaw and other authorities agree that the resident orca, known as Luna, is not being hostile or aggressive, just overly playful.

"Any animal that comes up beside you like this and starts rubbing against your boat and then turns upside down and hangs on with his pectoral fins, you know he's just playing."

Still, at 18 feet in length and weighing more than 3,000 pounds, the sheer bulk of this 6-year-old whale creates the potential for a serious accident.

A handful of anglers are so irate at Luna's disruptive antics that they've threatened to shoot or poison him. An unassuming and affable Shaw says he's been "parachuted in" to defuse the conflict. "The whale is not the problem," Shaw contends, "people are."

To understand just how volatile the situation has become, consider the primary characteristic of the southern resident orcas of Puget Sound, which were given protection just last month under the Endangered Species Act. The largest members of the dolphin family, these killer whales are remarkably social and have developed tightly knit family structures.

According to Department of Fisheries and Oceans marine scientist John Ford, "It seems to be the key feature to their social structure, where dispersal from the natal group is essentially nonexistent." Put simply, these animals follow their mothers throughout their lives, which is roughly the same lifespan as a human's. Scientists are thus baffled by the infant orca that arrived here on its own in July 2001, about 200 miles northwest of this post's prime territory in the waters off Puget Sound.

Nootka Sound, a deep canyon floor

teeming with wild salmon, is surrounded by a towering expanse of mountains covered in old-growth forests. The village of Gold River is essentially a kind of suburban mill town built in the wilderness. But since the paper and pulp mills shut down in the late '90s, the town has striven to rebuild its economic base largely around timber and fishing. Then Luna arrived.

Shortly after taking up residency in Nootka Sound, Luna startled locals by making contact with them. He'd pop up over the side of the dock and spray people from his blowhole. He'd let them pet him and rub his tongue. "His skin felt like a hard-boiled egg," recalls one boater. He even rubbed noses with a curious dog. The orca engaged humans for stimulation and people obliged, albeit in violation of the law.

In Canada—as well as in the U.S.—it's a crime to disturb or interact with marine mammals in the wild, an offense carrying a fine as high as \$100,000 in Canada.

Yet, for many, just the experience of seeing Luna up close is far more than a novelty. "It's spiritual for me," says Louise Johnson about having made eye contact with the orca. "I get a big lump in my throat when I see him." Others ascribe human characteristics to the whale, such as projecting that "Luna is lonely." For science writer Michael Parfit, who lives in Gold River, experiencing the orca is more intangible. "When Luna comes up to you, it's obvious that he wants something from you and you don't know what it is. We don't know what he's communicating and can't give him what he wants. But as another living creature, you still respond."

As news of the sociable orca spread, tourists descended upon the docks of Gold River as though it were an amusement park. In response, the law was strictly enforced and three people were arrested for allegedly touching the whale. As quickly as he had become the star attraction, Luna was officially cut off from human contact.

Habituated to human interaction, the orca displayed an increasing appetite for contact with people. Anglers who activated fish-finding sonar in Nootka discovered they had unwittingly called Luna to their boats. No longer a dolphin-sized infant, Luna sometimes damaged the fish finders, which scientists speculate irritated his sensitive hearing. Other times, seemingly hungry for attention, he would just rub up against boats, pushing and banging them around.

Toni Frohoff, a research scientist in Washington state, says extensive studies with solitary dolphins and beluga whales underscore the dire reality of Luna's situation. "The closer the contact that sociable marine mammals have with people, the more likely they are to be injured or even killed by them. Some people will take advantage of a situation in which the animals have learned to trust humans and abuse that trust."

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans has been deluged with thousands of e-mails demanding that something be done. Research scientists from nongovernmental organizations and whale advocacy groups rallied in support of reuniting the whale with its pod and mother, known to spend much of the year swimming between Puget Sound and the waters off Vancouver Is-



**ON THE LOOKOUT:** First Nation steward Jamie Lee James monitors the whale's whereabouts in Nootka Sound with the use of solar-powered equipment.



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land. To address the problem, the DFO convened a scientific panel to consider the ultimate dilemma: whether or not to intervene in nature.

In spring 2004, the DFO and the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service jointly unveiled an "action plan" to capture Luna and release him in the waters off Victoria when his pod was thought to be nearby. Because Luna had been separated from orcas and habituated to people for so long, the DFO's Ford says the plan carried inherent risks. "If he failed to reunite, which was a significant probability, what next?" The contingencies were either placing the orca in an aquarium or, if he posed a serious threat to public safety, having to kill him.

The Indigenous Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation band, which has inhabited the area for thousands of years, vehemently objected to the plan. Tribal leaders believe the whale is the reincarnated spirit of their grand chief, who died a week before Luna first appeared in Nootka. Before Luna had been separated from orcas and habituated to people, he became an increasing nuisance, and fishermen stepped up the death threats. One angler even suggested dynamite.

"There's a lot of tough talk out there, and we take it very seriously," acknowledges Shaw. "If you intentionally harm this animal or harm this animal, period, there are severe repercussions." With tensions escalating and captivity or the whale's death as likely scenarios, writer Parfit and his wife, Suzanne Chisholm, submitted a controversial proposal to the DFO. They suggested giving Luna a kind of "foster pod" of select boats to manage him with structured and consistent human interaction. The goal would be to eliminate the haphazard encounters and distract the orca away from fishermen until his pod might eventually swim by Nootka Sound.

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bound for permanent captivity.

That June, DFO boats were herding Luna into a net when members of the tribe paddled out in wooden canoes to prevent the capture. The ensuing struggle between marine mammal experts and Nootka's indigenous people lasted nine days, until Luna was eventually led into the pen. Johnson was one of the paddlers and recalls the event.

"There was a lot of emotion that day. We were feeling scared for our wellbeing and for the whale's well-being. Our singers were crying while they were singing." Before the net could be raised to close him in fully, Luna swam free and took refuge among the canoes. "That's how we lured him out of the pen," Johnson reflects, "we just sang our hearts out." Realizing the tribe was resolute, the DFO conceded defeat.

Many observers ridiculed the Muchalaht band for thwarting an effort to reunite the whale with his pod. "We've never been opposed to Luna finding his family or being with his family. That's a misconception," counters tribal Chief Mike Macquinna. "If there is anything that the elders in our nation have expressed, it's that we stand by the whale." Macquinna says that if Luna's pod ventures near the mouth of Nootka Sound, the tribe will not interfere. "If he goes, he goes. If he stays, that's fine. It's just a matter of nature taking its course."

Luna remains free in Nootka, loved by some, hated by others. Over the summer, he became an increasing nuisance, and fishermen stepped up the death threats. One angler even suggested dynamite.

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sons Parfit, "then aquariums are distanced from the whale. You don't have that looming possibility, and you don't have the looming possibility of his being shot, either."

Parfit and Chisholm also proposed using acoustic stimulation to occupy Luna, an idea that some independent marine scientists have advocated. This would entail generating underwater sounds to engage Luna and diminish his fixation on people and boats. Some marine mammal experts have also suggested that acoustic stimulation could possibly be used as a vehicle to lead Luna back to his pod, if and when the whales are in the vicinity of Nootka Sound. Frohoff is adamant. "Plans for a lead-out should have been undertaken long ago. Without trying something like this, DFO is setting Luna up for failure."

Scientist Ford says he sees no obvious downside to acoustic experiments, but he discounts the "human pod" element of the proposal. "It would further habituate him and just take him further away from being a wild whale."

## Limited success

**T**HE DFO neither approved nor rejected the proposal but did grant the Muchalaht tribe a permit to intervene and lead Luna away from boaters. The number of negative incidents have dropped, but that permit expired in October. There is now only sporadic, if not scant, monitoring of the situation by authorities.

Luna is being watched from a distance, however. Hydrophones placed in the water by independent scientists are recording and transmitting Luna's many vocal calls and are linked by satellite to whale researchers around the world. Last month, a researcher in Scotland was started to hear Luna communicating with a small group of transient killer whales, which had never previously been documented.

Orca researcher Lisa Larsson, who spent more than a year listening to Luna from a modest hilltop station in Nootka Sound, says Luna is providing science with hitherto unseen insights into the behavior of a wild orca.

"We have a unique opportunity to learn about solitary orcas through him, and it's unfortunate that some people don't understand that they are very fortunate to have him in their midst. We can learn amazing things from him. It's so unique that he's managed to survive and entertain himself by going up to people in boats."

Full and winter are relatively quiet in Nootka, and Luna has been more of an amusement than a nuisance since this year's fishing season came to a close. In September, the First Nation stewards were able to lead Luna to the mouth of the sound, where the orca swam in open water for the first time in more than a year. That's a significant development. If the wayward orca and his pod were to reunite in the waters off Vancouver Island, this healthy male could have a potentially positive influence on the endangered southern resident population.

But come spring, when heavy boat traffic and fishing resume, Luna's predicament could come to a tragic conclusion as some area fishermen continue to grumble that the whale can't be in Nootka next year.