

POSTSCRIPT

No happy ending for this young whale's tale

Gold River, Canada

Back in December, we wrote about Luna, a sociable young orca that had adopted the waters off this remote inlet town as its home almost five years ago.

A dolphin-sized 2-year-old when he showed up alone in Nootka Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island, the orca would often rub up against boats, spray people beside the dock and allow residents to pet him and rub his tongue.

But as he grew, those encounters became more disturbing to boaters and anglers — some threatened to harm the whale — and there was a move to reunite Luna with his pod.

One such attempt in 2004 was thwarted by the indigenous Mowachat/Muchalaht First Nation band, whose members believed that the orca embodied the spirit of their deceased chief. The tribe also thought the plan would be dangerous for the orca.

And indeed, the potential for failure "was a significant probab-

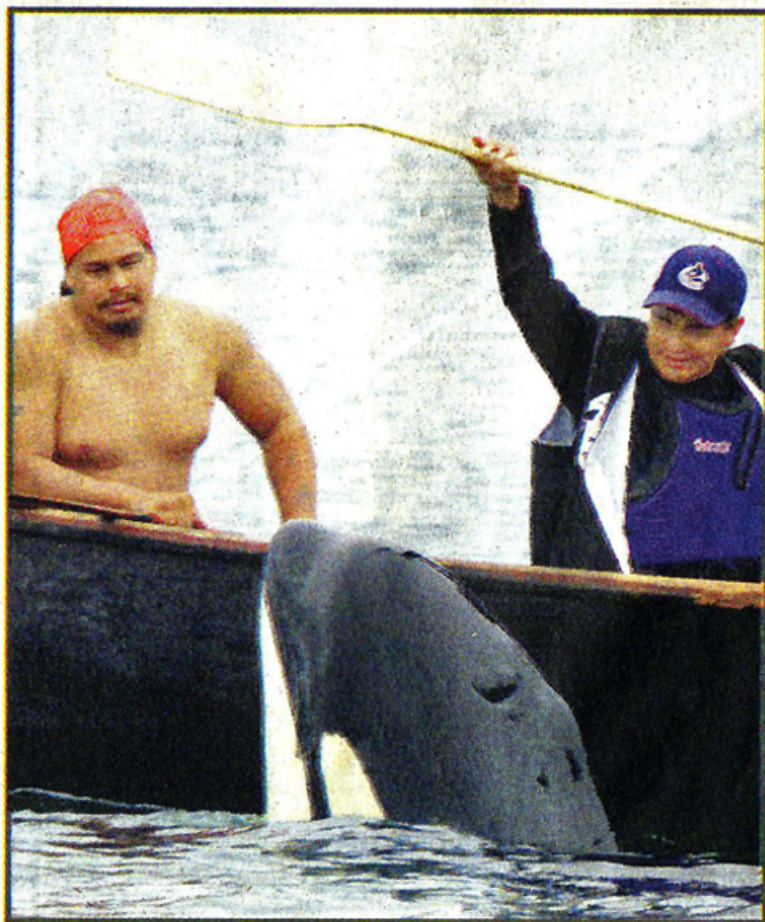
ity," said scientist John Ford of Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans. If Luna did not reunite, he would have been placed in an aquarium, Ford said.

A subsequent joint stewardship program between the department and First Nation led the whale to open waters for a limited time, but he continued to seek human contact and play with boats.

Early last month, Luna's story took a bleak turn, and his desire to interact with people proved fatal. The curious young orca was sucked into the propeller of a 104-foot tugboat. Authorities believe Luna died instantly in what has been ruled an accident.

As they ponder how to protect the remaining 87 endangered southern resident orcas of Puget Sound, scientists and environmentalists will study how Luna was handled and what they might do should another gregarious whale wind up once again among humans.

— STEPHAN MICHAELS



RICHARD LAM Associated Press

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER: Luna's affinity for boats and people cost him his life last month off the coast of Canada.