

## Orca Issue Not Black and White, Expert Claims

The news coverage last year of Tilikum the orca killing a trainer at Sea World made Dr.

Randall Eaton cringe. An internationally known authority on the behavior of large predators, Eaton has studied wild and captive orcas for over thirty years..

When a national news reporter ended his coverage of the Sea World incident with the

comment that, "After all they are predators," Eaton's "ganglia were jangled" because

it was clear to him that the attack was not predatory at all.

Predation, by definition is about eating. Tilikum did not bite the trainer, he pulled her into the water, then held her in his mouth. When she stopped moving, he shook her,

possibly to revive her. She did not die from being bitten, but from drowning. Her death

was anything but an act of predation.

According to Eaton, it is in fact a mystery that orcas do not prey on humans. "After

all, they can kill anything in and around the sea, from ducks in flight and sea lions on

the beach to great white sharks and blue whales. The only documented case of a predatory attack on humans occurred on the California coast where orcas were preying

on sea lions and an orca grabbed a surfer on his board but quickly let go causing only a

minor wound."

“What is most surprising about wild orcas is their lack of unprovoked aggression toward humans. Considering the number of orcas that have been captured in the wild and the many thousands of hours they have spent with humans in the water the incidence of harmful attacks is exceedingly rare,” he said.

Director of The Dolphin and Whale Society, Eaton believes that the issues surrounding orcas in captivity cannot be resolved without comprehending our history of interaction with them, which is unique in the annals of human relationship with large predators.

His odyssey with orca whales began unexpectedly when Eaton conducted an extensive comparison of the behavior of dominant predators, those that rule their world or did until recently usurped by humans. They include the lion, wolf, orca and human.

He said, “Once a species rules its domain, its major competitor becomes its own species. As you’d expect wolves kill wolves, lions kill lions and humans kill humans, but there is no case known of orcas killing other orcas.”

His search also led him to examine how humans became the dominant predator of the planet. He studied the history of interaction between humans and their primary competitors, other predators. Soon he was convinced that humans waged a long, bloody war with species like the lion and bear that

preyed

upon humans and stole their kills.

As editor of the scientific journal *Carnivore*, Eaton said that, "Competition between

lions and hyenas for carcasses is fierce and amounts to warfare between species. The

same applies to wolves and bears, and our ancestors were right in the middle of it for

thousands of years. The longest war on earth was waged for meat."

That war continues to this day between herders and lions, and it is reflected around the world in mythology and religious and national symbols. The most common god figures in human history are big cats because they ruled human life.

"The word 'raja' in Asia means god, ruler and tiger, and many people in Asia still fear the tigers that prey upon them and their livestock. Around the world, culture

heroes were men who killed dangerous predators and paved the way for dominance over them. Examples in the traditional tales of western civilization include Hercules,

who killed the Nemean lion with his bare hands, and David who slayed a lion and bear.

To this day all the national symbols of Europe are the lion or bear, and in Asia the tiger," Eaton said.

Eaton discovered a unique history of relationship between orcas and the indigenous tribes of the Pacific Northwest coast. Orcas are revered by the cultures that know them best, but according to Eaton, not because they dominated humans,

preyed on them or competed with them for food.

“The Makah whalers of Puget Sound say the orca ‘is one step above god,’ the highest accolade ever given to any creature. From the Makah to the Eskimos, the coastal tribes tell a similar story about their history of interaction with the orca. The consistent theme is that, ‘Orcas never attacked us until we attacked them. Then they attacked us back, but only the members of our society who had actually attacked them, and we have had peace ever since,’” he said.

“If this is true”, Eaton says, “orcas have a higher ethical code for interacting with us than we do with them and other predators.”

He added, “It would be a mistake to dismiss indigenous knowledge of orcas. You have to realize that these people have been interacting with orcas for thousands of years, fishing, whaling and sealing in the same waters. If anyone knows the conduct of orcas toward humans, they do.”

An article by art historian Linda Schildkraut, in the current issue of The Dolphin and Whale Society’s online magazine, documents a number of Northwest coastal legends about orcas saving people. Last summer, Eaton’s Orca Project, a volunteer research program, uncovered a more recent case of an orca rescuing a member of the Samish tribe in Puget Sound. INCLUDEPICTURE "https://mail.google.com/mail/?ui=2&ik=2c75a66a06&view=att&th=12dee0133857c83e&attid=0.0.3&disp=emb&realattid=142db4d061999efb\_0.0.2&zw" \\* MERGEFORMATINET

“During our stay with the Samish people we interviewed several elders ,

including Rosie Cayou, who told us the story about her great uncle who, at nine years old, went out in a canoe with another boy who was seven. The canoe capsized. The older boy gave the other boy something that helped him to stay afloat and reach shore,” Eaton said.

According to Rosie, the people of the village came to the shore to look for her uncle but saw no sign of him. While they were there, an orca’s fin appeared on the horizon headed toward shore. When the boat was closer the people saw something on its back. As it approached shore the orca threw the boy off its back toward shore then turned a tight, full circle and came back to grab the boy in his mouth, came closer to shore and spit the boy out.

Eaton added that, “Rosie told us that all his life her uncle’s nickname was ‘Fish Puke’ because he had been puked onto shore by the orca.”

Rosie also recounted stories from her childhood of orcas driving salmon into Samish nets, much as dolphins help people catch fish to this day in Brazil and other parts of the world.

“After all, orcas are giant dolphins so we should not be too surprised that, like dolphins, they save human lives or help humans catch fish,” Eaton said.

Eaton points to a range of friendly interactions between orcas and humans, including a pod that helped whalers from Eden, at TwoFold Bay, Australia, catch southern gray whales for 115 years. “The orcas would guide the whale boats to the

whales, then catch and hold them so the whalers could harpoon them. This cooperative relationship was instigated by the orcas,” Eaton said.

In 1985, Eaton and the his Orca Project volunteers actually befriended a pod of orcas in British Columbia. “It all started when I yelled out to the matriarch of a pod, calling her by her name, Nicola. Two nights later she and her pod showed up offshore our camp. They floated on the surface in a large semi-circle, all the orcas facing us. Then two cows accompanied a calf to shore and it spyhopped over and over, raising itself out of the water to look at us. Then two other cows brought another calf to shore and it also looked at us repeatedly, and the ritual continued until all the calves had seen us close up. It was truly a meeting of nations,” Eaton said.

He says that thousands of people, both native and non-native, have had safe interactions with orcas in the sea. Eaton and the volunteers of his Orca Project have had many close encounters with wild orcas while snorkeling or diving by their camp in British Columbia.

“Sometimes the orcas swim to within three feet and look us straight in the eye. Like thousands of people every summer, we often kayak within inches of orcas without incident -- though a calf once nibbled on my kayak apparently out of curiosity.”

Eaton was surprised that orcas did not attack humans during capture efforts when they frantically were trying to escape nets and protect their young. Eaton’s book, *The Orca Project: A Meeting of Nations*, reviews ten years of orca captures in Puget

Sound where divers swam freely among netted orcas without being harmed or threatened. “The chief diver in these captures was Jerry Brown. He and other divers frequently swam to adult orcas, placed their hands on the whales’ pectoral fin and guided them into a steel cage that lifted the orcas up and outside the net for release.”

Equally unexpected is the behavior of orcas toward humans soon after capture. Normally, a wild animal cannot be handled unless it is socialized to humans from an early age, but orcas captured as full adults can be safely handled and even ridden by humans. The same applies to wild dolphins, but also humpback whales who not only solicit aid from humans but safely allow humans to untangle them from nets.

“Imagine a wild lion or bear being captured and handled without aggression,” Eaton said.

Altogether, Eaton says that captive orcas have an exemplary record of conduct toward humans. “Think of the many orcas that have faithfully entertained humans since 1965, and almost always they were confined to the equivalent of a bath tub, deprived of their normally complex social life and moving a hundred miles a day.”

Before 1965, the State of Washington was paying \$50 bounty for a “killer” whale. Owing to mistranslation, orcas were mistakenly dubbed “killer whales” instead of “whale killers.” Consequently, many orcas have been wounded and killed because they were believed to be dangerous. Thanks to Namu, who was captured in 1965 and exhibited in Seattle, attitudes toward the orca have shifted dramatically.

Eaton sees valid points to both sides of the question about whether orcas should be kept captive. He says there is a third point of view: what do the orcas want?

“All the evidence indicates that Namu captured himself. He swam into the capture net and guided a young female orca out, but he stayed there when clearly he knew how to escape. Then when the tide went out the net was stuck on rocks and did not come back up with the tide. For hours Namu wasn't even contained but he stayed there. After he was towed to Puget Sound from northern British Columbia, a floating log ripped the net covering the cove where he was held temporarily. He swam out into the Sound but on his accord returned and they patched the net,” Eaton said.

The actual cause of Namu's death was not publicized, but Eaton interviewed the aquarium staff who told him that Namu's mother showed up at the Seattle waterfront aquarium, 200 miles south of where he was captured. They told Eaton that Namu tried to escape by diving across his sea pool and ramming the net at top speed, and though he broke through the net held him fast and he drowned.

“The point I'm making is that it appears that Namu chose to come into our world, and that choice forever changed human perception of these magnificent creatures. But when he wanted to leave we didn't let him and therein lies the tragedy,” he said.

The story of Lolita is also a strong one. She lives still at the Miami Seaquarium, and



was the first orca displayed east of the Mississippi. She was brought to Miami during

the days when the US Air Force was still using orcas for target practice, and her presence, and popularity made a huge impact on US policies. The Miami Seaquarium

staff is still proud of the role Lolita played in awakening such sensitivities, including

the eventual passage of the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972.

Lolita is famous for tests her trainers. When they return from holiday she watches to make sure they stand exactly where they are supposed to stand and do the show routine exactly. If not, she stops the show, spits water at the trainers until they move into position and get it right, then resumes the show. Lolita knows the show routines better than anyone.

Eaton has studied and befriended captive orcas, and he believes that some of them,

like Lolita, have spent their lives faithfully entertaining, educating, and interacting with

humans without exhibiting behavior indicative of boredom or depression. On the other

hand, he suspects that some captive orcas, including Tilikum, have wanted to return to

the wild and may become so frustrated that they finally attack humans.

As one of the top attractions in the world, captive orcas are not only ambassadors to humanity, they have encouraged humans to care for the oceans. We have seaquariums to thank for that, and while Eaton thinks conditions could be

improved to prevent another incident, he believes that the solution is not as simple as

separating trainers from orcas or returning all the orcas to the wild.

“I suspect most of the captive orcas enjoy performing with their trainers, and while some of those captured in the wild might be able to reconnect with their wild kin

and survive, those born in captivity are likely to end up, despite extensive effort, like

Keiko. Captive-bred orcas may spawn generations better suited for captivity, like the

captive dolphins in the Florida Keys,” he said.

The recommendations Eaton made in his book have been reprinted in two volumes

on animal ethics. He favors “naturalistic oceanaria” where humans may view

and even interact harmlessly with free-ranging orcas that are attracted to a free salmon

lunch. Lime Kiln Park on San Juan Island, Puget Sound, where thousands of tourists

visit annually to view orcas close up, comes close to his model.

As the only dominant predator on earth that does not make war on its own kind, the orca has the most stable society known among mammals, and though much smaller than males, females govern orca societies. Eaton feels that,

“Overall, the remarkable constraint shown by wild and captive orcas toward humans is

worthy of our respect and admiration. Perhaps we have something to learn from them.”

Eaton's volunteer Orca Project will be making a TV documentary this summer about

the relationship between the coastal natives of British Columbia and the orca.

To learn more visit [www.dolphinandwhale.org](http://www.dolphinandwhale.org).

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