

Indigenous and Ancient Knowledge of Cetaceans

In a search for why animals and humans cooperate, I had spent ten years studying big cats. Most of the cats are basically solitary, but then there is the highly social lion. While group-living allows lions to kill larger animals such as buffalo and giraffe it also means greater protection of young against other predators, and it is an advantage in competing with other lions for territories and mates.

I proposed that there was still another advantage to lions from grouping, and that is direct competition with other species for the most valuable resource: animal carcasses. It doesn't do any good to kill big animals if you cannot eat them, and you cannot eat them if you are not able to defend them against troops of hyenas which will not only drive lions off their kills, they also may kill and eat the lions. On the other hand, some lions make their living by stealing carcasses from hyenas.

The point is that these species make war on one another. From a lion's point of view the only good hyena is a dead hyena which is why lions go out of their way to attack and kill hyenas when there are no lion cubs around or a carcass. Normally lions do not eat the hyenas they kill. From all appearances lions and hyenas hate one another.

We forget that for many thousands of years humans were right in the middle of an ongoing battle for meat on the ground. Competition with large carnivores also favored grouping by humans.

Humans only recently became the dominant lifeform on earth, and some people still are subordinate to large predators. I suspect that the greatest achievement of the human race was achieving dominance over big cats and bears before firearms. Once our ancestors did that human life shifted dramatically and other humans became our major competitors. Warfare among human societies became the prevalent theme of human life. Men subjugated women, domesticated wild animals and dominated nature which set the stage for the global crisis we now face. The blessing of dominance became a global curse.

I wondered what would have motivated men of hunting societies to risk their lives against awesome predators to achieve dominance over them. It is one thing to defend yourself and relatives or carcasses against dangerous animals, it is another to achieve full dominance over them. Around the world there are myths about culture heroes who had killed an awesome beast. Hercules is the great cultural hero of western civilization. His first and greatest feat was killing the Nemean lion.

If you think it was easy for our ancestors to kill lions, think again. The Massai herders of Africa have ritually hunted lions to achieve manhood and prove themselves worthy as warriors. They are among the greatest warriors ever: in the early part of the 20th century European armies that invaded Massailand armed with modern firearms were wiped out to a man by the spear-bearing Massai. As recently as the 1950s it took about twenty Massai warriors armed with shields and spears to kill a single male lion. Even then there were risks.

I theorized that trophyism was central to humanity's rise to dominion. The evidence from many disciplines indicated that men who won against dangerous carnivores obtained high status, power and more wives and children. Everywhere we look in contemporary society we find evidence of trophyism: names of fraternal groups; national symbols – the lion for most European nations, the bear for Switzerland and the tiger in Asia; the symbols associated with beer – most Europeans beers are symbolized by the lion; tavern names – the most common in England is “Red Lion,” symbolic of the bloodied lion; the names of cars – jaguar, panthera, cougar..

In wondering if humanity could live in peace and steward the planet I began to compare the behavior of humans to the species on earth that had ruled their worlds until recently. They are the lion, wolf and orca. Like humans, lions kill other lions and wolves kill other wolves, but there was no evidence that orcas kill other orcas. That has been born out by 35 years of intense study of orcas in the Northwest where only one aggressive altercation has been observed and it was not fatal.

Naturally I was curious about the history of relationship between the native societies of the northwest coast and the orca. I expected to find the same pattern of trophyism but I was in for a big surprise.

I read something written by Arnie Slettebak, an anthropologist at the Burke Museum, University of Washington. He had compiled information about the relationship between the native coastal societies of the northwest and the orca. What really caught my eye was the statement that, “The Makaw say the orca is one step above God.”

My first thought was that the orca was ranked above God because it was an especially esteemed trophy. Like the Massai, the Makaw were aggressive warriors. Whaling was a **very** dangerous affair; the average whaler survived six years. As might be expected, trophyism played a central role in their entire culture which was structured around the status of men as determined by their trophy exploits in whaling. The Makaw killed bears which also killed them, as well as wolves and cougars as trophies indicative of a man's prowess.

Both mammal-eating and fish-eating orcas were probably abundant in the waters where the Makaw hunted gray whales. Considering that orcas are capable of killing gray whales and are the most formidable creature in their world, it is surprising that the Makaw did not hunt them if nothing else as high-ranking trophies. A young whaler might ride an orca for which he earned considerable esteem, but if a young man with harpoon itch can ride an orca why not kill one?

The Makaw and the orca have had a relationship that is unique in the annals of human interaction with great predators on earth. They place the orca above God for a reason. Though surely they do not see it as above God they do see it as above us.

From Puget Sound to the Arctic, the orca is the most revered creature. There is a consistent theme among a number of coastal cultures that: orcas never attacked us until we attacked them; then they attacked us back but only the culprits of our society who had attacked them. If true, the orca upholds a higher ethical standard in its conduct with us than we practice with other humans, much less with animals who attack us or livestock.

The culture hero of the Kwakiutl Nation of British Columbia was a man who was saved by orcas after they were attacked by two of his comrades who, despite his warnings, harpooned an orca. The boat was capsized by the orcas and the culprits were never seen again, but the third man was brought to shore by orcas.

Anthropologists such as Richard Nelson who have spent years living among hunting cultures insist that they are accurate observers of nature which is exactly what we would expect. After all their survival depends on it. So why have numerous biologists who studied the orca ignored the peoples who may know the most about it?

If you wanted to know the sound an eland cow makes to attract her calf, who would you ask? A professor at the Mammal Research Institute in Pretoria? Or a Kalahari Bushman hunter? How many people know that Bushman hunters can accurately imitate the sound of over 300 species in their world, ranging from amphibians to large mammals? For them it is fun but also practical for their survival.

When my friend, Fritz Eloff, who was chairman of the zoology department at the University of Pretoria, studied Kalahari lions, he hired Bushman hunters to track the lions. He rode in a Land Rover while the Bushman ran for hours in the desert sand. Fritz learned a lot about lions from the Bushman who have lived with them for millennia. Wise man.

If western civilization suffers from anything it is hubris – vaulted pride. We are taught in school that Copernicus discovered that the earth revolves around the sun, but the Hindus knew it 5,000 years ago. Though modern science claims it discovered the

Van Allen belts, the ancient Hindus knew about them, too. We learn that the first book made by a printing press was the Gutenberg Bible, but the Chinese did it 500 years earlier.

In 1979, an article published in *Science* proposed the “long view,” that the universe did not simply start with a big bang, but that it contracts and expands repeatedly, also something the ancient Hindus believed. I remember reading a mid-1970s article in the same prestigious journal that ridiculed Vilikovsky’s book *Worlds in Collision*. A psychiatrist who studied ancient myths, Vilikovsky discovered universal stories about cosmic bodies colliding with earth. Now, 35 years later, worlds in collision is a widely accepted component of the scientific and cultural conversation - but Vilikovsky is not acknowledged.

One might well ask, why would there be similar stories among diverse cultures around the world unless there was some basis in actual events for them?

Perhaps Gary Snyder was right when he said that all the cultures that know the orca well feel the same about it. What if the orca is a step above us? Is the orca a model for how to rule a world without war? What more do the coastal cultures know about them that we need to know?

And why did ancient civilizations revere dolphins? Did they remind the ancients of what we too are missing in our life today? Joy, playfulness, compassion?

Isn’t it time to expand our horizon and unveil the knowledge of dolphins and whales held by indigenous cultures and ancient civilizations?

We think so.

USE: Someone also said there is nothing new under the sun. That being the case why would someone set out to study the orca without first talking to the people on earth who know it best?