

Toward a New Ethic for Watching Dolphins and Whales

In June 1998, I traveled to northern Japan to speak at a whale-watch conference on the subject of how best to observe whales and dolphins. Over the past decade, since whale-watching began to take off in Japan in the early 1990s, I have participated in four such forums at locales all over the country. These conferences make for warm gatherings of Japanese and international scientists, operators, and enthusiasts—a place where they can shake hands or bow low, exchange ideas and stories, and speak about amazing cetacean encounters.

Minutes after my long, overnight flight over Siberia had landed, the chief conference organizer, Dr. Tadao Furuya, a dentist who runs the local whale-watch tours, drove me into Muroran, on mountainous Hokkaido Island, where the conference was being held. We boarded a modern, well-equipped boat decorated with whale motifs and set off. Passing under the majestic Swan Bridge that acts as the gateway to the harbor, we found light breezes on twenty-five-mile-wide Volcano Bay, with scattered clouds above. The wind on my face eased the jet lag, and I felt the way I often do setting out to sea on an adventure to find cetaceans: anything could happen; it might be the chance to witness some rare behavior—a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Onboard the fifty-foot boat were an American and a British scientist and his partner, as well as about fifteen Japanese, including several dolphin enthusiasts with a family of first-timers, plus photographers, journalists, two scientists, a cartoonist, an environmental campaigner, and of course the skipper of the boat. For such an assortment of people, things seemed a little for-

mal. "Konnichiwa!" I tried to break the ice with my Japanese "hi," which predictably brought smiles. Slowing down my English, I learned that my companions had traveled from all over Japan for the same shared purpose as those of us from abroad: to seek out experiences with cetaceans and the people who like to watch them. We were in the right place!

After an hour of combing the rugged coastline of the bay, we met the local Dall's porpoises—about two dozen of them. They raced around our boat, creating characteristic rooster tails in the water and defying even the most agile Japanese photographers' attempts to get a shot. More than once, the photographers smirked as they bumped into each other, and then they became convulsed with nervous laughter as one became entangled in another's camera case straps.

The hyperactive Dall's porpoises, the largest of the five true porpoise species, are found only in the colder waters of the North Pacific. I had often seen them on my summer expeditions with orcas off northern Vancouver Island in the 1970s. They used to dance around the orcas, who moved slowly and steadily compared to the Dall's; we always joked that the porpoises, who sometimes become dinner for marine-mammal-eating orcas, have to keep moving. But certainly there are other, more likely reasons for speedy maneuvers—such as the animals' metabolism, the frigid water, and the speed of the fish they hunt. Their speed does not keep them from being killed by the tens of thousands in high seas drift nets in the northern North Pacific.

Dall's porpoises are mostly overlooked and are not the sort of cetaceans that engender public notice, much less support. Yet our little group of watchers loved their every move. I was impressed with the skill and enthusiasm of the Japanese skipper—my research and writing on and passion for whale-watching has enabled me to see and compare whale-watching going back three decades from all over the world. Being on a whale-watch boat in Japan with Japanese tourists—and 95 percent of all cetacean watchers in Japan are Japanese—is a bit like being on a California gray whale watch ca. 1972. There is raw enthusiasm, sheer exuberance. Fun. The oohs, aahs, wows erupt, and smiles are in abundance. The Japanese do not hang their emotions out in public as do Americans, but whales and dolphins can make them share their feelings faster than a few tumblers of sake.

Besides Dall's porpoises, we hoped to see Pacific white-sided dolphins, maybe pilot whales, and even orcas. Minke whales, the smallest baleen whale, are also found in this area, but we did not need to encounter them to make

this a successful trip. Japanese cetacean watchers, especially young women, are fond of dolphins. Even on sperm whale-watching trips out of Shikoku Island and near Taiji, on Honshu, the main island, Japanese women often tell the skippers: "Please take us to see dolphins."

After leaving the porpoises, our eyes and ears were sharpened toward unusual splashes or puffs. As the day brightened, we soon spotted a herd of at least 200 Pacific white-sided dolphins. We began traveling with them, staying off to the side and moving parallel. After chunky Dall's porpoises, Pacific white-sided dolphins look lithe, streamlined, with delicate painted faces and flanks. They are more athletic, and now the oohs and aahs reached new crescendos as a small group of dolphins came to bow ride and leap beside the boat. Even the British, American, and Japanese scientists among us joined the cheers. For nearly two hours, we stayed with them, hungry for more close encounters. We wanted it to last. And then the rare and extraordinary happened.

About 200 feet off the bow, we noticed that two mature dolphins were assisting a calf, supporting it so that it could breathe. Other dolphins were circling around the three.

"I think it's a newborn calf," said one Japanese scientist. "Let's find out."

"It looks to me like an injured calf," said the British woman.

"The other dolphins are lifting it up to breathe," said the scientist. "We need to get closer."

At least ten cameras were poised at the bow. Many wanted to move closer. But not everyone: "Leave them alone!" shouted the British woman. "It's obviously a mother and calf and the mother knows what to do."

"If it's a calf in trouble," said the American scientist, "we might be able to help." He hesitated, then added: "Or we might make things worse."

"We should rescue the calf," said a Japanese diver dressed in his dry suit and ready to go.

We were only ten miles away from a village that kills dolphins with electric lances. It seemed that we should not be arguing over how to watch dolphins. Any way of watching dolphins with nonlethal intentions deserved our support in these waters. The "thirst for the close encounter" is, after all, human nature.

Still, several Japanese dolphin watchers sided with the British woman, who repeated her fervent wish to leave the dolphins alone. Then the Japanese skipper of the boat silenced the debate.

“Let’s see what’s happening,” he said. And so we slowly motored over toward the calf and its entourage. As we approached, however, the surrounding dolphins dispersed, one by one, until only one adult and the calf remained. The British woman was upset.

The Japanese diver, also a photographer, yelled to the captain, “Stay here! I’ll jump in and swim over.”

Most of us—scientists, conservationists, and Japanese dolphin watchers—applauded this “compromise,” though we were already fairly close. We studied the diver as he swam ever closer to the dolphin. Were the dolphins disturbed by the diver? Probably. When the diver was within thirty-five feet, the last remaining adult dolphin swam off. Was that the calf’s mother? We did not know. The British woman was quiet and red-faced—anger tinged with embarrassment. Some of the Japanese were embarrassed, too. And the scientists were starting to question the suggestion to intervene.

Minutes later, the diver cradled the baby dolphin in his arms and swam back to the boat. He was holding it like a dead child. He passed it up to the waiting scientists. We crowded around for a closer look. It was a calf, a few hours to a few days old, and it had died, at least some hours before. Looking in its mouth, we glimpsed the tiny, perfectly formed teeth. It was like looking at a human baby’s fingernails—all the delicate features of unrealized maturity visible in miniature. It turned the joyous afternoon into a somber occasion. As the photographers snapped away, there were a few tears. Then, a scientist from a local university said they would do a necropsy, and that seemed to cheer most of us; at least the cause of death might be found and the carcass might help other dolphins.

The event was memorable, not just for witnessing the dolphins who had stayed by their dead pod-mate, trying to keep it breathing, but for seeing the culturally based reactions and behavior of the people on the boat. The baby dolphin had almost certainly died before we had seen it or decided to come close. But it helped crystallize for me the issue of how we should be watching whales and dolphins—the subject of my talk, which would close the conference at week’s end.

Was it appropriate to disturb the behavior of the dolphins who were attending the baby—even when we feared something was wrong? We know nothing about how these social animals might deal with the loss of family members or even “mourn” their dead. That baby’s mother, aunts, maybe sisters were in attendance doing a “duty” that was arguably a mix of instinct

and culture. To what extent did we intrude? And the larger question is whether humans engaged in watching cetaceans should seek to interact with them or influence their behavior at all. The ethic of watching wildlife without disturbing it, which has been accepted with many land mammals and birds in national parks and reserves, does not seem to apply to cetaceans in the same way. Even though whale-watching guidelines and regulations have been established in many parts of the world, few rules prevent interaction, much less disturbance; most simply try to regulate close encounters with mixed success by cautioning boat captains against making direct approaches and insisting they maintain a certain arbitrary distance. Yet even if these basic rules are followed—often they are not—cetaceans can hear boats coming from miles away. They know they are being watched.

The idea of interacting with dolphins reached the public consciousness in the late 1960s with the late John C. Lilly's interactive experiments with cetaceans. If he did not start it, he certainly pushed the concept along and popularized it. Lilly looked at the large, convoluted brain of the dolphin and wondered what it could be used for. He set up a long-term, live-in experience with a woman and a dolphin, the woman taking up residence beside the dolphin's pool. He famously stated that humans were on the brink of communicating with dolphins and gave a date, long since passed, when the magic breakthrough would come. Lilly's work was conducted exclusively in captivity, but it had an influence on many wild cetacean researchers.

Yet even if Lilly had not influenced a generation of cetacean scientists and enthusiasts, a unique aspect of cetaceans would have put the interaction question on the agenda sooner or later: certain cetaceans regularly approach humans. Most dolphin species visit boats to ride the bow or the wake or just to investigate. Some species, both the larger cetaceans such as humpbacks and gray whales, as well as orcas and certain dolphins, have so-called "friendly" individuals who often approach close to whale-watch boats. On top of this, several dolphin species, led by bottlenose dolphins, have the phenomenon of sometimes becoming "lone, sociable dolphins" eager to interact with humans.

At times, it would seem, it is all we can do to avoid cetaceans. Yet close encounters probably represent less than 1 percent of all cetacean encounters. Still, such encounters have made many operators and prospective whale watchers seek out the close encounter, to feel that it is all right to encourage or take advantage of cetaceans' accessibility and the habits of bow-

riding and social or predator curiosity. Commercial trips often promise close encounters, and the trips are sold on this basis. The brochure photographs and the film and video close encounters all hint that close approaches and interactions confer the ultimate experience.

It is not hard to understand why. I will never forget one of my first close encounters with an orca in a small boat off northern Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in 1973. As I wrote at the time, he blew and his breath covered me like a cool shower on a hot day—and I was sweating. I believe it was partly instinctive predator curiosity and partly a playful sense that led the orca to inspect me, lifting his head out of the water from only a few feet away. Then he turned his eye on me. This animal proved to be half of a duo, a couple of youngsters we called the Twins, who, over time, often approached to swim around our boat and even ride the bow and the wake, behavior not normally seen in orcas. We eventually came to seek out the close encounter, hungry for the thrill of the unexpected. It was easy to get them going. A quick buzz in our Zodiac inflatable around the bay often did the trick.

This “relationship” with the Twins lasted two and a half summers. They soon matured and lost interest in play. Whether we were a negative influence on their adolescence, diminished their ability to survive, or lowered their “quality of life,” is impossible to determine, but doubtful. We were only a few researchers and film-makers in the 1970s. Back then, there was no whale-watch industry for orcas. Worldwide, by the mid-1970s, there were only a couple hundred thousand whale watchers a year, mainly looking at gray whales in California and humpback whales in New England. Dolphin watchers, before the accessible spotted dolphins were discovered off the Bahamas in the late 1970s, were mainly confined to opportunistic sightings on California and New England whale watches. I suppose we felt that it was all right for ourselves and a few others to have close relationships with orcas but not for the general public. Yet something happened that changed that view and drove us to publicize our experiences with orcas.

In 1980, the largest logging company in Canada at the time, MacMillan Bloedel Ltd., announced that it was going to be logging the last untouched river valley on eastern Vancouver Island, driving the logs down the virgin Tsitika River and booming them in the bay at Robson Bight, which orca researcher Michael Bigg had identified as the core area for orcas. In this area we had often encountered orcas; here, pods came to rest, socialize, and rub themselves on smooth pebbles found on several beaches.

Through a poster and media campaign, we—a small ad hoc group of grassroots conservationists—put orcas on the agenda in the province of British Columbia as well as across Canada, and the ultimate result was that a marine protected area was created to help conserve the area for the orcas. It did not stop the logging of the valley, but it prevented logging in the estuary, including log booms and logging traffic, and the immediate disastrous effects all this would have had on the orcas.

The other result was that, after high-profile articles in *National Geographic*, *Equinox*, *Defenders*, and other publications, as well as my book, *Orca: The Whale Called Killer*, orcas were now in demand to be watched. The first trips in the early 1980s led to powerful word-of-mouth, and by the late 1980s orca-watching had spread from northern to southern Vancouver Island and into Greater Puget Sound. The numbers today, post-Keiko and the *Free Willy* films, amount to more than 75 operators taking 472,000 orca watchers a year in the northwestern United States and Canada alone. This may well be too many orca watchers, especially if all those people expect close encounters. Fortunately, more than half of all orca watchers, some 265,000 people a year, are watching from land-based spots such as Lime Kiln Park on San Juan Island, Washington. That helps cut down on the numbers of boats but still leaves a lot of close-encounter seekers on the water.

The “great orca trade-off,” as I call it, resembles the trade-off for most other cetaceans. Many whale and dolphin species have particular habitat, hunting, or other pressures that have been eased, in one way or another, following the spread of whale-watching over the past few decades. The public is now more aware of cetacean problems and is willing to help in various ways through campaigning, assisting with research, and supporting conservation. At the same time, several thousand businesses in some 500 communities worldwide are supported by whale and dolphin watching. Cetaceans are so appealing that, according to my research, whale-watch tours grew through the 1990s at a 12 percent rate of increase per year—three times the growth rate of all other tourism. As of 1998, more than nine million people a year were going whale- and dolphin-watching, spending more than \$1 billion. Since then, in the post-9/11 world, whale-watching has continued to be popular, though growth has slowed along with most other tourism.

Clearly, whale-watching is vital economically and acts as a sales tool for cetaceans and cetacean conservation. But it is time to reconsider the best

way for masses of people to watch cetaceans. Is it with close encounters? What worked with whale-watching in the early years, when there were a few hundred thousand spread-out whale watchers, does not work as well now. There are not enough accessible, friendly cetaceans with time available—after feeding and socializing—to allow for nine million close encounters per year. Of course, in some parts of the world whale-watching is new, and the promise of closeness sparks young businesses. But the new operators need to look at what is happening in the busy, established whale-watch capitals to know what to avoid: too many people, too many boats on the water, all trying to get too close, and mounting regulations to try to keep them away and control the situation. Otherwise, as whale-watching continues to expand, and as regulatory and enforcement agencies struggle to manage the mess, there are going to be many dissatisfied customers frustrated with the traffic levels and even jaded by any closeness or intimacy with cetaceans they do experience. This may be the fate of whale-watching—unless we change our way of thinking.

Close encounters have served a valuable role in getting people interested in cetaceans and their conservation, but are close encounters truly as compelling as seeing cetaceans interacting among themselves, undisturbed and undefined by human intervention? Is it more interesting to see a dolphin calf supported by its family and to glimpse complex social rituals—or to try to get as close as possible and then watch a dolphin or whale staring back at us? Yes, it is a thrill, and there is no proof that close encounters harm cetaceans, but we must accept that there is a limit to how many times and how much of their life they can spend entertaining humans—even if we cannot define the limit. We may be too conservative in our application of the precautionary principle—the idea that policy-makers in the absence of hard knowledge should take a cautious route. Still, this principle and all the regulations that might go with it mainly serve to erect fences between people and whales. Why not look positively and try to develop a novel approach, a new ethic when it comes to whale-watching?

My closing address at the conference on how best to watch whales and dolphins tried to do just this. First, I focused on the educational, scientific, and conservation values of whale- and dolphin-watching. I told a sea of eager Japanese faces that whale-watching was not as valuable in terms of education and science as many people say it is or imagine it to be. According to my 1997 operator survey, only 35 percent of the world's whale-watch

operations have naturalists or nature guides on every trip. And only 9 percent of operators have researchers or naturalists who conduct research as part of their trips. Some 57 percent never conduct scientific research or offer information to scientists, but 44 percent worldwide would be willing to offer their boat free to researchers. This last statistic is encouraging, but it is depressing to discover that whale-watching is largely a commercial enterprise. The lack of education and poor value to science represents a massive wasted opportunity.

In my talk, I promoted the idea of “well-balanced whale-watching”: for whale-watching to reach its potential and be successful, it needs to provide an enjoyable, educational experience that contributes to scientific knowledge and marine conservation, as well as being a profitable commercial venture. The most valuable whale-watching in the world, in terms of rate of return and socioeconomic value, is arguably around southern New England. The best operators here have made their trips into a thrilling scientific and educational experience: you get to see the scientists in action, doing their work from the boat, and you see the level of care they have toward the animals they study.

Of course, the definition of “education” varies by community, country, and culture. In Japan and Norway, where whaling still occurs, whale-watching offers another way to view cetaceans, if nothing else. Yet no matter the country or culture, learning more about cetaceans has the capacity to enhance the level of our appreciation and understanding of marine life and the natural world. Since my talk, I have continued to think about a new ethic for whale-watching. I think it is time to adapt an idea from land-based wildlife and wilderness tourism—that the best way to observe wild animals is to watch without being noticed, to become invisible, like the birdwatcher in the blind. It may not be fully achievable in the short term, but I believe it needs to be an idea that is recognized, articulated, established, and reinforced. With this new ethic, the goal of most whale- and dolphin-watching changes from wanting to get as close as possible and interact, to trying to watch, learn, and enjoy without disturbing. And a complementary aspect of this new ethic about visiting the ocean, adapted from land-based wilderness tourism, encourages us to tread softly, leaving the faintest “footprint” possible. In the sea, this means to watch from the cliff or shore when you can, to travel in boats with minimal wakes and unobtrusive sound profiles, to

move quietly through the world, and to keep eyes, ears, minds, and sensitivities open.

I believe that, with this new ethic and with the goal of “well-balanced whale-watching” in the mind of every cetacean watcher, operator, and regulator, we can then truly celebrate the close encounters when they come. And they will come. Cetaceans will never ignore us, but the close encounter will return to its position of special, treasured experience. We might even sharpen our sense of wonder toward these extraordinary animals.