

Looking at the world through orca eyes

Of Pacific County’s five major waterfronts — the Pacific Ocean, Willapa Bay, the Columbia, Willapa and Naselle rivers — the Pacific is the most spectacularly popular. People pour down to the seashore burbling with a sort of primeval wonder. We’re like preliterate villagers dancing on the edge of another space-time dimension. The ocean fascinates and terrorizes. It is a featureless mirror that loudly growls forever — but we love it anyway. There is almost no telling what might be under the surface a few hundred feet offshore. “There be monsters” was the unknown ocean’s default description until recent generations.

The sudden astonishing ability to peer down from space and track an orca as he and his tribe rocket through the cold saltwater just off our shore is a revelation. This electronic mapping is a crack in the ocean’s one-way mirror. We can peek through and catch the slimmest glimpse of a swirling, mysterious maelstrom in which warriors undertake epic journeys. Maybe they quest after adventures as much as they pursue fish.

What must it be like to be an orca, aside from us the apex predator of the North Pacific? His brain five times larger than mine, tagged orca L84 has become his species’ unwitting ambassador. In a better-balanced world, orca scientists would be simultaneously monitoring the movements of an ordinary human up in the appalling expanses of the air-bathed realm. If, by chance, they tagged me, they might assume I’m something like a moray eel, lurking in my office for eight hours at a time, awaiting innocent prey. Tagging a long-haul trucker or airline pilot would result in fantastically different theories about our species.

Aided by our satellites, we can see how swiftly an orca pod can traverse hundreds of miles of coastline, swimming up to 30 mph, relentlessly slicing through the ocean like a human family on an interstate highway vacation determined to make Reno by nightfall. What drives them? Can those enormous brains discern the distant whispers of delicious fish or precisely compute the date and place of a salmon run’s return



Matt Winters



This killer whale photographed off the north Washington Coast in February is part of a pod that satellite tracking found off Cape Disappointment Monday.

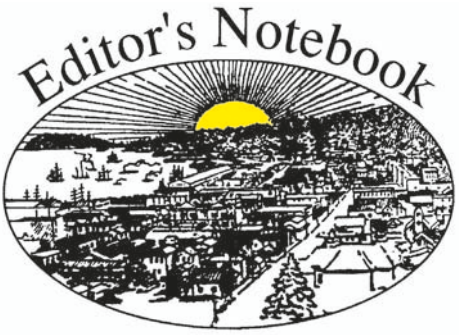
Courtesy of NOAA

after three years at sea? Does something like an air-traffic control screen play across an orca’s cerebral cortex, plotting the vectors of currents and tides and the flavor of the sea? Do they experience ecstasy as the cold ocean massages their smooth, warm skin? Are the deep, black ocean depths as lovely to them as a clear blue sky is to us?

One way to test the antiquity and connectedness of elements within the Pacific Northwest is to see whether there are Chinook language words for them. Orcas are a worldwide species and must have been here two, 20 and 200 centuries ago. Did Lower Columbia River civilizations regard them as competitors, as food, gods, or what?

Unsurprisingly, since there are many kinds of whales, the Chinook language includes several different words for whale: ehkolie, ehkole, kwahnice and kwaddis are the ones we know about from Edward Harper Thomas’ masterful 1935 compendium of Chinook. Two of these are listed on the highly helpful online Chinookan dictionary at tinyurl.com/3cwrj, which makes it obvious that kwahnice refers to orcas, describing the word as “Of Klickitat origin. The Klickitat are upriver on the Columbia, well beyond tidewater; why they would have a word for whale at all is an interesting question. Dolphins and orca have been known to roam up the Fraser River on occasion, so it is possible that whales may have swum up the Columbia to Klickitat territory.”

Orcas that ventured all the way up to the base of Celilo Falls would have an amazing story to tell, like the Vikings who

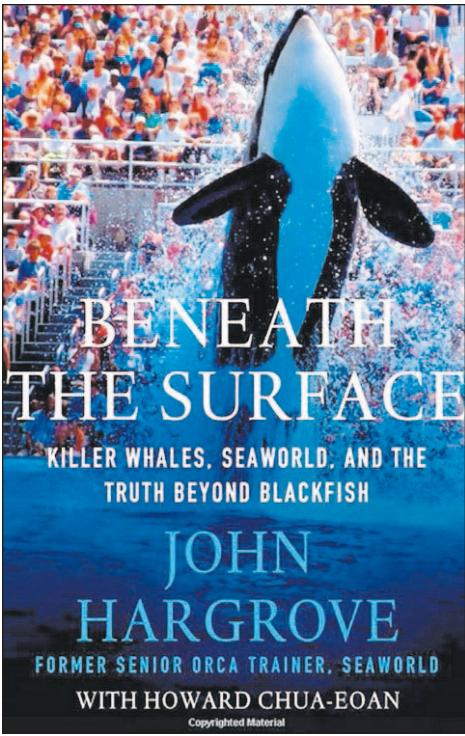


pushed their way into Eurasia and founded Moscow. Such orca heroes definitely would at least be worth their own word.

Another source says the Chinook phrase for orcas was kakowan yaka pishak. Kakowan may be a spelling or dialectic variation on kwahnice, while yaka means “he” and pishak means “bad” or “naughty.” Altogether, a modern English translation might be “bad whale,” which makes sense particularly for the Southern Resident Killer Whale pods that come down the coast from Puget Sound and specialize in hunting chinook salmon. Other non-SRKW orcas also range in our waters, with additional distinct populations north to Alaska. Some of these hunt marine mammals including seals and sea lions, but SRKW orcas are strictly salmon gourmets. By one estimate, a pod eats 800,000 salmon a year.

In *Natural Grace*, a delight-filled compilation of his *Seattle Times* columns, William Dietrich notes that the Haida Indian word for orca is *S’gan*, their chief of the underworld, and that the species’ formal scientific name in Latin is *Orcinus Orca* — whale of the realm of the dead.

Dietrich documents the transformation in public opinion about these



Palgrave Macmillan Trade publishing
A new book makes revealing claims about SeaWorld’s captive orca program. Before he became Washington secretary of state, now-retired Ralph Munro helped end the company’s capture of killer whales in Puget Sound from the population that is now known to hunt salmon along our coast.

whales, which were being used for Air Force strafing practice as recently as 1964. As if I needed any more reason to love retired Washington Secretary of State Ralph Munro, Dietrich reminds us it was Ralph who witnessed an orca hunt by SeaWorld in south Puget Sound in 1976 and launched the campaign to end this cruel practice. It is good to see Sea World taken to task by former orca trainer John Hargrove’s new book *Beneath the Surface* (see tinyurl.com/meruz7w) and in the 2013 movie *Blackfish*.

“It’s shameful that as a species we are so arrogant to believe that we can do whatever we want to any animal,” Hargrove told National Geographic.

At the same time he profoundly loves orcas, Hargrove makes this fascinating point about one of them he was closest to: “I never lost sight of the fact that one day she could betray me, because at the end of the day she is a killer whale.” These are animals smart enough to recognize that Sea World trainers are, in effect, prison guards belonging to an alien species. Who can blame them, really, for being dangerous. We’re lucky they can’t shoot back. “There be monsters” is something orcas could justly think when they look at the land.

—MSW

Matt Winters is editor and publisher of the *Chinook Observer* and *Coast River Business Journal*. He and his family live in Ilwaco.

Open forum

Her white whale

Hillary Clinton has come a long, long way since Arkansas, where she hitched her wagon to Bill Clinton’s star and hit the jackpot right up to the White House in Washington, D.C. It’s been obvious to anyone who’s ever thought about it that she had her own jackpot in mind — attaining the nation’s top spot in her own right in the White House.

Her story from that point of view is well known to nearly everyone — first lady, U.S. senator, secretary of state — and her record is one of abject failure at everything she has undertaken. Yet, she’s still trying to convince all but her mind-numbed sycophants that she can succeed as president of the U.S.

With all her fame and huge fortune — she’s acquired millions of dollars over the years — she appears publicly almost daily, but has become a plainly tired-looking, pathetic figure, plagued by a long string of failures, scandals and actions that would have imprisoned most citizens, but not the Clintons who apparently have their own set of rules and laws.

No one believes anything she ever says — her reputation as an acknowledged liar has taken care of that. Mrs. Clinton realistically can’t even be considered a “has been” since, based on her record of

failures, she’s an authentic “never was.”

She reminds me of Herman Melville’s Capt. Ahab, who was obsessed with capturing the white whale. Hillary’s obsession is capturing the White House. Ahab finally managed to catch Moby Dick, and we know how that turned out. I hope, for her sake, Hillary has read that book.

E. ROBERT NASSIKAS
Astoria

Words vs. actions

Port of Astoria Executive Director Jim Knight wrote a guest column, “Proposals require scrutiny” (*The Daily Astorian*, March 19), trying to assuage public concern over the Port’s recently exposed negotiations with Great Ocean Capital Holdings. Knight listed nine appropriate considerations he stated he will use in scrutinizing Great Ocean’s proposals. He also wrote, “the Port looks forward to engaging with our community.”

Coincidentally, in the same day’s newspaper we learned the Port was urging Astoria Mayor LaMear to set aside the prior Astoria City Council vote which rejected co-sponsoring the Port’s application to establish an enterprise zone within Clatsop County.

An enterprise zone would guar-

antee up to five years of property tax waivers on any new facilities within the zone boundaries for any business which meets the predetermined criteria of the zone, no matter what. So, for example, none of Knight’s nine considerations would be among the criteria in determining whether to grant businesses those enterprise zone-mandated incentives. Also not permitted would be consideration of a business owner’s personal integrity, or whether the business would expand here without the tax waiver (which would render the waiver just a wasteful handout).

By contrast, without an enterprise zone, we can already choose to form a teaming arrangement with any business deemed beneficial to the community, including offering incentives equivalent to an enterprise zone, and with criteria and conditions which we can negotiate flexibly on a case-by-case basis.

The Port and its fellow enterprise zone advocates claim an enterprise zone is an “additional tool” which will help us compete for new business. Yet all an enterprise zone would add is the requirement to squander future tax receipts on some businesses we would not have otherwise chosen to incentivize.

Obviously, an enterprise zone

is not an additional tool — it’s a straight jacket, which can only hamper our ability to compete. No wonder decades of studies have failed to demonstrate a consistently beneficial enterprise zone effect, even on the easy-to-measure factor of employment levels.

These facts were presented several times, but enterprise zone advocates ignored them all and merely kept repeating their same unjustified claims.

Knight’s written words promised scrutiny and community engagement. Instead, the Port and its fellow enterprise zone advocates want us to abrogate our existing authority and fiduciary responsibility to scrutinize businesses before offering monetary incentives, and they “engaged” our community by ignoring the facts we presented.

Should we believe the Port’s words, or its actions?

SHEL CANTOR
Astoria

Ideas for school

I’m a middle school student at Broadway Middle School.

A microwave and low-sugar pop would be a good idea at the middle and high schools. At my parents’ school they had a microwave and pop machine.

First, these are things that you

can put in a microwave: seafood, farm food or any kind of food. These are things that you can’t put in a microwave: silverware, thin plastic, paper plates, tin foil, etc. So why can’t we have all cool electronic things?

Second, there are things that are wrong with pop. Some pop has over 20 grams of sugar. That is too much sugar. That kind of pop is very bad for your teeth because it slowly rots your teeth. That is why I don’t drink a lot of it.

After that, there is pop with not a lot of sugar. For example, diet soda has low amounts of sugar, and so does Sprite or Sierra Mist. Yes, some of these things might make some kids hyper, but they need to know how to control it and not ruin it for everyone else. Some kids only get pop once or twice a year.

Not all kids like Sobe and water. They like energy drinks, Gatorade, etc. Some teachers won’t let you have lemonade. What if a kid didn’t have water for a few days, or they were poor, but they finally just got enough money to buy a few bottles of it, how do you think the teacher would know? How would the teacher feel?

As you can see, a microwave and low-sugar pop would be a good idea at the high and middle schools.

DALTON SMITH
Seaside



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