

# Scientists discover different kind of killer whale off Chile

By **SETH BORENSTEIN**  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — For decades, there were tales from fishermen and tourists, even lots of photos, of a mysterious killer whale that just didn't look like all the others, but scientists had never seen one.

Now they have.

An international team of researchers says they found a couple of dozen of these distinctly different orcas roaming in the oceans off southern Chile in January. Scientists are waiting for DNA tests from a tissue sample but think it may be a distinct species.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration felt confident enough to trumpet the discovery of the long rumored killer whale on Thursday. Some outside experts were more cautious, acknowledging the whales are different, but saying they'd wait for the test results to answer the species question.

"This is the most different looking killer whale I've ever seen," said Robert Pitman, a NOAA marine ecologist in San Diego. He was part of the team that spotted the orcas off Cape Horn at the tip of South America.

How different? The whale's signature large white eye patch is tiny on these new guys, barely noticeable. Their heads are a bit more rounded and less sleek than normal killer whales and their dorsal fins are narrower and pointed.

They likely mostly eat fish, not marine mammals like seals, as other killer whales do, Pitman said. Fishermen have complained about how good they are at poaching off fishing lines, snatching 200-pound fish



Paul Tixier

Scientists are waiting for test results from a tissue sample, which could give them the DNA evidence to prove the type D killer whale is a distinct species.

away.

Pitman said they are so different they probably can't breed with other killer whales and are likely a new species. At 20 to 25 feet long, they are slightly smaller than most killer whales. In the Southern Hemisphere, killer whales are considered all one species, classified in types A through C. This one is called type D, or subantarctic killer whales.

Michael McGowen, marine mammal curator at the Smithsonian, said calling it a new species without genetic data may be premature. Still, he said, "I think it's pretty remarkable that there are still many things out there in the ocean like a huge killer whale that we don't know about."

Scientists have heard about these distinctive whales ever since a mass

stranding in New Zealand in 1955. Scientists initially thought it could be one family of killer whales that had a specific mutation, but the January discovery and all the photos in between point to a different type, Pitman said.

He said they are hard to find because they live far south and away from shore, unlike most killer whales.

"The type D killer whale lives in the most inhospitable waters on the planet. It's a good place to hide."

Pitman got interested in this mysterious killer whale when he was shown a photograph in 2005. When he and others decided to go find them, they followed the advice and directions of South American fishermen, who had seen the whales poaching their fish.

After weeks of waiting, about 25 of the whales came

up to the scientist's boat, looking like they expected to be fed. Equipment problems prevented the scientists from recording enough of the whale songs, but they used a crossbow to get a tissue sample. Pitman said the whales are so big and their skin so tough that it didn't hurt them, saying the arrow "is like a soda straw bouncing off a truck tire."

Pitman said he'll never forget Jan. 21, when he finally saw his first and then a bunch of the type D orcas.

"For 14 years I was looking for these guys. I finally got to see them," Pitman said.

He acknowledged that he did sound like the revenge-seeking captain in the classic novel "Moby-Dick."

"I guess I know how Ahab felt, but for a good reason," Pitman said.

## Orcas: Agency is looking at an overall management framework

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management perspective, (that what we do) doesn't impede their recovery moving forward," said Barry Thom, regional administrator for the National Marine Fisheries Service.

At a Pacific Fishery Management Council meeting Thursday, Thom announced the agency's intention to reinitiate an Endangered Species Act consultation to reassess the effects of fisheries on the orcas. The council helps set ocean salmon harvests of Oregon, Washington state and California.

The agency is also looking at an overall management framework that would help fishery managers make decisions in years when, for example, environmental conditions — such as warmer-than-average waters — might impact the availability of salmon and pose a risk to orca recovery.

A National Marine Fisheries Service consultation in 2009 concluded that fisheries overseen by the council did not jeopardize the survival and recovery of the whale population.

The Wild Fish Conservancy and the Center for Biological Diversity have filed an intent to sue, arguing that coastal salmon fishing impacts the orcas' survival, Thom said.

Chinook salmon runs throughout the year are an important part of the orcas' diets. Certain fished runs, including those that return to the lower Columbia River, are especially critical.

But many West Coast fisheries have seen decreased salmon stocks over the years — a concern to some on the Pacific Fishery Management Council

when it comes to assessing the fisheries in light of declining killer whale populations.

Some on the council want to make sure any investigation takes into account a wide amount of factors that could be impacting salmon populations and, as a result, impacting orcas.

"Often fisheries become the first knob to turn and the easiest knob to turn," said Brett Kormos, a council designee for Chuck Bonham of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"We know the fisheries themselves have not been robust and healthy," Thom said. Nor is it clear if simply providing more food means the Puget Sound orcas would rebound given other pressures in the environment.

One of the biggest challenges for salmon abundance — as well as orca abundance — is habitat, Thom said.

Fishery managers and state and tribal partners are working on habitat protection and recovery and to negotiate harvest reductions on salmon runs.

"But we do need to make sure fish management is doing the right things in the right places to move us forward," he said.

The consultation is a long-term plan, unlikely to provide information for the 2019 fisheries.

But the National Marine Fisheries Service asked the council to begin taking steps to develop a long-term approach. The agency will be evaluating information about projections for the abundance of Chinook salmon in 2019. Future planning will likely be discussed at a council meeting in April.

## Rentals: 'Please do not take away these tools from the communities'

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"Reasonable restrictions on short-term rentals are essential to prevent Astoria from suffering the fate of other coastal communities whose residents are slowly but steadily being driven out in favor of commercial rental property owners," Astoria Mayor Bruce Jones wrote in a letter.

"Astoria has taken steps to create reasonable restrictions on short-term rentals through a public process, and prohibiting our ability to take such steps will result in a more rapid increase in the cost of permanent housing for residents, and a significant degradation of the unique small town qualities which make Astoria a desirable location for visitors and residents alike."

The legislation would impact cities like Gearhart and Manzanita, which have both capped the number of rentals, and interfere with Seaside's practice of only allowing vacation rentals in certain zones as a conditional use.

"Please do not take away these tools from the



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Markers on a map at Gearhart City Hall indicate the location of vacation rental properties.

communities. Each community has unique issues that make an over-arching prohibition even more contrary to the livability goals that are identified in each town's comprehensive plan," Seaside City Councilor Tom Horning wrote. "SB 621 protects outside real estate investors and corporate interests at the expense of community livability and affordability, and it heads off potential solutions to these problems.

"Allow us to handle our

problems without outside interference."

Proponents of the bill argue that the role vacation rentals play in the housing crunch is overstated, and that the vacation rental industry creates jobs, brings in tax revenue and allows people to afford their homes.

Colleen Easlon, who operates vacation rentals out of Port Orford, told the Senate businesses like hers play an integral role in supporting a local tourism economy.

"The industry has been fantastic for our little community," Easlon said.

But organizations like the League of Oregon Cities and the Oregon Coast Alliance are concerned about the broader implications the bill could have for livability and long-term land use planning.

Putting a local government's control over how it can resolve or mitigate disputes between visitors and residents will lead to more community tension, said Cameron La Follette, executive director of the Oregon Coast Alliance.

"It would eliminate the ability of residents and local governments to regulate livability, which is ter-

rible for a land use program and a disaster for people on the coast," La Follette said.

Taking away a city's ability to decide where and how vacation rentals should operate reduces the ability to keep the integrity of commercial and residential zones, said Erin Doyle, an intergovernmental relations associate with the League of Oregon Cities.

"There's an expectation when you buy a home in a residential area it will be residential, not a commercial area ... and (vacation

rentals) are businesses," Doyle said.

Many cities have spent years working on regulations that address these issues, and that independence should be respected, Doyle said.

"To have it all undone would reopen a lot of wounds for cities who adopted policies they are now getting used to ... and those cities who don't want (vacation rental regulations) just don't have them," she said. "There's no need for a state pre-emption."

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