

STATE & REGION

Mother's Day hope: Orca pod in best condition in a decade

There is cause for cautious optimism for killer whales that frequent Puget Sound

BY LYNDA V. MAPES

The Seattle Times

SEATTLE — She was a mother who happened to be an orca, whose plight resonated around the world as she clung to her dead calf, refusing to let it go.

Mother orca Tahlequah, J35, brought front and center the extinction crisis threatening the southern resident killer whales that frequent Washington's Puget Sound. There are only 75 left.

She swam through the Salish Sea for 17 days and more than 1,000 miles in the summer of 2018, in what many interpreted as a journey of grief. It's possible she never let the calf go; when it was last photographed by scientists at the Center for Whale Research, the calf was falling apart.

But on this Mother's Day, there is some cause for cautious optimism for some of the most famous mothers in our region, on whom the future of this fragile population of orcas depends.

Since Tahlequah lost her calf that lived only one half-hour, she has birthed another, J57, a male born in September — and still going strong. Two more calves also have been born to J pod, J56, a female born in 2019, and J58, a female born in 2020.

"There are signs for optimism; in general over the last several years, J pod is in better condition than in much of the last decade," John Durban, professor at Oregon State Uni-



Center for Whale Research via AP, file

An orca whale calf known as J51 swims with J19, his grandmother, near San Juan Island, Washington, in 2015. Several calves have been born into the J pod in recent years, bolstering the southern resident killer whales that frequent the Puget Sound.

versity told The Seattle Times. He's also a research associate with an orca health monitoring project led by Holly Fearnbach of SR3, a science and research and marine mammal rescue nonprofit.

Using a drone flown more than 100 feet above the whales, they take photographs to document the orcas' body condition. And lately, what they are seeing in J pod generally is improvement.

"There is hope in our images," Durban said. "But it is fragile."

After all, the region was celebrating a baby boom of southern residents in 2015 with five births — but three of those calves and two of the mothers subsequently died.

By summer 2018, J50, not even 4 years old, was wasting away, spurring an attempt at an international rescue effort, even as mother orca Tahlequah was clinging to her dead calf.

But since then a birth to L pod, L124 born in May 2019, and L125, born in February 2021, as well as the three J pod calves, have given the region something to root for: not only

the new orca babies, but also their moms.

Matriarchal society

To a greater degree than in many other animals, including humans, the southern resident orcas put family first. Their society is matriarchal, with the pods led by grandmothers and mothers.

Every baby brings both hope and risk for the population, as the mother undergoes the most costly and risky stage of her life, carrying, birthing and nursing her baby.

Published peer-reviewed research led by Sam Wasser at the Center for Conservation Biology at the University of Washington has found two thirds of southern resident orca pregnancies are lost because of nutritional stress.

When adult male orcas lose their mother their own chances at survival are diminished. "He has a higher chance of mortality, even in the prime of life," Durban said. "Some of that may be emotional, but it is also direct for support from their mothers they are dependent on."

TODAY

It's Sunday, May 9, the 129th day of 2021. There are 236 days left in the year. This is Mother's Day.

Today's Highlight in History:

In 1994, South Africa's newly elected parliament chose Nelson Mandela to be the country's first Black president.

In 1712, the Carolina Colony was officially divided into two entities: North Carolina and South Carolina.

In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson, acting on a joint congressional resolution, signed a proclamation designating the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day.

In 1926, Americans Richard Byrd and Floyd Bennett supposedly became the first men to fly over the North Pole. However, U.S. scholars announced in 1996 that their examination of Byrd's flight diary suggested he had turned back 150 miles short of his goal.

In 1945, with World War II in Europe at an end, Soviet forces liberated Czechoslovakia from Nazi occupation. U.S. officials announced that a midnight entertainment curfew was being lifted immediately.

In 1951, the U.S. conducted its first thermonuclear experiment as part of Operation Greenhouse by

detonating a 225-kiloton device on Enewetak Atoll in the Pacific nicknamed "George."

In 1962, scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology succeeded in reflecting a laser beam off the surface of the moon.

In 1970, President Richard Nixon made a surprise and impromptu pre-dawn visit to the Lincoln Memorial, where he chatted with a group of protesters who'd been resting on the Memorial steps after protests against the Vietnam War and the Kent State shootings.

In 2012, President Barack Obama declared his unequivocal support for same-sex marriage in a historic announcement that came three days after Vice President Joe Biden spoke in favor of such unions on NBC's "Meet the Press."

In 2019, Pope Francis issued a groundbreaking new church law requiring all Catholic priests and nuns to report clergy sexual abuse and cover-ups by their superiors to church authorities.

Ten years ago: Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich announced on social networking websites that he was running for the Republican presidential nomination.

Five years ago: Filipinos went to

the polls to elect Rodrigo Duterte, the controversial, tough-talking mayor of Davao city, to be their country's next president.

One year ago: Rock 'n' roll pioneer Little Richard, known for his piercing wail, pounding piano and towering pompadour, died in Tennessee at 87 after battling bone cancer; he had helped shatter the color line on the music charts while introducing Black R&B to white America.

Today's Birthdays: Actor-writer Alan Bennett is 87. Actor and politician Glenda Jackson is 85. Producer-director James L. Brooks is 84. Musician Sonny Curtis (Buddy Holly and the Crickets) is 84. Singer Tommy Roe is 79. Singer-musician Richie Furay (Buffalo Springfield and Poco) is 77. Actor Candice Bergen is 75. Singer Billy Joel is 72. Blues singer-musician Bob Margolin is 72. Actor Amy Hill is 68. Actor Wendy Crewson is 65. Actor John Corbett is 60. Singer Dave Gahan (Depeche Mode) is 59. Actor Sonja Sohn is 57. Rapper Ghostface Killah is 51. Actor Daniel Franzese is 43. Rock singer Pierre Bouvier (Simple Plan) is 42. Actor Rosario Dawson is 42. Rock singer Andrew W.K. is 42. TV personality Audrina Patridge is 36.

—Associated Press



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