

Grieving Orca carries dead baby

by Andrew Conradi, ofs from various sources, 6 August 2018

Thanks to Dawn D'Cruz. ofs & FVC editors for raising this.

Her dead calf resting on her nose, an orca has swum in mourning for days in the Salish Sea. It has become a devastating symbol, and an uncannily pointed one, for the whales' plight. Watch this video (34 secs).

The calf died Tuesday [24 July 2018] morning, half an hour after it was born near Victoria, BC in the Haro Strait between Sidney Island, BC and Henry Island, WA, to a 20-year-old whale called J35. It was the first calf known to have been born to the local population, known as the Southern Resident killer whales, since 2015. There are just 75 of these endangered whales in three pods. J-35's pod consists of 23 whales.

Paul Cottrell, marine mammal co-ordinator for Fisheries and Oceans Canada, together with American researchers, spent days on the water helping keep marine traffic away from J-35. Whale-watching vessels legally have to stay at least 200 metres back from the endangered southern resident killer whales. But for now, operators have decided to stay 400 metres away from this group of whales because of J-35.

Southern Resident killer whales generally stay near British Columbia and Washington State, though some swim north to Alaska and south to California. Researchers fear the decline of the population, which has been besieged by a shrinking gene pool, dwindling food supply and environmental degradation.

In 1976 they numbered about 70, after approximately 50 were removed from the wild to become attractions in marine parks.

The population decline, and the lack of new baby whales, has largely been attributed to their primary prey, the Chinook salmon, dying off. Jan Ohlberger, a research scientist at the University of Washington's School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences, said that the orcas prefer the larger Chinook salmon that are richer in energy, but that they have steadily declined over the last several decades.

One hypothesis for the salmon decline is that it could be because of overfishing and/or climate. But conservationists have said the whale population has also declined because of inbreeding, noise pollution from ship traffic, and municipal and industrial waste and other chemicals being spilled into the water.

There are more potential threats on the horizon. A recent agreement to expand the Trans Mountain Pipeline, which carries oil from Alberta to Burnaby, BC, would multiply tanker traffic through the orcas' habitat and expose them to more noise and potential spills and ship strikes.

What can we do? Learn more from this March 2018 video (1 min 35 secs) from the Raincoast Conservation Foundation: <https://vimeo.com/255857963>