

# Luna — The Friendly Killer Whale



## A Wild Killer Whale Created an International Storm When He Befriended Humans

*Lonely since being separated from his family, Luna, a killer whale in the wild, developed a unique and close relationship with humans that frequented the waters he swam in. Hungry for warmth and attention, the playful Luna interacted with seafarers in the most amazing, playful and gentle ways, and became an international sensation. This magnificent and intelligent sea creature kept the world riveted as a diplomatic rift between America and Canada, and then between government officials and Native Americans, raged on about what to do with him.*

• **Aryeh Cohen**



**O**rcas (*Orcinus orca*) are commonly known as killer whales. At lengths up to 32 feet and weighing upward of 12,000 pounds, they rank among the world's largest sea creatures. Their powerful bodies can move rapidly in the water, achieving speeds up to 35 MPH.

Orcas have voracious appetites and can eat 300 pounds of fish and sea mammals per day. They attack in packs, and their habit of preying on whales is thought by some to be the source of their nickname, originally: "whale killers." Orcas are at the top of the ocean food chain; they have no predators.

Nevertheless, the world has seen a marked decline in the number of killer whales. First, they do not multiply rapidly. Close to 50%

of newborn orcas do not survive. Hunting and other forms of human interaction has also caused their numbers to drop. Some countries have placed orcas on the list of endangered species.

Orcas are social by nature, working together to hunt for food and playing together for the sake of recreation. They live in pods that are led by a matriarch and include four generations of offspring. Orcas, for their entire lifespan, believed to be up to 60 years in the case of females, remain attached to their mothers. (Males, by contrast, are believed to have an average lifespan of 30 years.)

Aunts and uncles often "babysit" orca calves. Killer whales rarely leave their family pod for more than a few hours at a time. They identify and communicate with each other using "calls," combinations of clicks, squeals and whistles, that are unique to the specific pod. Similar to dolphins, orcas use echolocation to orient themselves at sea.

Despite their fearsome title and reputation, few people are frightened by killer whales. For centuries, they were the stuff of nightmares for fishermen and mariners, but in modern times it has been clearly established that killer whales have no interest in harming humans. If anything, they are extremely friendly toward us. There are no recorded instances of orcas in the wild killing humans.

However, there have been multiple attacks of captive killer whales on humans, with some attacks being fatal. The most recent incident occurred at the famous SeaWorld Park in Orlando, Florida, in February 2010, when the orca Tilikum killed Dawn Brancheau, an experienced trainer. Tilikum had been involved in two previous fatalities.

Some animal rights groups are critical of keeping orcas in captivity—not merely to prevent deaths to humans. Rather they claim that the negative effect of captivity impacts the psyche of killer whales, causing them to suffer reduced lifespans and making them more prone to disease and other ailments. As a result, these groups are pressing to outlaw holding orcas in aquariums altogether.

## A Killer Whale Befriends Humans

Orcas are found in all of the world's oceans and many of its larger rivers. One large community of killer whales, known to marine biologists as the "South Residents," lives in the North Pacific region. This community has been carefully monitored by researchers for the past 40 years.

Scientists track each one individually. They know that there are exactly 87 orcas in this community and each one has a name.

On September 19, 1999, marine biologists celebrated the birth of an orca calf to a family of the South Residents. The birth took place off the coast of San Juan Island in Washington State. South Residents are recognized by both the governments of Canada and the United States as endangered animals in need of protection. As such, the newborn orca calf was seen as critical to the future of the entire killer whale community. A Seattle newspaper held a contest to name the baby orca, and readers voted for Luna, Latin for moon.

For a while, scientists were very enthusiastic about Luna's future. However, in June 2001, they carried out their annual census of the killer whale population and discovered that Luna was missing from his family. Baby orcas cannot survive on their own at sea, much as a human baby would not survive without an adult's care. The scientists naturally concluded that Luna could no longer be alive.

But in autumn of 2001, around the time Luna would have been two years old, he suddenly reappeared. Luna was observed swimming alone in Nootka Sound, off the west coast of Vancouver Island in the Canadian province of British Columbia. He was first sighted by the crew of a cargo ship. At first, Luna satisfied himself with following the ship on its daily route from a distance. After a few days, though, he began swimming closer, waving with his tail, leaping into the air and spraying the crew with water.

It seems that Luna had not obeyed his mother's admonitions not to stray too far



Contrast the size of this killer whale with the humans at the side.



Orcas surround a sea leopard, hoping to make a kill.



Orca entertains a crowd at SeaWorld.



Killer whales are known for their remarkable social behavior.



When Luna heard the sound of a familiar ship, he leaped from the water three times and then swam toward it.



Retrieving objects to the delight of his human playmates.