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Orcas Anything But Dangerous, Expert Claims

The recent news coverage of an orca killing a trainer at Sea World made Dr. Randall Eaton cringe. An internationally known authority on the behavior of large predators Eaton has studied orcas since 1976. “What is most surprising about wild orcas is the lack of unprovoked aggression toward humans,” he said.

Eaton points to a range of friendly interactions between orcas and humans including a pod that helped whalers from Sydney, Australia, catch southern gray whales for 115 years. “The orcas would guide the whaling ships to the gray whales then catch and hold them so the whalers could harpoon them. This cooperative relationship was instigated by the orcas,” Eaton said.

The Kwakiutl people of British Columbia tell of orcas rescuing a member of their tribe and pushing him to shore. In 1985, Eaton and the his Orca Project volunteers actually befriended a pod of orcas in British Columbia.

“It all started when I yelled out to the matriarch of a pod, calling her by her name, Nicola. Two nights later she and her pod showed up offshore our camp. They floated on the surface in a large semi-circle, all the orcas facing us. Then two cows accompanied a calf to shore and it spyhopped over and over, raising itself out of the water to look at us. Then two other cows brought another calf to shore and it also

looked at us repeatedly, and the ritual continued until all the calves had seen us close up. It was truly a meeting of nations,” Eaton said.

Eaton’s odyssey with orca whales began unexpectedly while he was a graduate student studying aggressive behavior in the African lion. He was struck by a lioness and knocked flat. “That event aroused my curiosity about how we humans ever became dominant to great carnivores before the advent of firearms.”

His search for answers led him to examine the history of interaction between humans and dangerous predators. Soon he was convinced that humans waged a long, bloody war with species like the lion and bear that preyed upon humans and stole their kills.

Editor of the scientific journal *Carnivore*, Eaton said that, “Competition between lions and hyenas for carcasses is fierce and amounts to warfare between species. The same applies to wolves and bears, and our ancestors were right in the middle of it for thousands of years. The longest war on earth was waged for meat,” Eaton added.

That war continues to this day between herders and lions, and it is reflected around the world in mythology and religious and national symbols. The most common god figures in human history are big cats because they ruled human life.

“The word ‘raja’ in Asia means ruler, king and tiger, and many people in Asia still fear tigers that prey upon them and their livestock. Around the world culture heroes were men who killed dangerous predators and paved the way for dominance

over them. Examples in western civilization include Hercules who killed the Nemean lion with his bare hands, and David who slayed a lion and bear. To this day all the national symbols of Europe are the lion or bear, and in Asia the tiger,” Eaton said.

Orcas are revered by the cultures that know them best, but according to Eaton, not because they dominated humans, preyed on them or competed with them for food.

“The Makaw whalers of Puget Sound say the orca ‘is one step above god,’ the highest accolade ever given to any creature. From the Makaw to the Eskimos, the coastal tribes tell the same story about their history of interaction with the orca which is unique in the annals of human relationship with large predators. They say the orcas never attacked them until they attacked the orca, then they say that the orca attacked them back but only the culprits of their society who had attacked the orcas. They add that they have had peace ever since,” Eaton said.

He added, “You have to realize that these people have been interacting with orcas for thousands of years, fishing, whaling and sealing in the same waters. If anyone knows the conduct of orcas toward humans they do.”

According to Eaton, it is surprising that orcas do not prey on humans. “After all they can kill anything in and around the sea with impunity, from ducks in flight to great white sharks and blue whales. There is only one documented case of a predatory attack. On the California coast where orcas were preying on sea lions

an orca grabbed a surfer on his board but quickly let go causing only a minor wound.”

When a national news reporter ended his coverage of the Sea World incident with the comment that, “After all they are predators,” Eaton’s “ganglia were jangled” because it was clear to him that the attack was not predatory at all.

Eaton and the volunteers of his Orca Project have had numerous close encounters with wild orcas while snorkeling or diving by their camp in British Columbia.

“Sometimes the orcas swim to within three feet and look us straight in the eye. Like thousands of people every summer, we often kayak within inches of orcas without incident, though a calf once nibbled on my kayak apparently out of curiosity.”

Eaton is surprised that orcas have not attacked humans during capture efforts when they were trying to escape nets and protect their young. Eaton’s book, *The Orca Project: A Meeting of Nations*, reviews ten years of orca captures in Puget Sound where divers swam freely among netted orcas without being harmed or even threatened. “The chief diver in these captures was Jerry Brown. He and other divers frequently swam to adult orcas, placed their hands on the whales’ pectoral fin and guided them into a steel cage that lifted the orcas up and outside the net for release.”

Equally surprising is the behavior of orcas toward humans soon after capture. Normally, a wild animal cannot be handled unless it is socialized to humans from an early age, but orcas captured as full adults are safely handled and even ridden by humans.

Altogether, Eaton says that captive orcas have an exemplary record of conduct toward humans. “Think of the many orcas that have faithfully entertained humans since 1965, and almost always they were confined to the equivalent of a bath tub, deprived of their normally complex social life and certainly very bored. It is no wonder that one might go mad and kill someone.”

Before 1965, the State of Washington was paying \$50 bounty for a “killer” whale. Owing to mistranslation, orcas were mistakenly dubbed “killer whales” instead of “whale killers.” Consequently, many orcas have been wounded and killed because they were believed to be dangerous. Thanks to Namu, who was captured in 1965 and exhibited in Seattle, attitudes toward the orca have shifted dramatically.

Now the orca is among the top attractions in the world. Captive orcas are not only ambassadors to humanity, they have encouraged humans to care for the oceans. We have seaquariums to thank for that, though Eaton thinks conditions could be improved to prevent another incident.

The orca is the only dominant predator on earth that does not make war on its own kind. This giant dolphin has the most stable society known, and though much smaller than males, females govern orca societies. Eaton feels that, “the remarkable constraint shown by wild and captive orcas toward humans is worthy of our respect and admiration. Perhaps we have something to learn from them.”

Eaton’s Orca Project will be making a TV documentary this summer about the

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relationship between the coastal natives of the Pacific Northwest and the orca.

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