



Dear dolphin friend,

during the Year of the Dolphin 2007, UNEP/CMS has been introducing you to a different species of dolphin each month. Dolphin of the month for August is the orca - an impressively social animal, as orcas stay in their family group for life, led by the female members of their species.



The orca

Orcas - a so-called species complex?

Worldwide, there are numerous different, small populations of orcas. They feature such a variety of different social organisations that one probably has to abandon the idea of only one kind. For example, the orca population of the northeast Pacific off British Columbia, Canada, split into different species which do not mate with one another, differ both in their genotype and their phenotype, and even in their behaviour: there are species that specialise in hunting mammals, in hunting fish, and the only recently discovered and less known school in the open sea. Orcas are the biggest dolphins, with the males reaching up to 9 metres long and weighing up to 10 tons. The females are much smaller.

Protection through international agreements

The orca population in the Strait of Gibraltar is threatened by extinction, according to the World Conservation Union (IUCN), as there are now less than 50 individuals remaining. This is partly due to the decline in tuna stock as a result of overfishing. However, as the orcas account for about 17% of the reduction of the fishers' catches, there are also reports of deliberate killings of orcas by local fishermen.

The southern orca community in the northeast Pacific has been listed as threatened by extinction by COSEWIC, the "Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada" which is responsible for assessing the degree of threat. The orca (*Orcinus orca*) is listed in appendix II of the Bonn Convention (CMS - Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals). Through this agreement, the CMS member states commit themselves to the protection of orcas and to measures against the factors by which they are threatened. Moreover, they are protected by the regional agreements ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS. According to IUCN, the worldwide threat for the overall orca population is smaller, depending on preservation measures. They are listed in appendix II of the Bonn convention, too.

Living with Orcas in Canada and Russia

"I first met orcas off northern Vancouver Island in 1973 and spent 10 summers with them along the Canadian west coast. We got to know them as individuals and recorded their unique dialects. These pods, or family groups of orcas, were suffering then from exploitation by the world's aquarium industry and many pods had been reduced in size. Some of the southern Vancouver Island pods were found to be carrying the heaviest contaminant loads of any animal on Earth. In 1999, I helped start the first orca study in Russia, with Russian students conducting the research from a summer base camp in Kamchatka, in the Russian Far East. The first reason was to find out more about these animals because they were being subjected to capture for aquariums in Japan and China. We have come to know the Russian orcas as individuals and they have similar dialects as are found with orcas elsewhere, except they have Russian accents. There are fish-eating resident types and transient marine-mammal eating types, as are found on the Canadian coast. Despite 6-10 permits being given every year, only 2 young Russian orca females were captured in 2003, and both died during or soon after capture. We are hoping to prevent any more of 'our whales' from being captured. The biggest danger orcas face in future is 'bad press' because they are big predators and people may think they eat too many fish and kill too many marine mammals. Of course, it is impossible for big

predators to 'overeat' their prey. It is only humans that are responsible for overfishing and hunting to the point of extinction."

Erich Hoyt, Senior Research Fellow, Whale and Co-Director, Far East Russia Orca Project. www.russianorca.com , www.erichoyt.com

Threatened orcas

"Orcas are in one sense the world's 'top' marine animal, but in another sense, they are one of the most threatened. As predators, they face no competition, literally preying on anything they wish, even great white sharks; yet they are extremely vulnerable to human activities and intrusions. Poisons from industries accumulate in the marine food chain. Inevitably, they are consumed by orcas, which become toxin-laden. Toxins affect orca health in many ways, e.g. by reducing immune system function and reproductive capability. Another huge threat comes from diminished food supplies. Salmon, the staple food of the 'resident' orcas of the Pacific Northwest, have been in rapid decline for decades, because of over fishing and habitat degradation. When global warming causes ocean temperatures to rise, salmon stocks will decline even further. Adding to these problems are increasing ocean noise, and disturbance from vessels. The 'endangered' status of Northwest Pacific orcas reflects all of these difficulties. They are not alone. Worldwide, orcas face threats on all sides. Without question, they need our help, now. The work of OrcaLab, which is land based and non-intrusive, focuses on the lives of 'northern resident' orcas and the problems they face. Ongoing for more than 3 decades, it contributes to understanding and conservation of these magnificent creatures."

Dr Paul Spong, whale expert, has carried out research on orcas in the wild for more than 30 years.

CMS species guide:

http://www.yod2007.org/en/World_of_dolphins/Species_guide/index.html