

Getting to know a whale by its tail

BY CHRISTOPHER POLLON

Minutes after the pod of killer whales slaughtered a sea lion, 15 humpbacks appeared on the eastern edge of Swiftsure Bank.

Witness Brian Gisborne, a local ex-fisherman, amateur sea historian and whale photographer on contract to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, was sailing his 12-metre gillnetter about 11 kilometres off Bamfield.

"The killer whales were deadly quiet leading up to the kill, but afterward they got loud, and this seems to have attracted the humpback whales," he said. "The approaching humpbacks were very hostile toward the killer whales ... they were trumpet breathing, and using diagonal tail slashes like karate kicks."

Mr. Gisborne had been following the humpback whales



A humpback whale shows its signature tail off the Vancouver Island coast. Humpbacks' tail fins are as unique as fingerprints.

CETACEAN RESEARCH PROGRAM, FISHERIES AND OCEANS CANADA

in hope of photographing their tail fins, which are as unique to individual humpbacks as fingerprints are to humans.

Such fingerprinting represents the only way researchers can confirm what they

have been witnessing off the southwest coast of Vancouver Island for at least a decade – the return of humpback whales to the waters where they were hunted to near-extinction early last century.

» SEE 'HUMPBACKS' PAGE 53

'All of the current estimates are guesswork'

“In my 25 years of field work in B.C., humpback [sightings] have gone from rare to routine,” said DFO marine biologist John Ford, who employs Mr. Gisborne as a part-time contractor. “Humpbacks today are making tremendous recovery strides, and they are repopulating areas of the B.C. coast over the last 10 years where I have never seen them before.”

As encouraging as this sounds, no one really knows how many whales comprise the North Pacific humpback population.

Estimates from the early 1990s pegged the population at about 6,000 whales, up from a low of 1,200 in 1967, the year commercial whaling ceased in B.C. The International Whaling Commission estimates there are currently at least 10,000 North Pacific humpbacks, but there is no wide consensus on that. The most recent assessment by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (2003) states that no estimates exist for the number of humpbacks that use B.C. waters, although they are probably in the hundreds.

“The increased sightings of humpbacks off places like Victoria, Telegraph Cove and Port McNeil, this suggests population growth, but it might also be population shifts as humpbacks move to new areas to access food,” Dr. Ford said. “All of the current estimates are guesswork, and these numbers will be revised with the completion of the SPLASH study.”

Started in 2004 and scheduled for completion in 2008, SPLASH (Structure of Populations, Level of Abundance and Status of Humpbacks) is an international humpback census of sorts, enlisting 300 researchers (including Dr. Ford) from 10 countries to collect whale “fingerprints” and skin biopsies from thousands of North Pacific humpbacks. Participants hope to better understand humpback migrations and how the whales cope with ongoing threats, including warming seas, exposure to human-made toxins, noise and boat strikes.

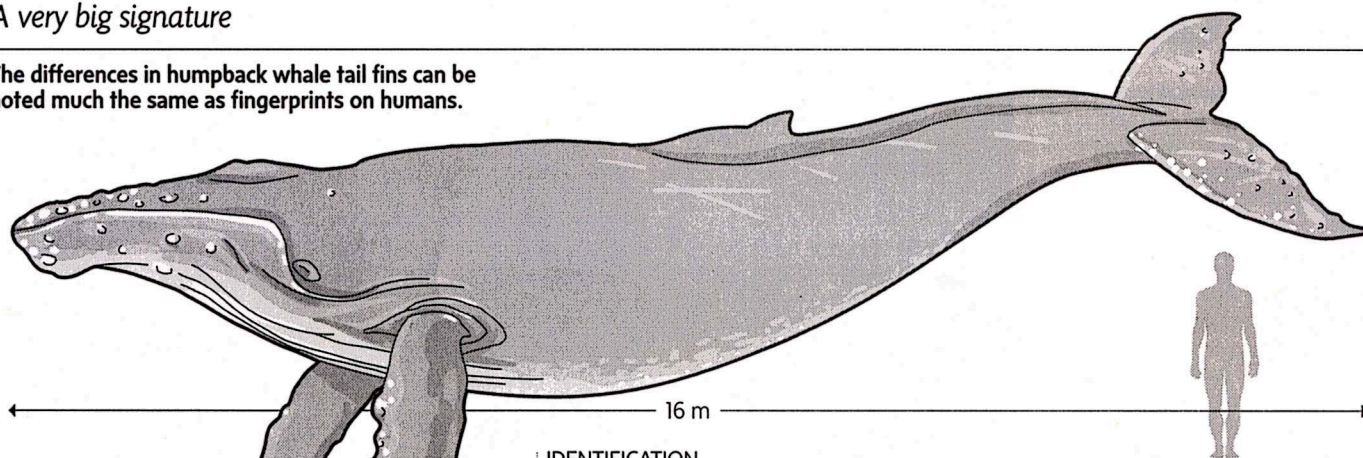
Perhaps most significantly, SPLASH will provide the most reliable population estimate ever produced for the North Pacific population.

ON THE HUNT

In search of snapshots of his own, Mr. Gisborne set sail on another humpback-whale-hunting trip in late August, fol-

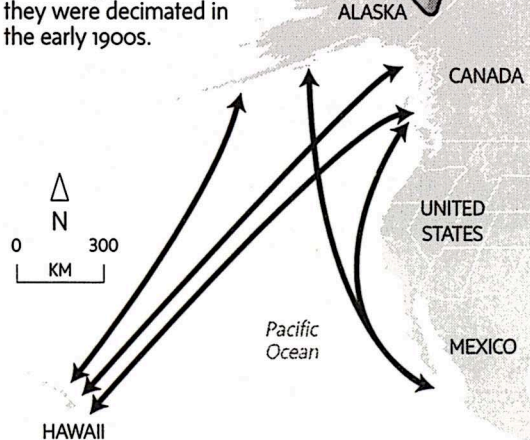
A very big signature

The differences in humpback whale tail fins can be noted much the same as fingerprints on humans.



MIGRATION

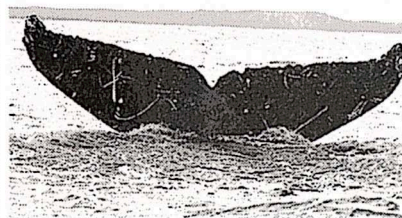
The behemoths appear to be reclaiming B.C. waters where they were decimated in the early 1900s.



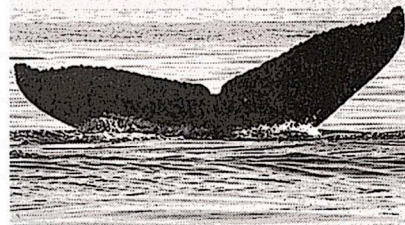
IDENTIFICATION

Researchers use photographs to identify and track the great whales, and to estimate numbers. Patterns of pigmentation, scarring and shape are unique to each whale.

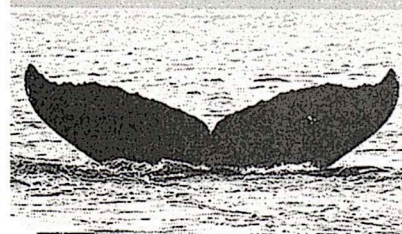
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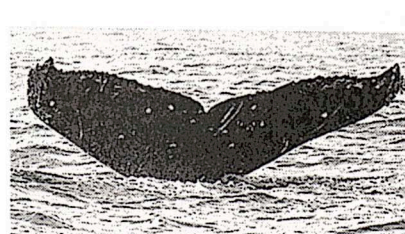
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Every few minutes the mother and calf surface in tandem, exhale and shallow dive.

lowing a course he has taken thousands of times as a commercial fisherman, water-taxi skipper and DFO contractor.

Travelling between Port Renfrew and Bamfield, he passed within 20 kilometres of the abandoned Sechart whaling station in Barkley Sound, which was the first such station in B.C. when it opened in 1905. By the time it closed in 1918, more than 1,900 local humpbacks were processed at Sechart alone, where the oil-rich blubber was rendered and baleen removed to make umbrellas and corsets.

Within sight of the lighthouse at Carmanah Point, Mr. Gisborne left the emerald-green coastline for open water.

His destination was Swiftsure Bank, a marine oasis where the deep water of Juan de Fuca Strait hits the shallows, resulting in a tremendous upwelling of cold water, nutrients and life. Life in this case includes tiny, shrimp-like krill, which are a favoured food of both salmon and humpbacks.

Like any good fisherman, Mr. Gisborne takes cues from other animals to pinpoint where humpbacks are feeding. He follows seagulls for 20 minutes, which lead to a krill “bloom” encircled by at least 300 seabirds, where the krill are so thick the water glows yellow in the muted overcast light.

The immense fountain of a humpback blowhole “exhale” appears off the starboard side. A mother and calf are swimming languidly just below the surface, their movements slow and methodical – they have just gorged themselves on krill and, like many satiated animals, enter a sluggish, semi-conscious state. The mother is

at least 13 metres long and weighed more than 20 tonnes – which is moderate, given that humpbacks can reach 16 metres and 40 tonnes. Her head is enormous and surprisingly long, more like an alligator than a fish.

A century before, such an encounter would have been considered ideal by commercial whalers: Harpooners quickly learned to avoid the powerful males in favour of females with calves, simply because a mother would not abandon her slow-swimming offspring under any circumstances.

Every few minutes the mother and calf surface in tandem, exhale and shallow dive, revealing the mother’s powerful studded back and stubby dorsal fin. Mr. Gisborne snaps a few photos, although there are no clear tail fluke shots because the maternal duo remain close to the surface.

Mr. Gisborne flips through a thick binder of humpback tail fluke pictures, trying to ID the

mother – each tail photo is different, although it is surprising how many of the tails are ragged and beaten up.

“Those are killer whale marks,” said Mr. Gisborne pointing to numerous photos displaying rake-like scratches and crescent-shaped bite marks. He explained that a killer whale will not touch an adult humpback out of fear for its life, but it will go after a calf, much like the whalers of the recent past. Put in that perspective, Mr. Gisborne’s tale of humpback aggression toward killer whales seems less mysterious.

A voice over the radio brings news of more than 90 killer whales assembling nearby to feed on migrating chinook salmon. As Mr. Gisborne turns the boat and accelerates toward the killer-whale hunting ground for a look, the humpback mother and her calf are fortunate enough to be swimming in the opposite direction.

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