

ORCAS - INTIMATE KILLERS



It seems that there's a sensitive side to the Patagonian orcas, made famous for their violent attacks upon sea lions on the beaches.

Words: Federico Quintana.

The orcas of Peninsula Valdés in Patagonia became international stars in 1990 after astonishing film footage was broadcast of them launching on to the beaches to catch sea lions. When, two years ago, I met Roberto Bubas, the forest ranger in the northern part of the Peninsula Valdés, I discovered there was a sequel to this.

Peninsula Valdés extends outwards in the southern Atlantic for about 100km. It is principally known for the southern right whales that arrive each October to give birth and is also a natural sanctuary for sea lions, elephant seals, dolphins and many birds. But in its northern point, Punta Norte, the annual visits of a pod of 11 orcas has made it famous among scientists as well as the media.



The Valdés orcas have been observed 'intentional beach stranding' since 1976. Suddenly, the water swells, and like a nuclear submarine surfacing, an eight-tonne orca zooms in at around 60km/h and grabs its prey. The tremendous momentum and force would beach the orca but the slippery, rolling gravel would allow it, albeit with tremendous effort, to return to sea with its trophy.

The Punta Norte has a natural sea channel, the Caleta Valdés, which the orcas use as a resting area where they can practise their stranding in a relaxed and playful mood. About a year after he started observing them here, Roberto had the impression that the orcas were aware of his presence. One day, as he was playing his harmonica close to the water, he saw one of the fins move from the rest of the pod and head towards him. Mesmerised, he watched as its black and white head emerged from the water, just inches from him. From then on, whenever the orcas were in the Caleta at the same time as Roberto, they would approach him in pairs, splashing their tails and making small breaches in a 'playful' manner as if to demand attention. Roberto was sure that they were 'demanding' that he enter the water. And so, apprehensively, he did.

When he walked into the shallows, the orcas started swimming back and forth at incredible speed and splashing water at him with their fins and tails. Two of the larger females, Ishta and Maga, slowly approached him and remained still, just inches away, allowing Roberto to caress their heads and backs. Roberto has, since then, been in the water 50 or so times. Each time he enters, it's as though the orcas are inviting him in, splashing violently in the shallows with their tails, almost like playful dogs.



Visitors to the Peninsula are affected, almost spiritually, by the orcas. Some tourists return year after year, spending huge sums just to see the orcas again and experience the magic that surrounds these animals.

Unknown words

1.	sanctuary	A sacred and inviolable asylum; a place of refuge and protection; shelter; refuge; protection.
2.	momentum	An impelling force or strength; "the car's momentum carried it off the road"; SYN. impulse
3.	beach	To land on a beach, as of watercraft.
4.	gravel	Rock fragments and pebbles; SYN. crushed rock.
5.	albeit	Even though; although; notwithstanding.
6.	effort	Use of physical or mental energy; hard work; "he got an A for effort"; SYN. elbow grease, exertion, travail, sweat.
7.	pod	A group of aquatic mammals; "a pod of dolphins."
8.	apprehensive	In fear or dread of possible evil or harm; "apprehensive for one's life"; "apprehensive of danger."
9.	fin	Organ of locomotion and balance in fishes and some other aquatic animals.
10	spiritually	In a spiritual manner; "the ninth century was the spiritually freest period."
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