

ENVIRONMENT

MOBY DOLL

*How a bungled hunt turned killer whales into star attractions —
and launched the modern conservation movement*

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IF YOU WANT TO harpoon a killer whale from the safety of the shore, there is no better place on the planet than East Point. For as long as anyone can remember, black and white behemoths have gathered every summer off Saturna, one of British Columbia's southernmost Gulf Islands, not far from the edge of the imaginary line in the Strait of Georgia that marks the Canada-US border.

On a mild, sunny day in May 2013, small clusters of scientists, researchers, and amateur naturalists are gathered here, too, on an outcropping of sandstone, to learn about the world's last killer whale. A Parks Canada guide points to the spot that once served as the base for a harpoon gun. It was here, on this quiet idyll of an island, that a Vancouver Public Aquarium crew harpooned Moby Doll nearly fifty years ago and accidentally turned her into a *cause célèbre*.

Because of this, killer whales would become orcas.
And orcas would become pets.



TO MARK the anniversary of Moby Doll's capture, the visitors on the rocky shore had come by float plane, ferry, and chartered boat for a three-day symposium, swelling the tiny island's population of 335 people to nearly 600.

The leaders of that fated expedition, Murray Newman and Pat McGeer, were the first to speak in the crowded community hall. McGeer, BC's former minister of science, called for fishing moratoriums and an end to all whaling, to allow the local whale

populations to recover. But mostly, the two octogenarians riffed off each other like a vaudeville duo, recalling the unexpected legacy of their bungled hunting trip half a century ago. The mood was surprisingly light.

A lot had changed since they'd caught their whale. Across the waters, protesters had for years condemned the Vancouver Aquarium for continuing to keep marine mammals in captivity. In this narrative, Newman, the facility's founding director, could be seen as the villain of the Moby Doll story. In recent years, he had become wary of talking publicly about the cetacean.

Was the pendulum swinging too far the other way? A year after the symposium, on July 31 of this year, the Vancouver Parks Board finally voted to ban the breeding of most captive whales, dolphins, and porpoises in the city's parks. (Species at risk are exempt.) Even eco-icon Jane Goodall waded into the fray, condemning the practice of captive breeding, and suggesting that phasing out such programs "is the natural progression of human-kind's evolving view of our non-human animal kin."

Newman prefers to talk about the symbolic importance of Moby Doll's capture, and told me so back when I met him and McGeer offstage. "When you go to Africa, you want to see the lions on the Serengeti, and when you come to British Columbia, you want to see the killer whale," he said. The eighty-nine-year-old spoke a little slower than he did when I first interviewed him twenty years ago, but still rattled off names, dates, and details as if reading from his daily agenda.



McGeer, a neuroscientist-turned-whale expert, likes to think about orcas in terms of their brainpower. They are, he says, “among the most sophisticated animals that ever lived. They are the most intelligent beasts in the ocean, certainly.” We know this, he said, because of Moby Doll.

“Why were they named killer whales?” he asked. “Because they were going to kill us and anything else. Now they are respected and loved. Where did that change take place? It took place here at East Point.”

Newman and I walked up to the lighthouse together. He gazed out at the water, his eyes failing from macular degeneration, and tried to picture the scene from fifty years ago, superimposed on this new, twenty-first-century landscape, which now feature an oil refinery and a coal container facility in nearby Washington.

IN 1964, Newman announced that his new aquarium was going to harpoon a killer whale. Then, as now, the Vancouver Aquarium was in expansion mode, and he intended to make a massive killer whale sculpture its star attraction. He wanted a corpse that could be studied—by Samuel Burich, the acclaimed sculptor commissioned to create the first ever anatomically accurate life-sized replica, and by McGeer’s team of scientists, who would dissect the cadaver to better understand this mysterious animal.

Never in a million years did Newman imagine he could land a live one. Two years earlier, Marineland of the Pacific, in Los Angeles County, attempted to do just that. It hadn’t ended well: The hunters, who were seasoned dolphin catchers, nearly drowned after their lassoed prey bolted, tangling up their propeller. When a second whale swam up, the would-be whalers slaughtered their captive with a high-powered rifle, convinced they were being attacked.

At the time, there was nothing controversial about killing the monsters, which were as beloved as the great white shark after *Jaws* arrived in movie theatres. Fishermen dubbed them “blackfish,” and regularly shot the dangerous pests to protect their salmon. A few years earlier, the BC government had authorized fishermen to set up a .50-calibre machine gun on Quadra Island to eliminate their competition. It was never used—but only because a stray bullet might have injured a human or sparked a forest fire.

To prepare for his expedition, Newman visited the whaling station in Coal Harbour on Vancouver Island, a plant that slaughtered, flensed, and rendered 10,362 whales between 1948 and 1967. At the time, we valued the mammals as a source of oil, pet food, and even a perfume ingredient. He drafted Ron Sparrow, a Musqueam fisherman who knew how to use a harpoon gun, and Burich. The men set up camp on East Point on May 22, mounted their vintage Norwegian harpoon gun, and proceeded to wait. And wait.

It was as if the whales that were always swimming off Saturna had read stories in the Vancouver newspapers about the brave hunters.

After a few more weeks of waiting, Sparrow abandoned his post to go fish for halibut. He had bills to pay. Burich became the designated harpooner, joined by Josef Bauer, a fisherman and aquarium volunteer.

On July 16, just as Burich and Bauer prepared to pack up their gear and head home, a pod surfaced not far from shore. The

sculptor launched the harpoon and speared his 4.5-metre-long target, hooking it in front of its dorsal fin, like the world’s biggest bait fish. The stunned creature began to sink. Two podmates raced toward it.

A decade earlier, the US military slaughtered 100 whales off the coast of Iceland, after the country asked for help in eliminating the pests. When the soldiers saw the whales congregating around their wounded, they assumed they were ripping each other to shreds in a blood-fuelled frenzy.

But instead of attacking their struggling podmate, the Saturna whales seemed to be holding it aloft, to keep it from drowning.



BURICH AND BAUER jumped into a borrowed eighteen-foot dinghy to finish the job. The whale stared straight at Burich, who put down his rifle. “It would have been an execution,” he later told reporters.

McGeer arrived by seaplane to inspect the catch. The lighthouse keeper warned him it was dangerous, that there was an awful struggle underway. The neuroscientist had never seen a whale before, and knew very little about this particular species or how fierce they supposedly were.

McGeer told Burich to keep his gun down. If the whale were going to attack, the hunters would already be dead. The team ran through the list of options, from killing the injured beast to cutting it loose. Where to put the supersize creature? Newman phoned David Wallace, the owner of North Vancouver’s Burrard Dry Dock Co., and arranged to detain the prisoner there until they figured out what to do with it. Then the boat began its twenty-hour journey to Vancouver, the whale forced to trail behind it like a dog on a 180-metre leash. Burich nicknamed it Hound Dog.

The media had a field day with the story, and CBC TV reported the aquarium had captured a “pugnacious, dangerous monster.” But the monster was remarkably small and sweet tempered. Even still, when aquarium staff hoisted it by crane to administer antibiotics, they used a three-metre pole—to maintain a safe distance.

A local radio station ran a naming contest for the captive. Thinking they’d caught a female, with its curved dorsal fin, Newman chose Moby Doll. To nurse her back to health, McGeer called in a raft of medical specialists: a cardiologist, hematologist, bacteriologist, and dermatologist.

Meanwhile, Wallace agreed to a one-day open house to introduce Moby to her public. An estimated 20,000 people came to see the killer—the same number that crowded into Vancouver’s Empire Stadium a month later to scream for the Beatles. It was as if the aquarium had captured King Kong. Locals sold make-shift Moby souvenirs, stores used Moby photos in their ads for “whale-size” sales, and Vancouver newspaper headlines referred to “our whale.” Reporters came from around the world to view the creature; scientists came from as far away as Woods Hole, Massachusetts, to listen to her strange sounds.

But Moby Doll was taking up valuable space at the dock, and the guest distracted Wallace’s workers. Moby needed a new home. Fast.

Newman called in the cavalry. Military volunteers built Moby a temporary home off Jericho Beach. News reports estimated the value of the project at \$1 million. After an epic struggle to move the whale—involving the navy—Moby was placed in a twenty-three-by-fourteen-metre pen. Burich, the man who’d fired the

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harpoon, spent his days on a floating dock, whistling to keep the creature company. She whistled back.

But Moby wouldn't eat. The aquarium team tried everything. Among the more exotic treats: blubber and whale tongue (courtesy of a whaling station), seal carcass, and octopus. The whale was losing weight, and growing listless. Almost two months into captivity, when she finally snacked on salmon, her feast made the front page.

Unbeknownst to her captors, the low salinity off Jericho Beach left Moby struggling to stay afloat. On October 9, eighty-five days after her capture, she died, exhausted and weakened by a fungal infection.

CHARLOTTE EPSTEIN, an international politics professor at the University of Sydney in Australia, divides our relationship with whales into two periods: before and after Moby Doll's capture. "Well into the second half of the twentieth century the world was largely a whaling world," she writes in *The Power of Words in International Relations: Birth of an Anti-Whaling Discourse*. "Whales comprised a strategic resource, a key raw material, a fuel, and a food. Whaling was just as important to us then as the oil industry is today."

And yet, until Moby Doll's imprisonment, we knew and cared very little about the animals themselves, including how to determine their gender. It wasn't until after the whale's death that the aquarium staff knew for certain that the doll was actually a dude.

Epstein thinks Newman's decision to dub the whale Moby Doll reframed the way we saw the species. "Suddenly Moby becomes a doll, a cuddly toy. It becomes something you give to kids," she says by phone. "Moby Dick was not something that was cute or that you would have wanted to bring to a kiddie's room—except as a very scary story about how dangerous nature can be."

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During his brief life in captivity, Moby Doll captured the imaginations of several key players in the future of his species. Ted Griffin, an American entrepreneur who opened the Seattle Marine Aquarium in 1962, was at the Jericho pen when Moby ate his first substantial meal. He convinced Newman to let him swim with the whale for a closer look. Marineland of the Pacific offered to buy Moby for \$20,000; when Undersea Gardens in Victoria said it would match that price, the California aquarium upped the ante to \$25,000. Newman declined, but the offers were enough to show there was a market for blackfish—for anyone brave enough to try their hand at capturing one.

A year later, a BC fisherman accidentally caught a pair of killer whales in his gill net. One escaped, but the fisherman sold the other to Griffin, who earned the dubious distinction of training the first whale to perform for the public. It was the beginning of a lucrative entertainment industry.

After Moby, orcas also became star attractions for marine biologists, who soon distinguished between two types, if not two species, of orcas. (This is still a matter of debate.) Chatty "residents" like Moby travel in close-knit family units and live off a very specific fish diet. More aggressive, quieter "transients" hunt in small packs and have a more diverse diet. They also have a reputation for playing with or, if you prefer, torturing their food. The transients are the killers that gave orcas their bad name, earning a reputation for attacking and eating almost anything, including other whales.

Michael Bigg, a zoologist who specialized in seals, brought seal meat to Moby while he was in captivity, and helped McGeer perform the autopsy. After Moby's death, Bigg shifted the focus of his research, and established a method of identifying orcas by their markings. He also set up an ongoing census that revealed a West Coast population of about 345—not the tens of thousands of killer whales fisherman claimed were pestering them. Bigg died of leukemia in 1990, but his work is at the cornerstone of what we now know about orcas. It is so well-regarded that there is a movement to rename transients Bigg's killer whales.

Another future orca expert was nine when he met Moby Doll. John Ford remembers thinking Moby was really small for a monster. A few years later, he was working at the aquarium as a floor boy. By that time, Vancouver had acquired Skana, another orca, and the teenager listened to her squeals and squeaks as he swept up popcorn. As an adult, Ford went on to study the recordings that had been made of Moby.

Now one of the world's pre-eminent experts on whale sounds, Ford recognized a familiar pattern when he was listening to the sounds of West Coast whale clans. In 1979, he was able to identify Moby as a member of J-Pod.

PAUL SPONG, a neuroscientist from New Zealand, was caring for Skana when he began referring to killer whales as *orcas*—after their Latin name, *Orcinus orca*.

If we were going to call them *killer whales*, he said, we ought to refer to ourselves as *killer apes*. Since 1970, Spong has been based on Hanson Island, an isolated community off the north end of Vancouver Island, where he runs the research facility OrcaLab with his partner, Helena Symonds.

Spong was one of the key players who turned Greenpeace green. Eco-warrior Paul Watson was another. Watson had his own unique relationship with the Vancouver Aquarium and Skana: as a teenager, he would sneak into the aquarium at night and swim with the whale. It was Watson who first told me the story of Moby Doll two decades ago, during another flare-up over whether to free the whales from the Vancouver Aquarium. Watson surprised me by making a distinction between the aquarium—which did real research on whales and treated them with respect—and the tourist traps that dressed them up like Santa Claus.

Whales also changed the future of Greenpeace, and the modern conservation movement. Founded in 1971 to fight nuclear testing, Greenpeace took on commercial whaling four years later with an ad hoc “Stop Ahab Committee.” As the save-the-whales movement picked up steam, eco-activists became the public face of the organization. Defending the environment superseded the fight for peace.

“Saving the whale became the metonymy, or the symbol, for saving the planet as a whole,” explains Epstein. “That’s the role this story plays in the broader picture of global environmental activism. In the United States first, and then globally, the whale became the perfect species, if you like, the perfect animal that can incarnate this concern.”

The success of its initial anti-whaling campaign established Greenpeace and NGOs like it as players in global politics. For the first time, says Epstein, unaffiliated outsiders were having an impact on international policy. Vancouver became the epicentre of the twentieth-century conservation movement.

The movement to save the whales—first from whalers, then from aquariums—caused such a sea change in opinion that the public now thinks all whales are intelligent and endangered. When research revealed that some species, such as humpbacks, were no longer endangered, anti-whaling arguments began to shift, says Epstein. Now, the focus became their intelligence, personality, and majesty—all the traits McGeer and Newman celebrated at the Saturna conference. We began to focus on their human-like qualities: they sing, play, and form relationships. Whales deserve to live because they are whales.

Most scientists I met at the symposium made a different case, describing whales as “the canary in the coal mine.” Their argument for saving them: The many toxins found in this carnivore reveal just how dangerous our oceans have become. If they can’t survive these waters, we need to find a way to improve their environment.

SHORTLY BEFORE the 2013 symposium began, Lance Barrett-Lennard pulled up to the community hall on Saturna in a fire-engine red Vancouver Aquarium van and flipped open the back doors. Inside was a box holding a large skull. Moby’s skull. I asked if I could touch it. Barrett-Lennard, who heads the aquarium’s cetacean research program, invited me to help carry it into the hall. It was to be put on display in a small museum in the fog alarm building, next to the island’s now unmanned lighthouse, finally returning to Saturna after fifty years of languishing on the mainland. The monster’s skull weighed almost nothing. In my hands, it felt fragile. Small.

Here were the remains of the whale who changed the way we thought about these marine mammals. While it is true that

Moby Doll’s capture led to captive whales, it is also true that we might not have bothered to protect the species at all if we hadn’t captured a few in the first place. I thought about what might have been if Newman hadn’t gone hunting for Moby Doll. We might never have had the chance to free Willy. Maybe Willy would have been polished off a decade ago with a side of wasabi, without anyone even noticing. Maybe Moby died so that other whales could live.

As we stood by the lighthouse, looking out at the water, Newman and I were reminded that the biggest threats to whales in the wild today aren’t the SeaWorlds and Marinelands of the world (or even aquariums keen on breeding cetaceans), but the loss of habitat and food. The resident pods aren’t spotted as often now that the salmon stocks have thinned out.



AFTER THE SYMPOSIUM wrapped up, a friend offered to show me his family cabin, and we drove the steep dirt road up Mount Warburton Pike. The view seemed to take in the entire ocean.

He focused his telescope: “There’s a whale.”

And I was thinking, This is too perfect...I’ve held Moby’s skull, now I’m going to see his family and—

“It’s a humpback,” said Charles Campbell.

Damn.


“There’s been one hanging around the island for a week or so.”

I looked through the lens and spotted half a dozen boats. It took a moment to realize that they were all moving in the same direction. “Whale watchers,” said Campbell. Some were private boats, others were whale-watching charters.

We watched the whale, we watched the boats full of tourists watching the whale, and then we left the telescope to stand at the edge of the cliff, 350 metres above the water. Erich Hoyt, who published the original *Whale Watcher’s Handbook* back in 1984, says there are no other wild animals we pursue and pester in their habitat to this extent: “With birds and most other wild-life, humans are content to be invisible, watching natural behaviour from a blind. But not when it comes to whales. With whales, we’ve come to expect a ‘hug’ every time we go to sea. When there were only a few thousand whale watchers worldwide, it was okay. Today, with 13 million whale watchers, we have a big problem if we are all looking for close encounters.”

Hoyt is trying to convince people to switch to land-based viewing along parts of the West Coast feeding routes dubbed the Whale Trail. In their closing remarks at the symposium, Newman and McGeer had urged the people of Saturna to do the same—to promote their island as the place where the world’s attitudes toward whales shifted, and to embrace the concept of terrestrial whale watching. The very people who had changed the way we see whales now wanted to change the way we watch them.

We could observe Moby’s relatives from shore, they said, instead of trapping them in tanks, or chasing them like the paparazzi. Almost exactly a year after the Saturna symposium, the world’s oldest known orca, Granny (a nonagenarian and possibly Moby’s own grandmother) swam by the island, as if to prove the point. ➔

 **ONLINE** Deconstructing memories of a scandal-ridden theme park, at thewalrus.ca/the-marineland-dreamland.

