

WORLD

Killer whale group is disappearing

SEATTLE

Starvation and threats to habitat plague orcas in the Pacific Northwest

BY JIM ROBBINS

For the last three years, not one calf has been born to the dwindling pods of black-and-white killer whales spouting geysers of mist in the waters near Seattle.

Normally four or five calves would be born each year in this unusual urban population of whales — pods named J, K and L. But most recently, the number of orcas has dwindled to just 75, a 30-year low in what seems to be an inexorable, perplexing decline.

Listed as endangered since 2005, the orcas are essentially starving, as their primary prey, the Chinook salmon, also called the king salmon, dies off. Just last month, another one of the Southern Resident killer whales — one nicknamed “Crewser” that hadn’t been seen since last November — was presumed dead by the Center for Whale Research.

In March, Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington State issued an executive order directing state agencies to do more to protect the whales, and in May he convened the Southern Resident Orca Task Force, a group of state, tribal, provincial and federal officials, to devise ways to stem the loss of the beloved regional creature. “I believe we have orcas in our soul in this state,” he said. At another point, he wrote of the whales and Chinook salmon that “the impacts of letting these two species disappear would be felt for generations.”

The orcas are also facing a new threat. The recent agreement between the Canadian government and Kinder Morgan to expand the Trans Mountain Pipeline would multiply oil tanker traffic through the orcas’ habitat by seven times, according to some estimates, and expose them to excessive noise and potential spills. Construction is set to begin in August, despite opposition from Governor Inslee and many environmentalists.

In the late 1990s, there were nearly 100 of these whales in the population. Following the salmon, they migrate in the Salish Sea to the northern coast of British Columbia and often surface in the south at Puget Sound within sight of downtown Seattle, especially during the spring and summer months. The males, which can weigh up to 22,000 pounds, typically live about 30 years, and females, up to 16,000 pounds, survive longer — up to 50 or 60 years, although one J-pod member, Granny, lived to be 105 years old.

Not only are there fewer calves in recent years, but signs of inbreeding also point to a weakening population. In the 1970s and 80s, theme parks like Sea World captured nearly four dozen orcas from the region, possibly shrinking the pods’ gene pool. In the last three decades, just two males fathered half the calves, and only a third of the females are breeding, just once every decade instead of every five years. Researchers worry that reproducing females are aging out of the population and won’t be replaced.

Some conservationists are concerned that the orcas’ decline is another sign of a marine ecosystem in collapse. Beginning in 2013, something known as The Blob — a gigantic mass of nutrient-poor, extremely warm water — warmed the



An orca in Elliott Bay off Seattle. Killer whales in the Pacific Northwest have been listed as endangered since 2005, and their population has now dwindled to a 30-year low.

JOEL ROGERS, VIA GETTY IMAGES



A terminal of Kinder Morgan’s Trans Mountain Pipeline in Burnaby, British Columbia. The pipeline’s expansion would increase oil tanker traffic in the orcas’ habitat.

JONATHAN HAYWARD/THE CANADIAN PRESS, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

Pacific from Mexico to Alaska, as much as six degrees above normal. Several years ago, starfish succumbed to a wasting disease and vanished from tide pools.

Much is still unknown about the plight of these orcas, but biologists and conservation managers have zeroed in on several main factors — and they are all connected.

The biggest contributing factor may be the disappearance of big king salmon — fish more than 40 inches long. “They are Chinook salmon specialists,” said Brad Hanson, team leader for research at the Northwest Fisheries Science Cen-

ter here, part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. “If they could, they would eat Chinook salmon 24/7.” Orcas gobble 30 a day. Hunting enough smaller prey requires a lot more energy.

The underwater world in the region is also getting noisier, especially an area between the San Juan Islands and Vancouver Island called Haro Strait. It is one of the orcas’ favorite foraging grounds in the summer.

“It’s also essentially a big rock ditch where sound bounces off. When you add in commercial vessel traffic going to Vancouver, recreational boaters and



STEVE MASTRANO/U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, VIA AP

A major threat to the orcas is the disappearance of their primary prey, Chinook salmon, which are also endangered.

whale watching operations, it’s a pretty noisy place,” Mr. Hanson said.

Researchers are studying noise there now. They believe the cacophony of ship traffic interferes with echolocation and makes it harder for the whales to locate their prey and to communicate prey location among themselves. It can also cause hearing loss. In recent years, officials have expanded the distance that vessels, including whale watching boats and kayaks, must keep from the whales. And there is a voluntary no-go zone near the San Juan Islands.

“Just the presence of boats can cause the whales to spend less time feeding,” said Lynne Barre, of NOAA Fisheries, recovery coordinator for the orcas. “And it’s harder to communicate. They have to call longer and louder when boats are nearby.”

Another factor is the pollution in Puget Sound. Whales that live off the coast of Seattle, Tacoma and other cities are effectively urban whales buffeted by municipal and industrial waste, and the occasional spillage from wastewater treatment plants into the water. Killer whales carry some of the highest levels of pollution of any marine animal.

Of most concern are the lingering effects of chemicals and pesticides, including the now banned DDT, as well as PCBs and PBDE, widely used in flame retardants and found throughout the world. The pollutants accumulate in salmon as they feed, and when the whales eat salmon they also ingest PCBs at even higher levels.

“It’s very lipophilic, which means it stays in the fat, and the females transfer a huge proportion of the contaminant burden to their offspring,” Dr. Hanson said. “About 85 percent gets transferred to calves through lactation.”

And while much of the pollution is from the region’s industrial past, Boeing disclosed this spring that over the past five years it had discharged highly toxic PCBs into the Duwamish River, which flows into Puget Sound at Seattle, thousands of times over the legal limit.

These toxins suppress the whales’ immune systems, making them more susceptible to disease. They can also impede reproduction. That may be why tests show a high number of females who have become pregnant have failed to calve.

However, the decline of the whales can’t be pegged, experts say, to contaminants alone. A separate population of transient whales near Seattle eat mam-

mals that eat fish, and so consume contaminants at even higher levels — many times as high as the resident pods. Yet they are thriving, which has left scientists scratching their heads. Global populations are robust as well.

One possible scenario is that the dearth of salmon coupled with the interference of engine noise, which can affect their immune system, too, deprives the orcas of a sufficient diet. Their bodies then draw on fat reserves, which are laced with chemicals that suppress their immune system and reduce fecundity.

But experts aren’t sure what is raising their mortality rate. Often, when whales die, their carcasses sink or wash up onto remote beaches and are hard to find.

In recent years, researchers have been focusing on anthroponoses, diseases that humans may be passing to wildlife. Scientists have sailed out among the pods with a petri dish at the end of a 25-foot long pole to pass through the mist that whales exhale and see what they carry in their lungs. They found a range of pathogens that could be from humans, including antibiotic-resistant bacteria and staphylococcus, which can cause pneumonia.

“It doesn’t mean they are sick, we don’t have evidence for that,” said Linda D. Rhodes, a research biologist expert in marine microbes and toxins and part of the study. “It means they are being exposed. Whether or not the whales get sick is a product of how much of it is present in the environment and how well is the whale able to defend itself.”

There is deep concern that a fatal human or animal disease has, or will, cross the species barrier and find its way into these immuno-compromised killer whales.

“I’ve had dreams about it at night,” said Joseph K. Gaydos, a veterinarian with the SeaDoc Society in Eastsound, Wash., in the San Juan Islands, who studies the southern residents. “Disease smolders in the environment but can break out. If there were a highly virulent virus to come through here, it would take out a large part of the population and totally stop recovery efforts.”

Disease threats are myriad. A young killer whale died from a fungal infection last year. Toxoplasmosis is a disease spread by parasites in the feces of cats. It is one of the top threats to the Hawaiian monk seal, killing eight of the remaining 1,400 since 2001. It’s not known, though, to affect whales.

Canine distemper from dogs is also a concern. It’s a morbillivirus, which is an RNA rather than a DNA virus. Some 1,500 dolphins were killed by a single outbreak of morbilliviruses on the East Coast several years ago.

“RNA viruses can mutate rapidly and cross species lines,” Dr. Gaydos said.

Steps are being planned to help the whales. More Chinook salmon are being reared in hatcheries as whale food, but that is far from a certain fix.

In the end, trying to maintain a population of whales in the shadow of Seattle, one of the fastest growing cities in the country, may not be possible.

“It’s an ecosystem-wide problem,” Dr. Hanson said. “Things are out of whack and we have to get them back to where we can sustain killer whales. And the clock is ticking.”

Losing the charismatic, intelligent animals with the distinctive black-and-white “paint job” and permanent smile would be a blow to the area.

“There would be a great sense of loss,” Dr. Rhodes said. “They are such a part of our identity here. It would be a real sense of failure.”

A refugee turned barman spreads his good fortune

WASHINGTON

BY ELIZABETH WILLIAMSON

Sambonn Lek, bartender at the St. Regis hotel near the White House, has shaken and stirred for movers and shakers since the Carter administration. At 66, he leads a disappearing fraternity: barkeeps who know the regulars’ names and favorite cocktails, and when the regulars drink so much of the latter that they forget the former, find them a ride home.

When it’s quiet, he breaks out his repertoire of magic tricks, which in the days before the fire marshal stepped in included “breathing fire” by blowing a mouthful of spirits past a flame.

Mr. Lek’s greatest act, though, is performed daily in his native Cambodia, with the help of his affluent patrons. He is a Vietnam-era refugee turned philanthropist, collecting spare change and big checks from customers to fund Sam Relief, which builds schools, digs wells, and provides food, clothing and medical and school supplies in his native Cambodia. Since 2000, his nonprofit has built 27 schools, dug nearly 400 wells, delivered 290 tons of rice and awarded 120 scholarships to Cambodian schoolchildren.

Mr. Lek, who said he escaped Cambodia’s genocide and poverty because America opened its doors to him, believes that human generosity transcends politics. Over two decades, his patrons of both parties have proved him right.

“Sam is one of these rare people who found his calling in life, and it shows,” said Kevin Moore, owner of Moore Communications & Associates, in Danbury, Conn., who met Mr. Lek two decades ago

and has donated to Sam Relief most years since.

Mr. Lek has long been a local personality, his various career moves tracked by the restaurant industry and the local news media. And while a showman behind the bar, Mr. Lek smiles and grows quiet when asked about the emotions underpinning his effort. “That I came here was so lucky,” he said.

He arrived in the United States as an English-language student in 1974, barely a year after the American bombing of Cambodia.

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A year later, Cambodia fell to the communist Khmer Rouge. Its leader, Pol Pot, set on creating an agrarian utopia, wiped out the nation’s intellectuals and middle class and killed around two million people.

Mr. Lek’s father, a diplomat, and his mother, who were both living abroad, received asylum in France the following year. The United States offered refugee status to Cambodians studying in America during the overthrow, and Mr. Lek was among the lucky ones. He studied at the University of the District of Columbia, then Montgomery College until, in need of money, he left his studies before earning a degree.

He recalls the exact date, April 7, 1976, that he landed a bartending job in the Town & Country Lounge, in the landmark Mayflower Hotel a few blocks from the White House. Soon afterward, he married Nara Sok, a fellow refugee he

had met at a friend’s wedding. The couple has two children: Bonnary, 38, whose name means “lucky woman,” and Benjamin, 36. Mr. Lek became an American citizen in 1980.

A clubby, wood-paneled establishment that opened in 1948, the Town & Country had a storied past and a long list of influential imbibers, including former Prime Minister Bertie Ahern of Ireland and Eliot Spitzer, a former New York governor who drank there before meeting prostitutes in the Mayflower’s Room 871.

What Mr. Lek noticed most, though, was “the food people threw away,” he said. “I thought, ‘Oh God, people could eat this.’”

Mr. Lek’s mixology and magic tricks drew regulars who became friends. In 1998, Mr. Lek’s mother died, leaving him \$2,500.

In keeping with his Buddhist faith, he used the money to buy “rice for the poor people who don’t have food, and clothing for children to attend school.” He told a few patrons, who contributed, too, and Sam Relief was born.

In its early days, “Sam would take the money there on his summer vacation, go into the villages and buy rice himself to make sure it got delivered,” said James Meyers, a bassist in a jazz band called The Loungers, who has known Mr. Lek since the 1970s. Mayflower patrons sometimes tagged along, helping deliver.

Mr. Lek kept binders behind the bar with lists of donors and photographs of the works they had funded. William Batdorf, a patron and accountant now deceased, drew up the necessary paperwork, Mr. Lek said.

Sam Relief’s website says it costs \$55,000 to build a five-room school and



AL DRAGO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Sambonn Lek at the St. Regis hotel. Mr. Lek sought refuge in the United States from a devastated Cambodia, then created a nonprofit organization to aid his homeland.

\$250 to dig a well. A donation of \$2,500 buys school supplies for 500 students for a year, \$350 buys a ton of rice, and \$25 pays a teacher’s salary for a month. Mr. Lek is apolitical, and his donors come from across the political spectrum.

Philip Hoffman, a former Republican Michigan state senator who owned a lobbying firm, met Mr. Lek on a trip to Washington around 2001. “We developed a friendship right after Sam set up the relief fund, and I’d donate to it,” Mr. Hoffman said in an interview. “For wedding gifts, we would give a couple a ton of rice,” donated to Cambodian families in their names, he said.

In 2006, Mr. Lek asked the Hoffmans to fund a school. “We prayed on it and thought, ‘If we didn’t do it, who would?’”

Mr. Hoffman recalled. The school was named Lumen Christi, after Mr. Hoffman’s high school in Jackson, Mich. Sam Relief built six schools that year.

“Sam’s exuberance was what really convinced me to get involved. He didn’t have any government foundation backing him up. There was nothing off the top for Sam. It was 100 percent for his people,” Mr. Hoffman said. The Hoffmans later funded another school. “My only regret is that I didn’t do 20 schools,” Mr. Hoffman said.

Andi Drimmer, a computer programmer from Gaithersburg, Md., has never met Sam but read about him in The Washington Post in 2013, shortly after she inherited money from her mother, just as he did.

She has paid for 16 wells so far.

In 2011, the Town & Country closed, giving way to trendier pubs. Mr. Lek worked in the Mayflower’s new bar, but it wasn’t the same, and in late 2013 he and Nara decided to return to Cambodia, continue their charity work and relax.

But their children missed them, and “some of my guests were emailing, ‘Come back,’” Mr. Lek said. He and Nara realized “America is our home,” he said, adding, “My heart and spirit were here.”

Through friends, he learned that Marriott, which owns the Mayflower, was looking for a bartender for its St. Regis hotel bar. Mr. Lek got the job a week later. “Good karma came back to me,” he said.

Mr. Lek returned last winter after four years away, to a Trump-era Washington. His friends hadn’t forgotten him.

The St. Regis held a party in the bar to welcome him back. Among those present was Mr. Meyers, the bassist. Mr. Lek attended his wedding and knows his family. In 1981, Mr. Meyers’ brother, John, was walking down a street in Miami when a gunshot erupted nearby. He was killed by a stray bullet.

Neither of the Meyers brothers had ever been to Cambodia, but today a village well there bears John Meyers’ name. “Sam showed me a picture,” Mr. Meyers said.

Washington is known more for power politics than humanitarian works. What inspired these people to fork over thousands of dollars to a bartender with a story? Mr. Moore had an answer.

“Despite what might be interpreted as a meanness in today’s world, there’s an impulse to help. We all are our brother’s keepers,” he said. “People like Sam remind us of that.”