



## **HEALTH ASSESSMENT, A73, dba, SPRINGER**

Dr. Pete Schroeder, Dr. Dave Bain and Capt. Bob Wood aboard GRR vessel Shelmar

### **Background:**

Two year old, *Orcinus orca*, A73, was sighted swimming alone, 14 Jan 2002, in Puget Sound between the ferry terminals of Vashon Island and Southworth. She was reported to have a strong ketone like odor to her breath, bad skin, passing parasites and demonstrating needs for co-hort tactile interaction and companionship. She also appeared underweight and during her five months in a limited area of Puget Sound, developed a strong affinity for the ferry and small boats. She had most likely been weaned prior to separation from her pod.

Analysis of blood samples collected from A73 over the starboard side of a NOAA skiff on 8 and 10 May 2002, proved she was free of inborn errors of metabolism and relatively normal in other blood parameters. She was bright, alert and responsive toward people in the skiff and the ketone smell was less than previously noted.

A73 was collected from Puget Sound 13 June 2002, placed in a rehabilitation pen in Clam Bay near Port Orchard State Park. Atlantic salmon was offered but she only ate 29 lbs. total over the first four days. On day five, a stomach tube was passed treating her with an anthelmintic and 6 liters of water treating dehydration. She ate 55 lbs of salmon two hours later and averaged 60 lbs daily salmon consumption until her transport to Dong Chong Bay on Hanson Island in Johnstone Strait, BC, 13 July 2002. She was placed in a temporary pen in the bay and ate many native Chinook and Coho during that night. She was released 18 hours later, 14 July, when A pod members swam by and much mutual vocalizing was occurring. At that time, she was bright, alert and responsive, with an excellent appetite, no parasites, normal breath, improving skin, normal blood values and negative titers to *Eryisipelothrix*, Morbillivirus, Brucellosis and Leptospirosis. She had gained 150 pounds during rehabilitation, but was still small for her age.

The morning of 16 July 2002, A73 was observed near Donegal Head having traveled with A pod members to Robson Bight and back, at least 30 nm, in Johnstone Strait, only to be isolated once again. She was soliciting attention from two small fishing boats, then swam past the Shelmar to approach a small sailboat, taking to the people aboard a short piece of wood balanced just in front of her left pectoral flipper, which she was waving in the air. She was obviously tired, had regressed behavior-wise and was swimming slowly, diving at 10-second intervals. This was her make or break point. The four boats all left the area obligating her to survive on her own. A73 was reported pushing a small fishing boat the morning of 17 July 2002, but was also seen among humpback whales and other

orcas later that day. A major effort was mounted through Straitwatch and First Nation Kwakwaka'wakw to inform the public and first nation boaters that they had to avoid "Springer". Her behavior wouldn't change, so boaters had to change theirs and back away from her without exception. That was effective and she left Johnstone Strait, with her adopted pod, during the month of October, 2002.

#### Update:

I observed by A73 during July of 2003 and October of 2004. She appeared to have experienced a successful translocation from Puget Sound to Johnstone Strait. She was often seen during the '03 and '04 whale watching seasons by many experienced observers including Jim Borrowman and Wayne Garton of Stubbs Island Charters, Telegraph Cove and Bill Mackay of Mackay Whale Watching, Port McNeill as well as DFO scientists. She continued to behave normally and avoided approaching any vessels.

#### Health Assessment:

On our way to Johnstone Strait 17 August 2005, Dr John Ford advised us that he had sighted A73 in May, near Prince Rupert, BC, and that she was currently reported near Nodales Channel, 29 nm North-west of Campbell River. We entered the Nodales Channel and sighted A73 with pod members, A11, A56, A28, A42, A66, A79 and A13 (male).

A73 appeared bright and alert and totally involved with her co-horts. She has obviously continued to grow, but is less than the size expected of a five and one half year old female orca. Her skin has continued to improve, but is still somewhat grayish and mottled behind her dorsal fin from top midline, extending ventrally approximately 18 inches; extending caudally and tapering dorsally approximately 35 inches. From that point to her fluke tips her skin looked as normal as all other observed orcas. On review of digital telephotos downloaded to a computer, six short rake mark scars were seen on the leading edge of the left side of her dorsal fin, midway between its top and bottom and on the dorsal surface of her peduncle.

A73's dive intervals and speed was identical to the rest of the pod's. At one point she and A79, approximately one and one half years old, approached Shelmar's port side very rapidly and quickly returned to the rest of the pod. She didn't repeat that behavior again that day or during two subsequent sightings. A13 was swimming separately during this time, as was A28. All were swimming between three and five knots. It was reported that the pod left that area 19 August.

Our next sighting A73 sighting was 20 August, near Telegraph Cove. The pod had completed a 65 to 75 nm journey in 24 hours, and A73 appeared to be in excellent condition. She presented as a normal member of her pod. She was observed alone in the company of several white sided dolphins, common in the area and known for harassing both orcas and humpbacks. There was interaction, mostly the dolphins chasing A73, lasting two to four minutes at which time she would return to the side of A56. This was observed three times. Her behavior and swimming patterns were natural.

A73 was observed the third time, with the seven members of her pod, 21 August, near Blinkhorn Point, in Johnstone Strait opposite Hanson Island, a short distance east of Telegraph Cove. Again, she ignored all vessels and appeared normal in all aspects, other than short for her age, which may be corrected by a growth spurt. Her size is not medically significant, and she is no longer the smallest member of her pod, A79 is.

According to Dr Paul Spong, 21 August 2005, "Springer is a normal little orca". Whale Watch vessel captains Jim Borrowmen and Bill Mackay have not seen her interact with boats or pieces of wood (many of which are floating around the Strait in her range).

These findings are made possible only through the use of digital still images and videotapes, reviewed at the end of each sighting, on a computer monitor, and Dr. Dave Bain's identification skills. Without knowing A73's history and identifying saddle, she wouldn't be differentiated from any of the more than 30 different orcas we observed during the period of 17 to 23 August 2005.

The surface water temperature ranged from 50.3 to 52.8 degrees F and 49.3 to 51.1 degrees F at 50 feet below the surface. The weather ranged from bright sunshine to dense fog.

#### Summary:

The rehabilitation and relocation of A73 is unprecedented and an unequivocal success. She is a normal orca in her natural environment. It is of great interest to continue monitoring this unique animal, adding to knowledge of the species, orca pod dynamics and giving credibility to similar efforts should they become necessary in the future. When will she deliver her first calf?

Pete Schroeder, DVM

\*Acknowledgement: The authors appreciate the support by NOAA Fisheries, Seattle,  
Office of Protected Resources Contract# AB133F-03-SE1436