

# KILLER WHALES PURSUE SEA LIONS IN BERING SEA DRAMA

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On Jan. 23, 1971, during a patrol aboard the Coast Guard Cutter 'Storis' in the Bering Sea, I observed a pod of 7 killer whales (*Grampus vectipinna*) pursue a band of 20 to 25 Steller sea lions (*Eumetopias jubata*) around a Soviet SRTM trawler for over an hour.

At 3:15 p.m., on January 23, the *Storis* came up alongside the Soviet SRTM trawler 'Iskra', which had just begun to haul its gear from a depth of 440 fathoms. Its position was 54-18 N, 167-51 W., approximately 35 miles NW of Point Kadin on Unalaska Island, and 24 miles E of N from Bogoslof Island, a very large sea lion rookery.

At the time, there were 9 SRTMs operating in this immediate area. Each had an accompanying band of sea lions, waiting to garner what fish they could when the gear was pulled. Each group of sea lions averaged between 20 and 30 animals.

## Drama Unfolds

As the *Storis* came alongside the *Iskra*, a group of killer whales was noticed about 600 yards from the ship. There were 7 whales: 4 adults, two subadults, and one apparently quite young juvenile; they were making a direct approach on the *Iskra*. As they got within a hundred yards or so, the sea lions showed obvious signs of panic, clustering together in a very tight group and staying alongside the trawler, literally brushing the hull. As the whales made a close approach, the sea lions would mass and dive under the SRTM, or swim around the bow or stern of the ship seeking safety on the other side. The whales would follow either by sounding or by going around the ends of the ship, at which time the sea lions would immediately retreat to the dubious safety of the opposite side.

## A Lion's Probable Death

As long as the sea lions stayed tightly massed, the whales did not attack, but did make continuous close approaches on the sea

lions. After about 20 minutes of this, the sea lions were momentarily caught at a disadvantage a few feet from the stern of the SRTM, and two of the whales leaped clear of the water in a dash on the sea lions. A small group of sea lions, 5 or 6, apparently panicked and split off from the main group; they got as much as 200 yards away from the ship. At this time I believe one sea lion was taken, although I could not be sure. The proximity of a whale to a single sea lion, and the latter's sudden disappearance, make it likely that this animal was actually attacked and probably killed. I was unable to see any blood on the water, however.

## Another Kind of Surveillance

It was obvious at the end of an hour of this that the sea lions were getting quite tired. They had been moving very rapidly all this time. The whales continued to maintain a very close surveillance, approaching to within a few feet of the SRTM and the cutter. At one time, the two largest whales in the pod stationed themselves side by side facing directly toward the bow of the SRTM. Most of their back--from well forward of the blowhole to well aft of the dorsal fin--was awash. They maintained this position with a cold and beady eye on the sea lions, which were clustered tightly under the SRTM's bow.

## Denouement A Mystery

The SRTM required 40 minutes to get its doors aboard from the time it started hauling, 15 minutes to bring the cod end aboard, and another 10 minutes to reset and stream the net as it got underway. We left the area at this time and the whales were still in the immediate vicinity of the SRTM; the sea lions were doing their best to stay either on or alongside of the net which was streaming on the surface, or as close to the ship's hull as they could possibly get.

I'm sure the sea lions would happily have climbed aboard the ship if the sides had just been a little lower.

KILLER WHALES PURSUE SEA LIONS  
IN BEHIND SEA LIONS



Fig. 1 - HOT PURSUIT: 4 killer whales round ship's bow in close pursuit of sea lions.

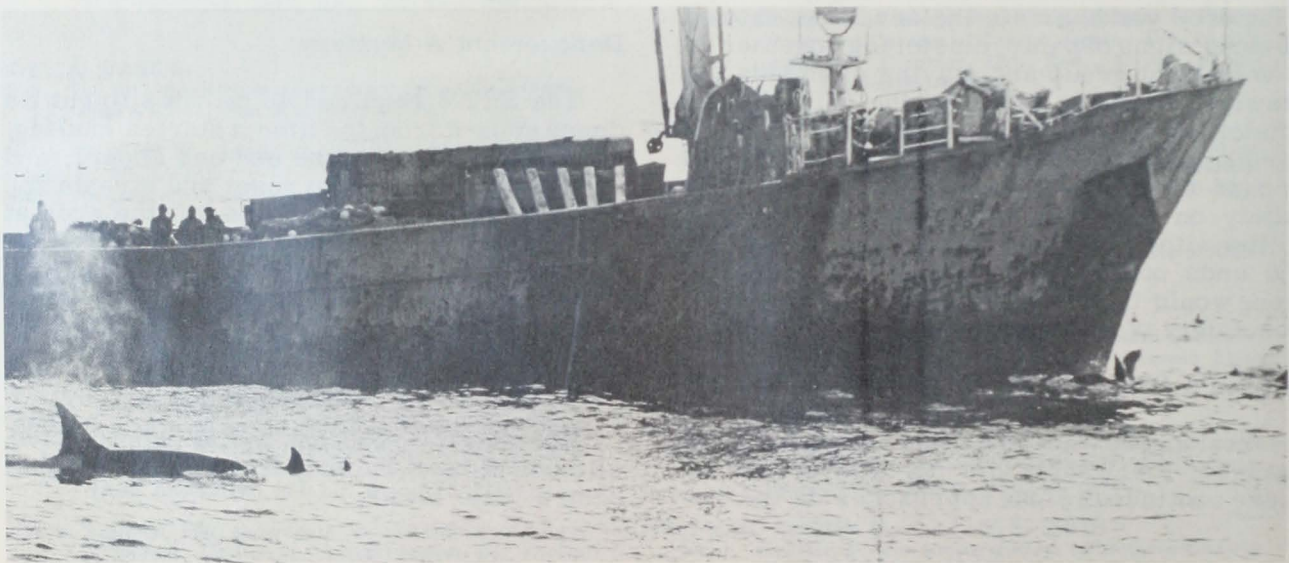


Fig. 2 - Pod of sea lions sheltering under bow of Soviet SRTM watch approach of 3 killer whales. (Photos: Jim Branson)