

Why Are Humpback Whales Saving Animals from Orcas?

(August 2016)

Humpback whales are wise animals. Now, they are getting a reputation for being kind, too. Tales of their kindness have come from marine experts who are recognizing something odd in the conduct of humpback whales. A lot of humpback whales have been spotted saving, or at least attempting to save, animals that are being hunted by orcas. Orcas, also called killer whales, live in all oceans and dine on fish and dolphins. Orcas are apex predators, which means there is no animal that hunts them. That is just one reason these humpback whale rescues are so shocking. There are a lot of experts who have been witness to the rescues and they want to find out why they are happening.

Robert Pitman, a marine ecologist, spotted a thrilling example of this conduct in 2009. At the time,

Pitman was watching a pod of orcas as it hunted a Weddell seal that was stuck on a chunk of drifting ice off the continent of Antarctica. The orcas hit the seal off the ice, and just as they were about to attack it, a massive humpback whale rose up out of the waves, and put the seal on its belly.

Some people think this was pure luck for the seal, but experts do not think so. Pitman spotted the humpback whale using its fins to help the seal as it slid off his belly. The orcas got fed up and swam off in a huff. Only then did the humpback let the seal go, and the shaken animal made its way to a safe slab of ice.

There was another event where two humpback whales spotted a baby gray whale being hunted by a pod of orcas after it had become separated from its mom. They wanted to save the baby and gave it their best shot. Sadly, the baby did not make it, but the humpback whales still would not let the orcas dine on

their kill. They protected the baby's body until the orcas swam off. The most interesting part of this conduct is that it happens often and in different parts of the world. Humpback whales have been spotted blocking orca hunts all the way from Antarctica to the North Pacific. It is almost as if humpback whales are telling orcas, "We are watching you!"

Pitman set out to collect more data about humpback whales interacting with orcas. He ended up with 115 events that took place between 1951 and 2012. In 89 percent of these, the humpback whales interrupted the beginning or the middle of the hunt. Some of the lucky kinds of sea life that have been protected include sea lions, sunfish, harbor seals, and baby gray whales.

Now, Pitman and his pals want to find out why the humpback whales are saving the lives of other animals. The humpbacks are putting themselves at risk, so such acts seem selfless, but there could be a

different motive. Humpback whale calves are helpless against a pod of orcas and they are often hunted by them. The adult humpbacks preventing the hunting of other sea life could be expecting that the orcas will think before attacking humpback calves. Still, some others think the humpbacks' behavior has more to do with getting even. They are mad after having so many of their own calves fall victim to orcas.

What is your take on these protective humpback whales? Do they have complex minds, or are they trying to make the orcas who dine on their calves think again? It will likely be a while before we know for sure!

Teacher Resources

Text Easability:

Text Easability Scores

If you would like to measure the text easability scores of this passage, please follow the directions below.

1. Visit the Coh-Metrix Text Easability Assessor website at <http://tea.cohmetrix.com/>. If you do not already have a login and password, create one. It is free and easy to sign up for access to the website.
2. Once you have created an account and sign in, you will be taken to a page with an empty, white text box. Copy and paste the text from this passage into the empty, white text box. Make sure you are only copying and pasting the body of the passage. Do not include the title, date, or any of the resources present in the passage.
3. When you have pasted the passage into the text box, click on the red button beneath the text box that says "Analyze." There will be a short delay and after a few seconds, you will see a bar graph appear to the right of the screen.
4. The bar graph will give you the percentages for several text characteristics including: narrativity, syntactic simplicity, word concreteness, referential cohesion, and deep cohesion.
5. Below the bar graph, the Flesch Kincaid Grade Level is also included for your benefit.
6. Lastly, a paragraph is provided that explains the meaning of the measurements of the text characteristics for your particular passage.
7. Once you have completed measuring your passage, you can click on the "Clear" button below the text box and measure another passage, if you wish.

Text Passage Archive on Wilson Academy®/Intensive Learning Community:

This text passage is archived under *Animals*.