

Why We Care about Whales

When the moon gets bored, it kills whales. Blue whales and fin whales and humpback, sperm, and orca whales: centrifugal forces don't discriminate.

With a hushed retreat, the moon pulls waters out from under fins and flippers, oscillating them backward and forward before they slip outward. At nighttime, the moon watches its work. Silver light traces the strips of lingering water, the jittery crabs, the lumps of tangled seaweed.

Slowly, awkwardly, the whales find their footing. They try to fight the waves, but they can't fight the moon. They can't fight the world's rotation or the bathymetry of oceans or the inevitability that sometimes things just don't work out.

More than two thousand cetaceans die from beaching every year. Occasionally they trap themselves in solitude, but whales are often beached in groups, huddled together in clusters and rows. Whales feel cohesion, a sense of community, of loyalty. The distress call of a lone whale is enough to prompt its entire pod to rush to its side—a gesture that lands them nose to nose in the same sand. It's a fatal symphony of echolocation, a siren call to the sympathetic.

The death is slow. As mammals of the Cetacea order, whales are conscious breathers. Inhalation is a choice, an occasional rise to the ocean's surface. Although their ancestors lived on land, constant oxygen exposure overwhelms today's creatures.

Beached whales become frantic, captives to their hyperventilation. Most die from dehydration. The salty air shrinks their oily pores, capturing their moisture. Deprived of the buoyancy water provides, whales can literally crush themselves to death. Some collapse before they dry out—their lungs suffocating under their massive bodies—or drown when high tides cover their blowholes, filling them slowly while they're too weak to move. The average whale can't last more than twenty-four hours on land.

In their final moments, they begin belching and erupting in violent thrashing. Finally, their jaws open slightly—not all the way, but just enough that the characteristic illusion of a perpetual smile disappears. This means it's over. I know this because I watched as twenty-three whale mouths unhinged. As twenty-three pairs of whale eyes glazed over.

I had woken up that morning to a triage center outside my window. Fifty or so pilot whales were lying along the stretch of beach in front of my house on Cape Cod, surrounded by frenzied neighbors and animal activists. The Coast Guard had arrived while I was still sleeping, and guardsmen were already using boats with giant nets in an attempt to pull the massive bodies back into the water. Volunteers hurried about in groups, digging trenches around the whales' heads to cool them off, placing wet towels on their skin, and forming assembly lines to pour buckets of water on them. The energy was nervous, confused, and palpably urgent.

Pilot whales are among the most populous of the marine mammals in the cetacean order. Fully grown males can measure up to twenty feet and weigh three tons, while females usually reach sixteen feet and 1.5 tons.

Their enormity was their problem. Unlike the three dolphins that had managed to strand themselves near our house the previous summer, fifty pilot whales were nearly impossible to maneuver. If unfavorable tidal currents and topography unite, the larger species may be trapped. Sandbars sneak up on them, and the tides tie them back.

People are strange about animals. Especially large ones. Daily, on the docks of Wellfleet Harbor, thousands of fish are scaled, gutted, and seasoned with thyme and lemon. No one strokes their sides with water. No one cries when their jaws slip open.

Pilot whales are not an endangered species, yet people spend tens of thousands of dollars in rescue efforts, trucking the wounded to aquariums and in some places even airlifting them off beaches. Perhaps the whales' sheer immensity fosters sympathy. Perhaps the stories of Jonah or Moby Dick do the same. Or maybe it's that article we read last week about that whale in Australia understanding hand signals. Intelligence matters, doesn't it? Brain size is important, right? Those whales knew they were dying. They have some sort of language, some sort of emotion. They give birth, for God's sake! There aren't any pregnant fish in the Wellfleet nets. No communal understanding of their imminent fatality.

I worry sometimes that humans are afraid of helping humans. There's less risk associated with animals, less fear of failure, fear of getting too involved. In war movies, a thousand soldiers can die gruesomely, but when the horse is shot, the

audience is heartbroken. It's the *My Dog Skip* effect. The *Home-ward Bound* syndrome.

When we hear that the lady on the next street over has cancer, we don't see the entire town flock to her house. We push and shove and wet whales all day, then walk home through town past homeless men curled up on benches—washed up like whales on the curbsides. Pulled outside by the moon and struggling for air among the sewers. They're suffocating too, but there's no town assembly line of food. No palpable urgency, no airlifting plane.

Fifty stranded whales are a tangible crisis with a visible solution. There's camaraderie in the process, a *Free Willy* fantasy, an image of Flipper in everyone's mind. There's nothing romantic about waking up a man on a park bench and making him walk to a shelter. Little self-righteous fulfillment comes from sending a check to Oxfam International.

Would there be such a commotion if a man washed up on the beach? Yes. But stranded humans don't roll in with the tide—they hide in the corners and the concrete houses and the plains of exotic countries we've never heard of, dying of diseases we can't pronounce.

In theory I can say that our resources should be concentrated on saving human lives, that our SAVE THE WHALES T-shirts should read SAVE THE STARVING ETHIOPIANS. Logically, it's an easy argument to make. Why do we spend so much time caring about animals? Yes, their welfare is important, but surely that of humans is more so.

Last year a nonprofit spent \$10,000 transporting a whale to an aquarium in Florida, where it died only three days after arriving. That same \$10,000 could have purchased hundreds of thousands of food rations. In theory, this is easy to say.

But when I was looking in the eye of a dying pilot whale at four in the morning, my thoughts were not so philosophical. Four hours until high tide. Keep his skin moist. Just three hours now. There wasn't time for logic. My rationality had slipped away with the ebbing dance of the waves.

I had helped all day. We had managed to save twenty-seven of the fifty whales, but twenty-three others were deemed too far up shore, too old, or already too close to death. That night, after most of the volunteers had gone home, I went back outside my bedroom to check on the whales.

It was mid-tide, and the up-shore seaweed still crunched under my bare feet. The water was rising. The moonlight drifted down on the salt-caked battlefield, reflected in the tiny pools of water and half-shell oysters.

It was easy to spot the living whales. Their bodies, still moist, shone in the moonlight. I weaved between carcasses, kneeling down beside an old whale that was breathing deeply and far too rapidly for a healthy pilot.

I put my hands on his nose and placed my face in front of his visible eye. I knew he was going to die, and he knew he was going to die, and we both understood that there was nothing either of us could do about it.

Beached whales die on their sides, one eye pressed into the sand, the other facing up and forced to look at the moon, at the orb that pulled the water out from under its fins.

There's no echolocation on land. I imagined dying slowly next to my mother or a lover, helplessly unable to relay my parting message. I remember trying to convince myself that everything would be fine. But he wouldn't be fine. Just like the homeless man and the Ethiopian aren't fine.

Perhaps I should have been comforting one of them, placing my hands on their shoulders. Spending my time and my money and my life saving those who walked on two legs and spoke without echoes.

The moon pulled the waters forward and backward, then inward and around my ankles. Before I could find an answer, the whale's jaw unclenched, opening slightly around the edges.

Against the Grain

On my deathbed, I will instruct a nurse to bring me the following: a box of Oreos, a bag of Goldfish, a McDonald's hamburger, an assortment of Dunkin' Donuts, a chicken pot pie, a Hot Pocket, a large pepperoni pizza, a French crepe, and an ice-cold beer. In my final moments, I will consume this food slowly and delicately as I fade to oblivion. I'll start with the donuts, lemon glazed and Boston Kreme, biting at each collapsible calorie as my relatives sigh and sign condolence cards. Next, I'll sample the pizza and beer, happily slurping both as the doctors sew me up and take sad notes. "Oh," they'll say in deep baritones, "I think it's too late. I think it's the end." Everyone will gather around me, crying softly and clutching each other, as I reach gloriously for the four-cheese Hot Pocket and Big Mac Supreme.

I'm allergic to stuff. Bread, pasta, cereal, pancakes, soy sauce, seitan, hydrolyzed amp-isostearoyl, triticum monococcum, hordeum vulgare extract, the list goes on. Eventually, it stops at a single word—a single little protein that lurks inside ingredients at the depths of unpronounceable obscurity. Gluten. The king of all polypeptide chains. The enemy of my existence and the hero of my deathbed feast. It hides in sauces and stews, artificial colors and flavors. It teems inside