

Newborn killer whale a good sign for imperiled pod

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In this Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2014 photo provided by the Center for Whale Research, a new baby orca whale swims alongside its mother near Vancouver Island in the Canadian Gulf Islands of British Columbia. The newborn is being called J-50. With the new addition, there are now 78 of the endangered whales in the waters of British Columbia and Washington state. (AP Photo/Center for Whale Research, Ken Balcomb)

A newborn orca in the endangered pod that frequents Puget Sound is an encouraging sign following the death earlier this month of a pregnant killer whale from the same group.

"That was a pretty hard hit," Howard Garrett of the Whidbey Island-

based Orca Network said Wednesday. "It's good to see a positive sign."

The baby orca was discovered Tuesday by Center for Whale Research scientist Ken Balcomb and another scientist monitoring members of J-pod off the Canadian Gulf Islands of British Columbia.

The presumed mother is J-16, a 43-year-old that has had three surviving calves, Balcomb said. The baby killer whale was estimated to be a day or two old and appeared healthy. It has been designated J-50.

Brad Hanson, a wildlife biologist with NOAA Fisheries, said he had noticed that before dawn Tuesday, satellite tracking showed the whale pod to have ducked into a narrow, protected passage between Shaw and Orcas islands in the San Juan archipelago—an area where he'd never seen them travel before.

"I was sort of scratching my head about why they'd go into that area," he said Wednesday. "The whales tend to use particular channels, and it was a very unusual travel route. This is pure speculation, but they may have been seeking an area of sheltered water for the birth."

The birth makes 78 orcas in the southern resident killer whale population that spends time in the inland waters of Washington state and Canada. They are an endangered species in Canada and the U.S.



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Now, everyone is hoping J-50 survives. An estimated 35 percent to 45 percent of orcas die in their first year, Garrett said. The Puget Sound population is in danger, with a limited supply of their favorite food, chinook salmon.

Killer whales are 7 to 8 feet in length at birth and weigh about 400 pounds. They are born after a 17-month gestation and nurse for at least a year, Balcomb wrote on the Center for Whale Research website.

It takes until their early teens for females to mature and late teens for males to mature. It is good news that J16, the mother, is a proven producer of calves, though her next most recent calf (J48) was born and died in December 2011 in Puget Sound, Balcomb wrote.



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It has been 2 ½ years since the last successful birth in the population. If orca calves don't survive, the iconic whales face certain extinction, he said.

That's why the death of the pregnant 19-year-old killer whale J-32 in early December in British Columbia waters was so distressing.

The fetus had died, and a resulting bacterial infection killed the mother, Fisheries and Oceans Canada said.

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