

Live salmon released for ailing orca but she doesn't eat

August 13 2018



Live chinook salmon aboard the King County Research Vessel SoundGardian are released into waters off San Juan Island, Wash, as a young female orca called J50 was not in the area on Friday Aug. 10, 2018. Experts have done a practice run to work out feeding live fish to the whale off Washington state so they're ready when they get a chance to save the ailing orca. The young female killer whale was too far north in Canadian waters for teams in boats carrying salmon to try to feed the emaciated animal Friday. (Alan Berner/The Seattle Times via AP, Pool)

Researchers carrying out unprecedented efforts to save an ailing young

killer whale in the U.S. Northwest released live salmon into waters in front of the free-swimming orca but didn't see her take any of the fish.

The operation that dropped eight salmon from a boat Sunday is part of an extraordinary response effort to save the 3 ½-year-old critically endangered whale called J50, who is malnourished and in poor body condition. A veterinarian gave the animal a closer look Thursday and also injected her with antibiotics using a dart.

Researchers want to see whether they can dose a live salmon with medication and feed it to the whale. But they first need to test whether it will take the fish.

Brad Hanson, wildlife biologist for NOAA Fisheries, told reporters Monday that the team will wait for the orcas to return to the inland waters of Washington state to evaluate the next step. The whales were last seen heading west toward more open waters.

The fish-eating whales have struggled for years because of lack of Chinook salmon—their preferred food source—toxic contamination and disturbance from vessel noise. They are down to just 75 animals, the lowest in more than three decades.

Hanson said he saw J50 "slogging along" with her pod mates off Washington state's San Juan Island, about 100 miles (161 kilometers) north of Seattle. She appeared tired from swimming into the current and was even moving backward as other whales sprinted by her.



Aboard a Lummi Nation police boat, tribal members, NOAA and others use a dip net to lift a chinook salmon from a fish tote to release through the green tube as a test into waters off San Juan Island, Wash., as viewed from aboard the King County Research Vessel SoundGuardian, Friday, Aug. 10, 2018. With the whale far away and a bin full of salmon pulled that morning from a state hatchery, crews did a practice run to work out the logistics of feeding live fish to a whale while staying ahead of it in a boat. The young female killer whale was too far north in Canadian waters for teams in boats carrying salmon to try to feed the emaciated animal Friday. (Alan Berner/The Seattle Times via AP, Pool)

Her body condition is quite poor, he said, and she doesn't look "very vibrant." She isn't socializing, such as splashing, but experts aren't seeing other things worsening, Hanson said.

For the feeding attempt Sunday, members of the Lummi Nation, a Native American tribe, and others moved their boat about 100 meters in front of J50 and other whales.

Keeping ahead of the pod in challenging currents, they scooped out salmon from a tote on the back of the boat and pushed it through a blue tube into the water.

Hanson called it very successful even though they didn't see J50 take fish. He said some of the whales responded to a salmon but it wasn't clear whether it was a fish that came off the boat.

"This type of thing has never been tried before," he said.



Live chinook salmon aboard the King County Research Vessel SoundGardian are released into waters off San Juan Island, Wash., as a young female orca called J50 was not in the area on Friday Aug. 10, 2018. These salmon are backups for the ones on the Lummi police boat. Experts have done a practice run to work out feeding live fish to the whale off Washington state so they're ready when they get a chance to save the ailing orca. The young female killer whale was too far north in Canadian waters for teams in boats carrying salmon to try to feed the emaciated animal Friday. (Alan Berner/The Seattle Times via AP, Pool)

© 2018 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Live salmon released for ailing orca but she doesn't eat (2018, August 13) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-08-salmon-ailing-orca-doesnt.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.