

Experts weigh next steps, possible capture to save ill orca

September 12 2018, by Phuong Le

A young, sick whale is skinnier than ever and in poor condition nearly two months after an international team of experts began taking extraordinary measures to save her.

Now, a U.S. agency and its partners are weighing whether to intervene further to help the female orca known as J50 by temporarily capturing her, treating her on the spot and releasing her, or holding her for a short time for rehabilitation before returning her to the wild.

Veterinarians believe they have exhausted treatment options in the field, including twice injecting the free-swimming whale with antibiotics in the Northwest waters.

"No rescue would proceed while J50 remains with J Pod and her family group," NOAA Fisheries, the agency responsible for marine mammal protection, said late Tuesday.

Teams would only rescue the orca if she becomes stranded or separated from the rest of her tightly knit group of [whales](#) to minimize any potential risks to those other whales, the agency said.

J50 is one of just 75 of the fish-eating orcas in Pacific Northwest waters. Another orca in the same pod, known as J35, triggered international sympathy this summer when she kept the body of her dead calf afloat in waters for more than two weeks.

The southern resident killer whales don't have enough chinook salmon, the staple of their diet. They also face threats from toxic contamination as well as vessel noise and disturbances that disrupt their ability to communicate and forage.

There hasn't been a successful birth in the population since 2015. Losing J50 would also mean losing her reproductive potential, biologists say.

An international team of Canadian and U.S. whale experts has mounted an intensive effort to help the young orca since concerns were raised in mid-July.

They have taken breath and fecal samples but still don't know for certain what's wrong with J50.

Response teams have injected her twice with antibiotics and tried to give her medication to help with parasitic worms, which they believe she has based on [fecal samples](#) taken from her mother.

Teams have also dropped several live salmon from a boat as J50 and her pod swam behind—a test to see whether fish could be used as a means of delivering medication.

Drone images taken Monday showed J50 much thinner than she was last year. Her mother, J16, has also declined in the past month, perhaps because of the burden of helping catch and share food with J50, experts said.

"Things are bad with her right now," Joe Gaydos, a wildlife veterinarian and science director of SeaDoc Society said. "She's one tough little cookie. It's amazing that she's still going."

As part of the response team, he tried unsuccessfully Friday to give the

orca a dewormer by dart. He said experts met Monday to discuss a range of scenarios, including the pros and cons of capturing a free-swimming whale and when to intervene.

"We don't want to take her from her mom where we have a J35 situation. We don't want to have an impact on J pod," Gaydos said, but waiting until she strands may also be too late. "These are very hard questions to answer and I think that right now the good thing is we're talking about all the options."

NOAA Fisheries announced two meetings in Washington state this weekend—in Friday Harbor and Seattle—to get public input on next steps.

What to do to help J50 has generated intense emotional reactions on social media and other forums. Some have pleaded with federal officials to do everything they can to save her, including feeding her or capturing her. Others worry that more intervention would stress her and her family members. They think that nature should be allowed to run its course.

"We would love J50 to survive," said Susan Berta, co-founder of the Orca Network, an advocacy group. "At what point are we doing more harm than good?"

The last time scientists rescued a killer whale in the region was in 2002 when a northern resident killer whale known as Springer was found swimming alone in Puget Sound.

She was moved into a floating net pen in Puget Sound and veterinarians assessed her condition and treated her. She was fed live salmon in the pen. She returned to her family of whales in Canada later that year and in 2013 was seen with her new calf.

© 2018 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Experts weigh next steps, possible capture to save ill orca (2018, September 12)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-09-experts-capture-ill-orca.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.