

The Hebrides best kept secret – featured on BBC’s The One Show

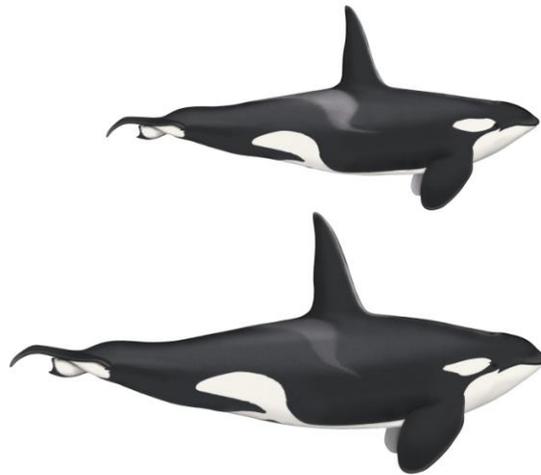
This week, BBC’s The One Show has been showcasing the endangered killer whale population that inhabits waters off the west coast of the UK and Ireland. Mike Dilger experienced an amazing encounter with four of the nine killer whales left in this population. With group numbers so low, it is likely that this community will go extinct in our lifetime.

In collaboration with Dr. Andy Foote, the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group and many others, the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust (HWDT) have found that of the group, four members are male and five are female. All individuals within the community interact with each other, although certain individuals are more regularly sighted together. As Mike mentioned on Tuesday evening, no live calves have been recorded since research began almost two decades ago, it is likely that the females are post-reproductive and due to their social isolation they are unlikely to recruit any killer whales from other populations. This means that the conservation status of this group is critical.

As sad as this is, the loss of this group has severe consequences, resulting in the loss of an evolutionary significant group of individuals. Through our research, we have discovered that this group is physically different to other killer whale populations in the North East Atlantic, suggesting separate ancestry, - they are bigger in size (by about a metre) and have different tooth wear. Furthermore, genetic analysis indicates that this group is more closely related to a group of Antarctic killer whales than those found in Atlantic waters.

Comparing the teeth in these killer whales to those in other populations suggests that this unique population is feeding exclusively on other cetaceans, such as harbour porpoises and minke whales (orca were reported surfacing either side of a minke whale in the Minch). On last night’s programme the remains of a harbour porpoise was shown floating in the water.

It was a phone call from HWDT that tipped the BBC film crew off and enabled them to locate the group. The public are encouraged to report their sightings of marine mammals via HWDT’s



The West Coast Community are about a metre larger than other orca populations found off the UK. Their eye patch orientation is also different to other populations.



The West Coast Community have virtually no tooth wear (pictured at the bottom) while in the other groups adults have worn their teeth down quite substantially (pictured at the top).

online sightings form on their website, www.hwdt.org, to contribute to our growing understanding of these magnificent creatures. Tonight we have been promised even more exciting footage, will this be the first ever predation shown on television by these individuals? Tune in!

There is still much to learn about the West Coast Community. Only with continued study can we better understand the only resident population found in British waters. Every year HWDT welcomes volunteers onboard their research yacht *Silurian* to assist with data collection from onboard. In fact, the same group of killer whales documented on the One Show were sighted from onboard *Silurian* in August 2012. These cetacean research surveys, alongside reports from the public and other organisations, have allowed for a better understanding of Hebridean cetaceans. If you would like to join HWDT onboard or would like to report a sighting please visit www.hwdt.org.

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Editors Notes

- The Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust (HWDT) is dedicated to enhancing knowledge and understanding of Scotland's whales, dolphins and porpoises (cetaceans) and the Hebridean marine environment through education, research and working within local communities as a basis for the lasting conservation of local species and habitats. For more information visit www.hwdt.org
- Dr. Andy Foote completed his PhD at Aberdeen University, focussing on the orca populations of the North East Atlantic. He is part of the North Atlantic Killer ID project (NAKID). For more information visit www.northatlantickillerwhales.com
- The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) is dedicated to the conservation and better understanding of whales, dolphins and porpoise in Irish waters. For more information visit www.iwdg.ie