

Author's Note

A movie that begins with the phrase “based on a true story” always gets my attention. As I watch, I wonder what parts are true, what was omitted, and how much was invented. *In the Company of Whales* is based on actual events. For readers curious about what really happened, here you go.

On October 21, 1997, a pod of nineteen orcas was spotted in Dyes Inlet, located near the Kitsap Peninsula of Washington State. None had been seen there for over forty years, and never more than a few at a time. To reach the inlet, they had come through Puget Sound and up the Port Washington Narrows, passing under two high bridges. The whales left together a month later. No one knows why they stayed so long, and no one knows why they left.

The local newspaper, *The Sun*, renamed *Kitsap Sun* in 2005, ran daily stories about the whales. Television news crews and reporters from the Seattle papers covered the story too. Word spread nationally. Over the thirty-day period, tens of thousands of people came to see the pod for themselves, overwhelming the town of Bremerton which at that time had a population of 37,000.

Letters to the editor revealed community members’ opposing views about the whales’ presence. The influx of visitors created heavy traffic resulting in some minor accidents but also increased business for hotels, restaurants, and gas stations. Tour companies packed their boats with whale watchers. Outdoor outfitters rented their full inventory of kayaks and canoes. Entrepreneurial residents sold cold drinks out of ice chests, charged fees to park on their property, and sold commemorative T-shirts. Others complained about cars blocking their driveways, people urinating in their yards, and the disruption to their quiet way of life.

Among the visitors were scientists taking advantage of the unique opportunity to study orcas up close. One group of marine biologists arrived by boat from the Center for Whale Research (CWR) on San Juan Island, about fifty nautical miles away. For years, they had been tracking, photographing, and recording the larger group of whales called the Southern Residents that includes this pod.

Weeks passed and the scientists, who were on the water almost daily, began to see troubling signs. The orcas were likely running low on salmon, their preferred food, and were behaving in ways that indicated stress, possibly caused by heavy boat traffic. One Sunday in early November, an estimated 500 boats were in the inlet, more than four times the previous record.

Debates began to surface among the experts: Was an intervention needed or was it best to continue observing the whales, hoping they would resolve the situation on their own? Theories also emerged regarding the whales’ observed reluctance to cross under the Warren Avenue Bridge, the four-lane highway that stretched across the Narrows connecting East Bremerton to Bremerton. Each time an orca approached the bridge, it turned back, rejoining the others in an inlet that couldn’t support the pod’s needs. Some believed the bridge created a psychological barrier caused by the vibrations from heavier than normal traffic.

On November 19, a cold and rainy day, one boat carrying several CWR researchers and a second with scientists from the National Marine Fisheries were near the Warren Avenue Bridge. They witnessed events unfold. Faith, a big male, and Ankh, the matriarch, dove under the water and surfaced on the other side of the bridge. The others followed except for two—Ophelia and her calf, Nerka. Canuck, an older female, seemed to wait for them as the rest of the pod continued toward open water. Then Cetus, Nerka’s older brother, swam back. Together, the four remaining whales made a dive that lasted for two very long minutes. They finally surfaced a mile away near the Manette Bridge.

The biologists followed the pod, watching as one by one the orcas moved closer to Rich Passage leading to Puget Sound. The two researchers from the CWR recounted the most memorable moment—Faith emerging from the water and swimming slowly alongside their boat, only ten feet away. He then turned on his side and looked directly at them as he passed.

The rest of the novel was a product of my imagination. A pretty yellow house sits where I built the fictional Coffee Spot. There is no pier or dock there, only a concrete boat ramp. And, most importantly, the orcas left on their own. Quietly. With no human intervention.

Where are they now, those nineteen orcas? I am happy to report that as of this writing, twenty-eight years after the events described above, five are still alive. That’s the good news. The bad news: the Southern Resident orcas are critically endangered. Several organizations are conducting ongoing research and working diligently to reverse this.

To learn more about the orcas of the Pacific Northwest, visit:

The Center for Whale Research <https://www.whaleresearch.com/>

Orca Lab <https://orcalab.org/orcas/>

Orca Conservancy <https://www.orcaconservancy.org/>