



Media Release concerning Kʷiisaḥiʔis (Brave Little Hunter) aka T109A3A

July 4th, 2024

On April 26th we helped guide the two and half-year old Bigg's killer whale known as T109A3A or Kʷiisaḥiʔis (Brave Little Hunter) down Espinosa Inlet along with members of the Nuchatlaht and Ehattesaht First Nations as well as representatives from Double Bay Sanctuary and Fisheries and Oceans Canada before she took off ahead of us towards open water. There were many unknowns around when, where, and with whom she would be documented next or if she would ever be seen again. But on April 29th, May 6th and May 10th she was filmed alone near the entrance to Esperanza Inlet where we had last seen her.

On May 15th another family of Bigg's killer whales (the T069As) were documented just north of Esperanza Inlet where she was last seen. Unconfirmed sightings of killer whales were also reported in and around the area up until May 21st. Then on May 22nd a different group (the T069s) were documented just to the south of Esperanza Inlet where Kʷiisaḥiʔis was last seen.

We have received no further sightings information of any lone killer whales around Esperanza Inlet or anywhere along the west coast of Vancouver Island despite enhanced vessel traffic throughout the region with the onset of summer. We also do not expect that Kʷiisaḥiʔis perished before the end of May considering her body condition was not critical and she had been showing interest in potential prey items both before and after getting back into open water. Subsequently, we think it is likely that sometime in mid-May Kʷiisaḥiʔis joined another group and/or moved on.

Through our own efforts and those of Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the extensive network of photo contributors on finwave.io we have collectively identified many other killer whales since mid-May, including Kʷiisaḥiʔis's natal group (the T109As), her great grandmother's group (the T109s), her aunties group (the T109A2s) as well as other groups known to frequent the west coast of Vancouver Island (eg, T007Bs, T011A, T023s, T041s,

T069s, T069As). K^wiisaḥiʔis was not with any of these groups but together, these and other whales in the population that have been documented since mid-May comprise only a proportion of the coastal subset of the Bigg's killer whale population.

It is possible that K^wiisaḥiʔis is traveling with any group of killer whales that have not been seen over the past few months including either of her great aunt's groups (the T109Bs or T109Cs). It is also possible she is moving between unrelated groups or that she is gone. Adoption in killer whale societies is common but typically only occurs in groups that can incur the cost of doing so without impacting survival of more closely related kin. Furthermore, the relationships between care-giving whales and adoptees can take time to develop.

For example, in 2002, a malnourished lost lone two-year old resident killer whale (A73) was relocated to where her community was and although she travelled with a variety of other groups in the area, it took two years for her to settle in with her extended family. Sightings intervals of this whale regularly spanned over 9 months, but she has been documented every year looking well and now has two offspring of her own. Another example comes from 2013 when a malnourished lone four-year old Bigg's killer whale (T046C2) was encouraged out of an enclosed bay and into open water. Following sightings intervals regularly spanned several months and included documentation of her alone, with unrelated whales, and related ones. She has still not settled in with any specific group but appears healthy in each sighting.

It is becoming increasingly common as the Bigg's killer whale population continues to grow for juveniles to appear outside their natal group with extended family or unrelated individuals. These youngsters may set off on their own intentionally while others could be left with other whales on purpose or accidentally. In many cases these whales find their way back to their natal group while in other cases they disappear altogether and are eventually presumed deceased.

The efforts to encourage K^wiisaḥiʔis to open water were done so to give her the best chance for re-integration into her community. We will issue a media release upon any confirmation she has been documented with them. In the meantime, we appreciate all support for our monitoring efforts.

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