

Welfare vs Politics. Lone orca calf denied humane intervention: A New Zealand case study.

INTRODUCTION

Reporting sick, injured or out-of-context wildlife is an increasing role that the public plays within the framework of animal welfare and compassionate conservation. The desire of the public to see an appropriate response for the animal(s) is not governed strictly by the responder, but rather by the response itself. As such, the responder(s) may be Authorities or NGO's (or a combination). In this case study we illustrate how politics and the Government Authority swamped humane welfare proposed by NGO's.

CASE STUDY HISTORY

The New Zealand Government Department of Conservation (DoC) is legally mandated to administer the Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978, which provides for the conservation, protection and management of marine mammals. In July 2016, a free-ranging, healthy, but lone male orca calf (*Orcinus orca*), was reported by members of the public to DoC who later notified NGO's (Table 1). Once alerted, the NGO's travelled to the location, conducted *in situ* assessments and ascertained that urgent intervention, with an aim to repatriate the calf to its population, was imperative if the calf was to survive.

METHODS & RESULTS

Scientific evaluation was made of the calf by the NGO's, including blood tests and pathogen cultures, all done in consultation with international veterinarians experienced in cetacean medicine. Five experts were flown in by the NGO's, from the USA. Additionally, extensive international collaboration, identification of welfare issues and comprehensive reports and practical plans (health & safety, welfare, capture, transport, temp-holding, medical, animal care, feeding, sea-pen, repatriation) were made (again, all in consultation with veterinarians but also with the local community, Maori Iwi (tribes), researchers and experts). At least seven meetings (30+ hrs) were conducted with DoC. Yet despite the experts and their supporting evidence, DoC actively prevented intervention and denied the calf appropriate care, which resulted in the steady and predicted deterioration of the orca.

At least 14 days after DoC was aware of the calf, they finally granted permission for the NGO's to humanely intervene and provide care. The calf was successfully captured, transported, held, cared for and fed (Table 1), but then died. Determination of cause-of-death (through necropsy) was denied due to cultural concerns by Iwi. However, the experts agreed, based on blood and pathogen samples; death was most likely linked to terminal decline due to extended dehydration and emaciation, with complications from organ failure due to these factors.

Table 1. Timeline of events involving lone orca calf.

| Date | Event | NGO's Response | Government Response | Comments |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| On or about 20160717* | Calf found | (not yet alerted) | Unclear but may not have been alerted | *A kayaking member of public knew about this calf for an undisclosed number of days, keeping information to himself so he could 'play' with & film it, which ultimately also contributed to the death of the calf |
| 20160720 | Calf reported to DoC | (not yet alerted) | Alerted, but response Unclear | Authorities alerted, action not confirmed |
| 20160721 | NGO's notified | NGO's notify & consult experts, international travel to location | Unclear | Action not confirmed (site visit not confirmed) |
| 20160724 | NGO's arrive | <i>In situ</i> assessment & Initial Inspection Report (provided to DoC following day) | Unclear | DoC has continued to avoid releasing their documentation regarding the event |
| 20160725, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31 | Calf battles currents & bad weather | <i>In situ</i> monitoring of calf, disentanglement, attending meetings, prepare reports, consultations internationally & with locals, sea-pen site inspections & consultation - with Iwi | Facilitate Meetings | DoC conducted additional consultation with experts which they would not disclose. Iwi attend meetings & demand results. Iwi building sea-pen for long-term rehabilitation of calf |
| 20160801 | Calf battles currents & bad weather | <i>In situ</i> monitoring of calf, attending meetings, prepare reports, consultations | Only inspection of calf <i>in situ</i> | NGO's & Iwi state they will intervene due to welfare, regardless of DoC position |
| 20160802 | Calf battles currents & bad weather | <i>In situ</i> monitoring of calf, attending meetings, prepare reports, consultations | Permission granted for NGO's to intervene | Iwi confirm sea-pen nearing completion for long-term rehabilitation |
| 20160803 | Capture, transport | Coordinate & conduct capture & transport, 24 hr medical care & attention | Coordinate DoC boats, coastguard, harbour master | Local's coordinate above-ground temp-holding para-pool, filling of pool, man-power for transport |
| 20160803-06 | Held in temporary above-ground pool | 24 hr medical care & attention | | Concerted effort by all to help calf |
| 20160807 | Calf died | Facilitated burial by Iwi | Facilitated burial by Iwi | Cultural respect precluded a necropsy |



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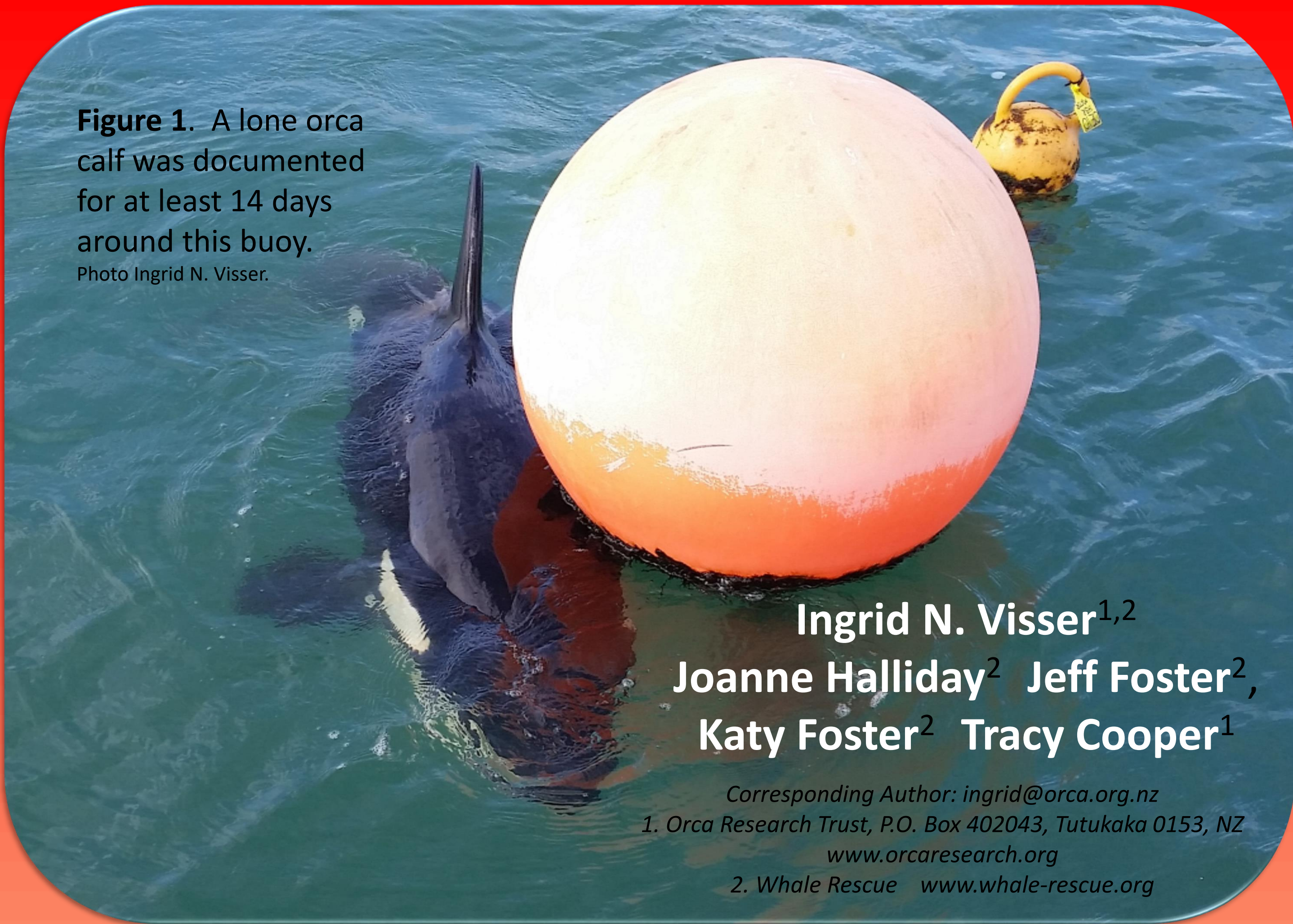


Figure 1. A lone orca calf was documented for at least 14 days around this buoy.
Photo Ingrid N. Visser.

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DISCUSSION

The extreme suffering this animal was put through was a direct result of the Government Authority actively preventing intervention. Such methods contravened their legal mandate to protect this critically listed species and contrasted with their previous welfare-orientated interventions for many other individuals, from a wide range of more common species. The NGO's found their ethical concerns were completely swamped by political motivations and an apparent fear of 'failure' by the Authorities. Multiple experts and their concurring recommendations were not appropriately recognised, all at the expense of the animal's welfare and untimely death.



Figure 3. Eye of the calf as he was transported to the temporary holding pool. Note 'wrinkle lines', from extreme dehydration. Photo: Katy Foster.

Dedicated to 'Tama-Tiger-Ongare-Bob', who fought to live for as hard and as long as he possibly could. Rest In Peace.

'Take-Home' Message

In order to address and tackle potential political motivation *verses* compassionate animal welfare, the ultimate driving force should be the practical application and unification of welfare and conservation sciences, which are in turn acknowledged and recognised by the Authorities. ***Put simply, the welfare of the animal should take priority when backed by science and experts.***