

Comprehension 1

Killer Whales

Orca whales are some of the most intelligent and deadly creatures to be found in the world's oceans. They are found from the Arctic and Antarctic regions to the tropical seas. Orcas have a very diverse diet, although individual populations will often specialize in particular types of prey and learn hunting tactics to match. Some orcas feed only on fish while others hunt marine mammals such as seals, walruses, and even large whales.

The Orca is at the top of the Ocean's food chain. These whales are even known to hunt and kill white sharks! Orca whales will also hunt and kill other whales. In a particularly aggressive hunting method, a pod of orcas will attack a mother and calf humpback whale by separating the two and drowning the younger whale by repeatedly jumping on top of it. The group will then eat the calf, leaving the mother unharmed. Some Orca whales will beach themselves to catch seals, having perfected a way of wriggling back down the beach to the sea. Historically, Orca whales used to accompany and 'aid' human whale hunters too. A famous example comes from Australia where a whale named 'Old Tom' would follow whaling boats and attack harpooned whales in return for scraps from the catch.

As toothed whales, Orcas belong to the oceanic dolphin family and, like dolphins, are exceedingly intelligent. It has been known for Orcas to track fishing boats, steal fish out of the nets and teach younger members of the family how to do the same. In fact, Orca whales have incredibly complex family and social groups, comparable to elephants, higher primates and humans. Unlike any other mammal species, Orcas live with their mothers for their entire lives, in groups of 5-6 of their kin. These groups are composed of animals from the female line and consist of a matriarch and her descendants, which form part of the line and continue it with their descendants. These complex relationships are one reason animal rights activists and some scientists believe Orcas should not be kept in captivity. These complex bonds cannot be established in the small artificial environments provided by humans.

There is a concern that some Orca populations are under threat from habitat loss, pollution and the depletion of their species. To give an exact estimation of the threat is difficult since the species is found all over the world and there is some suggestion that two or three groups of killer whale may even be a different branch of the species. In 2005, whales in the southern waters of British Columbia and Washington were labelled as an endangered species, and further assessments will also need to be made location by location. Undoubtedly, any species at the top of the food chain will be affected by problems in the species it feeds upon. The health of the world's oceans in general will be vital in the protection of the Orca. Of course, rising temperatures, continued whaling and overfishing as well as the continued pollution of the world's waters will have a negative chain-effect on all species living within the ocean.

Answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. Why are Orca whales some of the most intelligent and deadly creatures? Give an example from the passage.

2. Other than Orca whales, what animal would have matriarchs in the family?

3. How many Orca whales would you find in a family group?

4. Why do scientists believe that Orca whales should not be kept in aquariums?

5. Why do Orca whales, which are at the top of Ocean's food chain, face more problems than other mammals and fish in the ocean?

6. What problems are affecting Orca whale populations?

7. Choose the correct vocabulary in the box to match the definitions below.

diverse	marine	unharmd	composed	bonds
established	exact	labelled	ssessments	vital

- a) precise _____
- b) necessary _____
- c) identified _____
- d) analyses _____
- e) water-living _____
- f) created _____
- g) made _____
- h) varied _____
- i) safe _____
- j) relations _____



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