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Encounter with Luna, the killer whale, is lesson in stewardship

In September 2005, I accompanied two Mowachaht/Muchalaht fisheries experts up the northwest coast of Vancouver Island aboard the tribe's lightweight Zodiac. As we returned to the deep canyon fjord of Nootka Sound, a call came over the radio from the First Nation's stewardship boat. Luna was playing at the Gold River dock.

Within minutes, we were looking for the mischievous orca. At first there was no sign of him. We idled slowly from one end of the dock to the other. "False alarm," I thought. Then I saw his head bob up beside the rusty hull of a large boat.

Fisheries coordinator Jamie James leaned over the side of the Zodiac and snapped his fingers below the surface of the water. Luna immediately swam over to us like a happy sea puppy. He seemed to recognize Jamie, and he eyed me with curiosity. I was stunned.

For the next hour, a rambunctious Luna swam back and forth between our boats as we led him from potential trouble and out toward the ocean. He gently pushed us from side to side.

He dove with playful agility beneath the hull and pushed us along from the back of the Zodiac. Luna did backflips and splashed the water with his tail and pectoral fins. He surfed in our wake and rubbed up against the side of the boat.

All I could say over and over was, "He's amazing!" I feel blessed to have encountered this special creature. He struck me as a sweet, gentle, childlike spirit.

I took many photographs of Luna that day and have since written about the iconic orca for several publications. It is a compelling narrative.

At a time when salmon runs are at historic lows, northern glaciers are melting at an alarming rate and earthquakes and cyclones are wiping out entire communities, Luna's presence among humans serves as a poignant reminder about our responsibility as stewards over this fragile Earth and its endangered creatures.

Stephan Michaels

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STEPHAN MICHAELS

In September 2005, First Nation stewards guided Luna toward the open ocean.