



DEEP DIVE

Artists join scientists in whale recovery

NPS Photo

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As July 2018 waned, the world had its eyes on the Southern resident orcas of the Salish Sea. Twenty-year-old J35, affectionately known as Tahlequah, swam 1,000 miles in 17 days carrying the corpse of her deceased calf with her. Experts say she was mourning the loss of her baby.

Shortly thereafter, J50, Scarlet, was showing signs of emaciation, and though scientists worked tirelessly to feed the ailing orca, she disappeared and was declared dead.

Meanwhile, three orca enthusiasts and residents of San Juan Island spoke about how to bring the plight of the Southern residents to the masses: enter Deep Dive.

“Deep Dive is about the Salish Sea in general and the Southern resident killer whales in particular,” Deborah Giles, a leading orca scientist with a Ph.D. in marine biology, said. “The idea was to educate a new group of people (art lovers) about the plight of the whales and inspire them to get involved in the whales’ recovery.”

The Deep Dive art exhibit at San Juan Island Museum of Art opened on June 14 and will run until Sept. 16. The museum is open from 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Thursday-Monday. Admission is \$10 for adults; children 18 and younger are free.

Giles, along with Karin Roeners-Kleven and Snow Schammel, stood on the shore of South Beach discussing their sorrows and dreams to share the orcas’ story with everyone — not just the dedicated enthusiasts with whom they’ve spoken regularly.

“How do we create education that is going to change people’s way of interacting with the Salish Sea? ... There’s got to be a way to reach out to a larger population,” Roeners-Kleven queried, adding that an obvious avenue to express the topic was through art. “Art has historically been a beautiful vehicle to articulate a serious issue in our culture or society.”

With that thought in mind, Roeners-Kleven reached out to the board of SJIMA, spitballing the idea of an art exhibit dedicated to educating viewers about the Southern residents. She said the museum board loved the idea and gave it a green

light.

There was just one problem, however.

“We really don’t know art,” Roeners-Kleven confessed. “We know whales and we know ecosystem but we don’t know what it takes to fund an art exhibit and all the satellite events that go with that art exhibit. ... We ended up creating a collaboration between us and SJIMA.”

The teamwork between the art and orca enthusiasts resulted, very quickly, Roeners-Kleven added, in an exhibit featuring more than 50 artists, using a plethora of mediums to express the pain, grief, loss and struggle of the Southern residents.

“It is an interesting project,” San Juan Islander Heather Nicholson said.

Nicholson is one of the artists whose work is on display during the exhibition. She teamed up with choreographer Amber Willett and videographers from Amphora Media, Ian Stevens and Zachary Bivins, to create a short film. “Apex,” directed and produced by Nicholson, was created to intertwine a ballet dance to the song “Eyes Shut - Nocturne in C Minor” by Olafur Arnalds and Alice Sara Ott — inspired by the Southern residents — and interviews with orca scientists and conservationists.

“I just think that it’s really fortunate how the ballet ended up being very fitting for the subject,” Nicholson said. “I think that it really speaks to the social aspects of the Southern residents and our ability to relate to them as social beings.”

Giles hopes the audience comes away from the exhibit thinking about how we can make the Salish Sea better for not just the orcas but all the flora and fauna that rely on it for their existence.

“I’m a scientist. ... I typically work in that realm so this has been a new avenue for me — a new experience for me — it’s a liberating feeling to imagine that we’re going to be able to touch a new audience and educate a new audience of people to become ambassadors in this region,” she said.

A sister presentation, titled “Deep Dive: the documentaries,” is scheduled for July 13, wherein many films, both short and long, focusing on the Salish Sea will be shown at the San Juan Community Theatre.

Keep an eye on the Journal for more information about that event.

