

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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GROUNDBREAKING STUDY DISCOVERS FOOD STORING KILLER WHALES

VANCOUVER, B.C. – New landmark research has revealed fascinating insight into killer whale feeding and foraging behaviours. The study—conducted by Vancouver Aquarium research scientist Dr. Lance Barrett-Lennard and a team of colleagues—documented gray whale predation by killer whales near Unimak Island, Alaska.

“Whalers have known for centuries that killer whales can hunt, kill and consume whale species far larger than themselves,” said Barrett-Lennard. “But such events are seen and reported rarely, and it’s been hard to determine how common it is, how the killer whales manage such a feat, and what the impact might be on prey populations.”

Culminating four years of observation, the study—*Gray whale predation and prolonged feeding on submerged carcasses by transient killer whales at Unimak Island, Alaska* (Lance G. Barrett-Lennard et al.¹)—describes the behavior of a newly-discovered population of killer whales at the boundary of the Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea.

The research team made the following discoveries:

- Over 150 transient killer whales gather every spring near Unimak Island, Alaska, when gray whales are heading north on their annual migration.
- For a month or more, the killer whales hunt and feed exclusively on gray whale calves and yearlings.
- The gray whales’ principal defense is to move into very shallow water along the shoreline, where killer whales are reluctant to press the attack. The killer whales also give up when mothers defend their calves particularly aggressively.
- Most gray whales are attacked in waters of 10-20 m depth and sink to the bottom after death.
- After an initial feeding period, killer whales leave the site for 24 hours or more before returning to feed again—the first time such food storing behavior has been reported in whales.
- Stored carcasses leave a tell-tale sheen of oil on the surface that may persist for up to a week.
- Gray whales killed by killer whales provide an important source of food for other predators, including Alaskan brown bears and sleeper sharks.

“Through direct observation, we’re beginning to recognize the dramatic impact killer whales have on other aquatic life,” says Barrett-Lennard. “For example, we estimate that killer whales take up to a third of the calves born to the Eastern Pacific gray whale population each year.”

Since 2002, Barrett-Lennard and Alaskan researcher Craig Matkin have been at the forefront of a long-term research project on killer whales along the Alaskan Peninsula. This project highlights the Vancouver Aquarium’s 30-year tradition of cetacean research—playing a central role in the world’s longest continuous study of killer whales in B.C.

To learn more about Lance Barrett-Lennard’s research and to see a list of his recent publications about killer whales, visit www.killerwhale.org.

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About Dr. Lance Barrett-Lennard

Lance Barrett-Lennard has been an active collaborator in ongoing studies of the behavioural and population biology of killer whales in British Columbia and Alaska since 1984. In addition to killer whales, Lance is involved in research on baleen whales, dolphins, sea otters and belugas. He also heads up the B.C. Cetacean Sightings Network, located at the Vancouver Aquarium, and supervises graduate students in his capacity as adjunct professor (zoology) at the University of British Columbia.

About Vancouver Aquarium

The Vancouver Aquarium is a global leader in connecting people to our natural world, and a self-supporting, non-profit association dedicated to effecting the conservation of aquatic life through display, education, research, and direct action. Learn more at www.vanaqua.org.

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Editors: Photo of transient killer whale attacking a gray whale calf to be credited to John Durban.

Media Contacts:

Amanda Eaton
Communications Assistant
604 659 3752
publicrelations@vanaqua.org

Charlene Chiang
Director of Communications
604 659 3453
publicrelations@vanaqua.org

¹ Lance G. Barrett-Lennard, Craig O. Matkin, John W. Durban, Eva L. Saulitis, David Ellifrit (2010). *Gray whale predation and prolonged feeding on submerged carcasses by transient killer whales at Unimak Island, Alaska*. *Marine Ecology Progress Series* 421.