

Saving whales is good for the planet and for Scotland

adapted from an article by Ilona Amos

- 1 We have recently been treated to dramatic pictures of a humpback whale swimming in the Firth of Forth. It was a magnificent spectacle but a fairly 9 one as humpbacks are relatively uncommon here. They were hunted to the brink of extinction around Scotland, but in recent years there has been an increase in their numbers.
- 2 This is good news and a reminder of the richness of marine life in our seas. Scottish waters are important for whales and dolphins, being home to or visited by 24 of the 83 aquatic mammals. Whales are fascinating and their survival is important for global biodiversity. But they also have an 10 value. They play a major part in our growing wildlife tourism industry, which is worth an estimated £127 million a year. Whale-watching on the west coast brings in around £8 million.
- 3 So it's good to know there is an army of experts out there monitoring and analysing the activities of these fascinating creatures. These include the Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme, and the British Divers Marine Life Rescue, a group of volunteers on call 24 hours to help marine wildlife that is still alive when it comes ashore. A wealth of research is also carried out at Scottish universities and charities such as the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, and Whale and Dolphin Conservation.
- 4 Commercial whaling has been a thing of the past in Scotland for half a century, and the signs suggest whale numbers are finally beginning to recover. But though they might be more likely to dodge a harpoon now, whales today face an increasing number of other dangers. I've never been lucky enough to see a live whale. Just a dead one, a young male sperm whale that washed up on the shores of the Forth after a suspected collision with a boat. Sadly it's a common fate. Whales also face harm from entanglement in fishing gear; pollution (studies of 21 pilot whales that beached in Scotland in 2012 showed high levels of toxic chemicals in their bodies); and noise disturbance from naval sonar and acoustic surveys of the seabed.
- 5 Then there are mass strandings, which remain largely unexplained. Just last month more than 400 pilot whales came ashore on New Zealand's South Island at a spot notorious for strandings. Around 300 of the animals



died. There have been various speculations as to the cause of such devastating events. Now research is under way to establish whether there could be a link with weather in outer space. Some experts believe magnetic anomalies and extra-terrestrial meteorological phenomena could disorientate the animals. If they can establish a connection, researchers hope that observations of solar storms could serve as an early warning that strandings could occur. The results should be interesting. We've banned whaling for the most part and given the animals official protection. Now we must do more to minimise the impact of our actions on these majestic ocean giants.

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