

Pender Harbour's pioneering role in the live capture of orcas, Part II



Garden Bay Pub collection photo

By Brian Lee

(Continued from December 2007)

After the second set of seven whales were captured in April of 1968 there was considerable local opposition to the Pender Harbour whale hunt.

By most accounts, the opposition had nothing to do with the well-being of the whales but instead arose from the jealousy of many who felt that they weren't included in what looked to be a very lucrative business.

"Everyone thought we were millionaires after this deal," Sonny Reid said.

He recalls that, after the second capture and sale, they were loading a whale onto a truck at the Madeira Park wharf when one whale kicked up and broke loose as they closed up the pens.

"I can still remember everybody up on the wharf clapping because he got away," Reid says.

"I could look up and I could see all the people but I can't really put a name on who it was because I thought, 'I'll get you, you sons a..!'"

Another sign of the brewing resentment around this time occurred when Reid and Paul Spong, a UBC psychiatrist studying the whales, were denied entry to the Garden Bay Pub.

Spong had acquired a deep emotional attachment to the whales and split his time between Garden Bay and the Vancouver Aquarium studying their sensory abilities.

In Pender Harbour terms, Spong was considered a bit of an eccentric and fit the image of a hippie.

He had a long beard, long hair and was reputed to like his drugs — he told the Georgia Straight's Stan Persky that he'd taken mescaline during some of his aquatic sessions with Skana.

"We took him with us and you

could've heard a pin drop when we walked in." Reid says.

"Finally they came and said 'Sorry, there's no hippies allowed in here.' They knew who he was but we had to leave."

Reid insists that it had less to do with Spong's lifestyle and appearance and more to do with the growing bitterness over their whaling success.

On August 26, 1968, only 25 days after the Pender Harbour Whale Station's official opening, the big bull Skookum Cecil escaped from his pen in Hospital Bay thanks to a tear caused by a heavy cluster of mussels.

Skookum Cecil hung around Porpoise Bay for weeks but wouldn't be recaptured despite a number of attempts by Spong and local fishermen.

That November, the female Nat-sidalia died of an apparent heart attack leaving the original whale, Hyak I, alone in the Garden Bay Whale Station.

The final and crushing blow for

the whale station came with the intentional release of Hyak I the following February.

Despite an RCMP investigation, charges were never laid but Reid says he knows who did it — he suspects a couple of jealous locals, the same guys behind blocking him and Spong from the pub.

Other theories point to Spong himself who was by then making a public push for the whales to be set free.

Suspects were many though, as some nearby residents complained of the noise coming from the pens and others sang the familiar refrain that they feared all the attention to Pender Harbour would change the way of life they'd grown to love.

The local papers claimed the real losers in Hyak's escape were the people of Pender Harbour and quoted

one local resident as saying,

"I have no doubt that this act of vandalism was concocted as the result of a beer drinking session. This area depends on tourism and we will all suffer as a result of this stupidity."

Murray Newman, the director of the Vancouver Aquarium maintained that he agreed with those pushing for conservation of the whales.

But he insisted that the the study of captive whales in an aquarium environment was still in the public's — and the whales' — interests.

By this time the whales were even starting to become a nuisance to the fishermen who held the licences to catch them.

The damaged gear and lost fishing time meant that there was considerable expense attached to their new occupation and the added hostility was starting to take its toll.

The first two captures came by chance and were relatively easy but, after it became more of a business enterprise, Bert and Sonny started travelling farther afield in their pursuit.

"We tried all kinds of different times. I just about sunk my boat and everything else." says Reid.

They chased whales off and on for almost two years after the second capture but were never able to nab a whale outside of Pender Harbour.

Luckily for them, the whales came back on December 11, 1969, during one of the stormiest nights of the year.

This time they were able to surround 12 whales in Whiskey Slough after a 15 hour battle with gale force winds, sheets of rain and a new twist — dogfish.

"Our biggest net was sunk by
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Garden Bay Pub collection photo

Hyak I, the first whale captured in Pender Harbour, was the last whale to train at the Garden Bay Whale Station in Hospital Bay before being freed by persons unknwn in February of 1969.

Pender Harbour orcas (cont.)

dogfish,” Bert Gooldrup told the Vancouver Sun. “There were six tons of them in one net at one time.”

When it was all over, the partners managed to sell six of the whales after a number escaped or were let go.

“Did we have any bad moments?” said Reid to a Sun reporter.

“Sure. Every one was a bad

moment. You couldn’t see the whales because of the sheets of rain and you couldn’t hear them because of the noise of the engines.”

Of the six sold, Corky II is still alive and performs at Sea World in San Diego as one of the generic “Shamus.”

Corky II is the only wild capture

killer whale from the B.C. coast still living in captivity.

There’s a concerted effort to “Free Corky” and have her returned to the wild.

Corky is considered a good candidate for release back into the wild because researchers know her pod and that she still speaks her local dialect.

Whale activists promote Dec. 11 as the anniversary of her capture.

This year will mark Corky’s 38th year in captivity.

The third capture seemed to embolden opponents of the whale hunt and soon the Reid and Gooldrup families started receiving sinister threats.

“I got a nasty phone call that if they didn’t let the whales go, they’d kill my kids,” Isabel Gooldrup recalls.

“To me, that coloured the whole tone of the thing. I didn’t like it — any of it. It wasn’t worth it to me.”

The RCMP were never able to trace the threats but Isabel is sure it didn’t come from somebody in Pender Harbour.

“I’m sure it wasn’t local. You know, you could kind of tell in those days on the phone if it was a long distance call.”

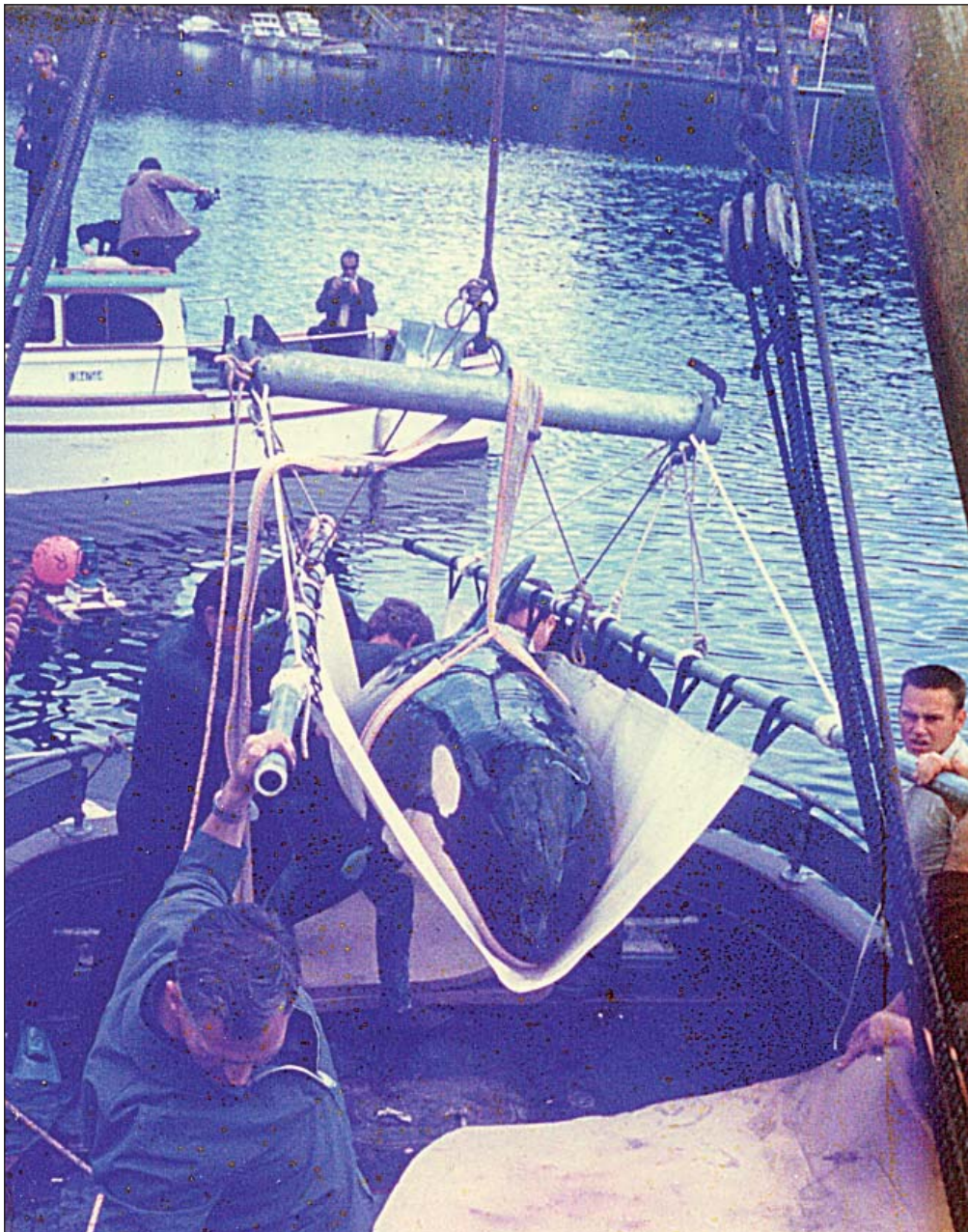
Sonny and Marie tell a similar story.

“People were phoning and told us if we didn’t let the whales go they were gonna kidnap our kids so we had to have police protection for the kids,” Reid says.

“We couldn’t let them go to school for awhile and then they weren’t allowed out of the school unless we were there to pick them up.”

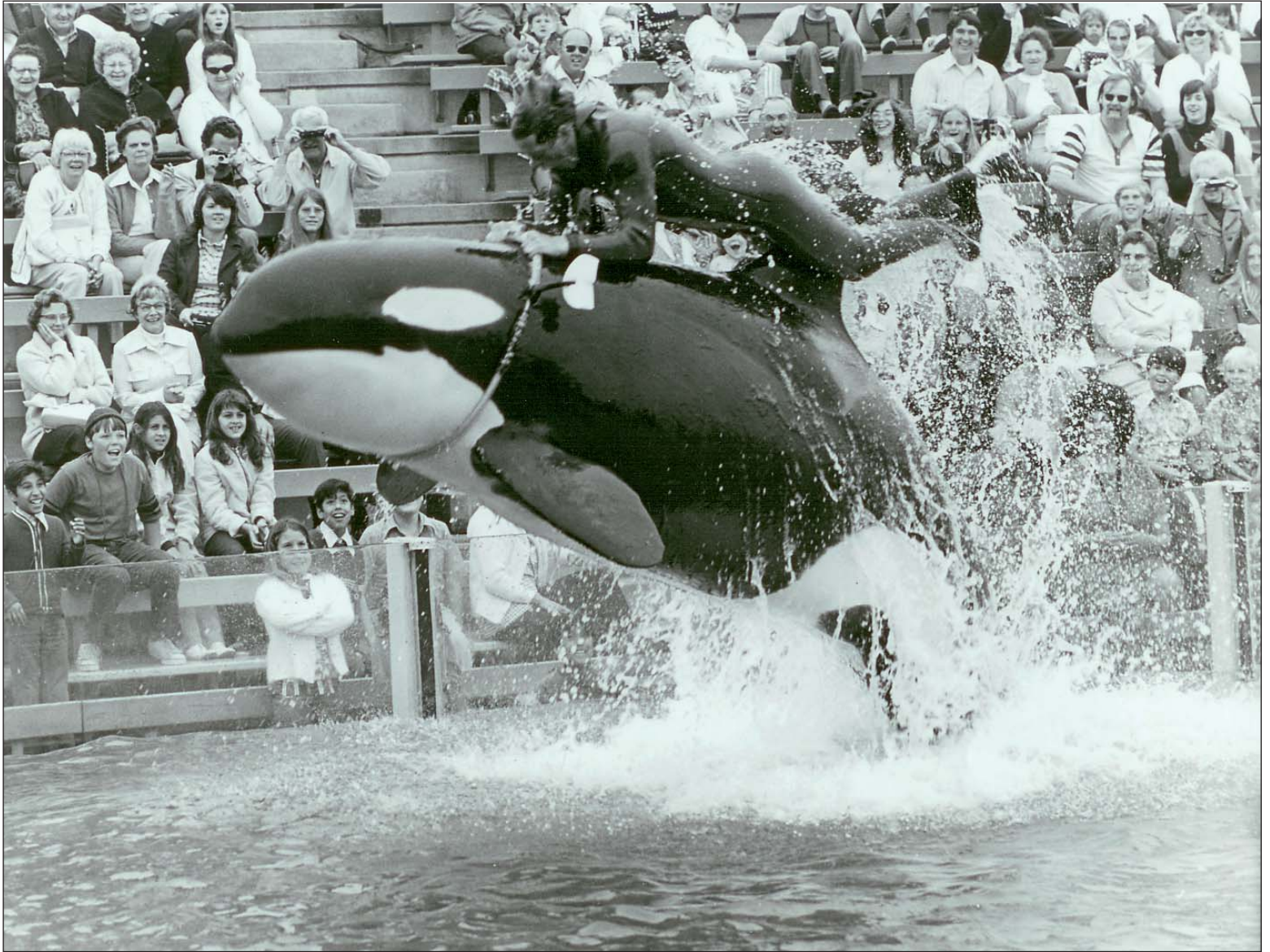
Ironically, people were taking out their frustrations on the whales too.

Soon after the capture, shots were



Garden Bay Pub collection photo

That’s Dick Gooldrup on the right looking on as an orca is hoisted on to a fishboat for transport. Orcas’ skin is very sensitive so handlers not only had to protect it from drying out but also shield it from the sun to prevent sunburns.



Isabel Gooldrup collection/Sea World photo

Possibly the biggest star to ever come from Pender Harbour is a whale. One of the whales caught locally performs at San Diego's Sea World with trainer Dean Hay in a production called "Shamu for Mayor."

heard from the direction of the whales penned near Dusenbury Island.

The fishermen ran over to check but could find nothing amiss.

About a month later, they received a letter from John Prescott of Marineland of the Pacific in California, describing a fresh bullet wound in one of the whales he had recently purchased.

"The most disconcerting fact about the wound is that we are con-

vinced that it did occur after the animals were captured. From its condition at Dr. Cornell's examination he estimated that it was no more than 10-15 days old. This coincides with the shots I heard from the direction of the island on the 16th or 17th of December," Prescott wrote.

"It is unfortunate that not all of the people in your area are as hospitable as you. Undoubtedly, even a closer watch will have to be posted should

you capture future whales in Pender Harbour."

But it didn't matter as this was to be the last capture for the Pender Harbour fishermen.

"They finally took our permit, which I was happy about. It got sort of like a disease." Reid says.

"You'd be headin' to go fishing in the fall and somebody would say they saw the killer whales off Scotch

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Pender Harbour orcas (cont.)

Fir (Point) or something like that. So you'd come back, pull your net off, put your whale net on and go chasing whales for two or three days."

Research conducted in the early '70s revealed that the whale populations weren't as large as previously

thought.

It turned out that whales spotted off the Gulf Islands were often the same pod spotted later in Johnstone Strait and researchers discovered the total coastal population of orcas to be approximately 450 — a number

considerably smaller than previous estimates.

Live capture of killer whales was officially ended in 1976 but by then just over 60 whales from the Pacific Coast had been sold into captivity with an average selling price of approximately \$21,000 each.

Although many were released, approximately 260 orcas were captured during this period.

Soon after, North American aquariums adopted new policies towards acquiring whales.

Many displayed only whales born into captivity or wild whales captured because they were ill or in danger.

But some, including the Vancouver Aquarium, still chose to import orcas from countries such as Iceland that still allowed commercial live capture.

By 1992, the Vancouver Aquarium had ceased collecting whales from the wild, regardless of their country of origin.

It phased out the captivity of wild whales altogether by 1996.

Despite the mistakes made, many still argue that the early capture and training of orcas afforded the public a greater appreciation for the mammal and, by so doing, helped to instigate its preservation.

For the fishermen of Pender Harbour, they were just catching fish.

"You've gotta remember that these were fishermen that, when they caught some weird fish or an injured seal or something of that nature, they'd phone and take them to the aquarium," Isabel Gooldrup says.

"So the whales were just another critter of the sea, I guess."



Isabel Gooldrup collection/Sea World photo

"The Shamus, husband and wife killer whale team, perform a spectacular double-whale hurdle in the all new 'Shamu for Mayor' show at Sea World," said the Sea World caption to this photo. "Mr. and Mrs. Shamu can be seen performing daily at Sea World with their three 'children,' Shamu Jr., Tricia and Baby Jackie in their million-gallon home."