MOBY DOLL ORCA SYMPOSIUM

The Moby Doll Orca Symposium: Reflections On Change was promoted as a “whale of a tale” and for those who attended the unique May 24-26, 2013 event on Saturna, it more than lived up to its billing.

The symposium itself, a day-long affair on Saturday, May 24 at the Saturna Island Recreation Centre, was the unique event’s focal-point and it was a sell-out.

Approximately 200 self-confessed “orca-holics” gathered to hear seven key orca scientists speak about the past, present and future of killer whales in local and regional coastal waters.

Most importantly, the symposium gave many a unique learning experience and a new outlook on how science, research and the future for killer whales are inexorably linked.

Saturna is part of that link and the symposium focused on how the capture of Moby Doll nearly 50 years ago off East Point triggered a complex sequence of events that forever changed the relationship between humans and orcas.

Many already know the Moby Doll backstory. In 1964 killer whales were considered vicious shark-like denizens of the deep and as Vancouver Aquarium founding curator Dr. Murray Newman told the symposium: “We believed at the time that killer whales were too dangerous to keep so that’s why we thought having a killer whale sculpture in the aquarium foyer would be the next best thing.”

The plan was to harpoon a killer whale off East Point and subsequently use the carcass as a model for a life-size sculpture and for scientific study. But the harpoon didn’t kill Moby Doll. The young orca was only snagged so it was quickly decided by Dr. Newman, Dr. Pat McGeer and others on the Vancouver Aquarium team to tow the orca to Vancouver Harbour for further study.

Once there, Moby Doll became an instant international celebrity since it was the first-ever killer whale to become captive.

Thus began an unparalleled learning experience for everyone -- scientists and the public alike -- even though Moby Doll died several months later from a lung infection, not the harpoon wound.

At the symposium Drs. Newman and McGeer gave enthralling eye-witness accounts of the Moby Doll capture and subsequent study.

For his part, Dr. Newman hinted about why he decided to take Moby Doll alive: “I always believed that live animals are more valuable than dead animals, especially for teaching young children and changing our attitudes.”

However, it was Dr. McGeer who sparked spontaneous applause at the symposium by recommending that a Moby Doll statue be unveiled next July at East Point to commemorate the event’s 50th anniversary.

“That capture was a pivotal time and this will be an opportunity for Saturna, B.C. and Canada to make Saturna a focal point of changing world attitudes,” he said. “Even though Moby Doll turned out to be a male, he was a doll and he changed the world.”

Dr. McGeer also called on government to suspend the herring fishery for a year as a first step to rebuilding the Inside Passage’s sea life.

Kathy Heise, a Research Associate at Vancouver Aquarium, gave a fascinating historic overview of B.C. whaling, and cited some astounding numbers. Between 1905 and 1967, for example, 24,524 whales were taken off the B.C. coast.

And while killer whales were not commercially valuable, many other larger whales certainly were actively harvested for products such as fertilizer, bone meal, glues, soaps, crayons and, yes, even lipstick.

One historic photo displayed by Heise showed eight workers at a coastal whaling processing station standing inside the open mouth of a huge white whale!

Addressing the contemporary state of orca research, Dr. John Ford, who heads the Cetacean Research Program for Fisheries and Oceans at its Nanaimo Research Station, explained key differences among the three main orca groups on our coast: the southern/northern residents, the transients and the offshore pods.

Orcas, he said, are now known to have distinct family dialects and they have highly complex social structures. The three groups also have different food sources (eg. chinook salmon, or seals, or sharks) and thus do not compete for food.

He replayed actual recordings of Moby Doll’s voice taken during its captivity and he paid a fitting tribute to the late Dr. Michael Biggs who pioneered a great deal of contemporary orca science, including how to identify individual orcas by their unique dorsal fin shapes.

Dr. Kenneth Balcomb, director of the Centre for Whale Research on San Juan Island and a foremost expert on the Southern Resident pods, warned that this group is still at risk and that these whales require about 25,000 pounds of Chinook salmon daily to survive.

He also called for the elimination of coastal fish farming because he said it introduces diseases and parasites into the marine eco-system.

Looking at the future for orcas, Dr. Lance Barrett-Lennard, head Cetologist at Vancouver Aquarium, gave the symposium a keen insight into killer whale social structure. “We’ve learned a tremendous amount about killer whales since Moby Doll,” he said. “Their culture is highly complex and they practise social learning in areas such as hunting and defence,” he added.

Future research challenges, he noted, include addressing wavering government support, recruiting new research scientists and building up citizen science as a vital research aid.

However, one of the most thought-provoking presentations came from marine toxicologist Dr. Peter Ross, a former federal marine mammal scientist who is now an Adjunct Professor at Simon Fraser University.

The Salish Sea, he said, is really a highly-industrialized, highly-populated, shallow inland waterway with low fresh water input. Currently there’s roughly one resident killer whale per 100,000 in human population producing contaminants. Consequently, the average male orca has 200-300 times more in contamination than the average human.

Noise from increased shipping and a dwindling Chinook supply are also long-term threats to local pods, he added.

But there is good news. Dr. Ross said studies of harbour seals show that since PCBs were banned in 1970, PCB contamination in killer whales has dropped significantly but it’s still too high. Plastic waste and oil spills remain as high-level risks, he added.

Fittingly, retired Senator Pat Carney paid a closing tribute to Symposium Convenor Richard Blagborne. “It was his vision that drove this symposium,” she noted. Blagborne said earlier that it’s hoped the symposium will be the start of a special relationship between orca scientists and Saturna. “We’d love to see this event lead to better whale watching and learning opportunities for our island,” he added.

– Brian Lewis, reporter