

SPRINGER'S (A-73) JOURNEY HOME

Michael Kundu, Project SeaWolf;

Photography by John Beath, Project SeaWolf

The following report chronicles the reunification efforts conducted in the later part of July 2002, to return **A-73**, or **Springer** the orphan orca whale calf found this past January in Puget Sound, back to her home waters in Johnston Strait, central British Columbia, Canada.

The effort to reunite this estranged orca calf with her family group in Canada is unprecedented - this is the first documented circumstance that a wild orca has successfully re-integrated to a wild pod. Everyone involved in this project considers the events currently taking place as a remarkable step forward in the accumulation of scientific and behavioural data about orca whales.

Accordingly, the project had been expensive, and readers are asked to consider contributing to the Vancouver



Springer placed in transit tank aboard the 'Catalina Jet'

Aquarium - the non-profit organisation that worked so diligently to bring Springer home and to advance the body of knowledge about orcas.

Please make a donation to the **Vancouver Aquarium** by visiting www.vanaqua.org. This was an unusual, unprecedented opportunity to learn more about orcas, and to learn a great deal about how humans might effectively help reunify 'estranged' or missing whale back to their own clan.

As of July 31, 2002, Springer appears to have successfully reunited with the **A5s**, a familial pod summering in the waters of Johnston Strait. Springer's tale is one of success, and it proves that whales removed from their home waters, at even very young ages, retain enough of their linguistic and behavioural knowledge to successfully be 'wild' again.

The knowledge we obtained through the grace of Springer is still in its infancy; this type of knowledge will be absolutely vital for the future, particularly in a world where orcas and other odontocetes declining in numbers worldwide. We could use this in the St. Lawrence/Saqueney River confluence, in Cooke Inlet Alaska, even in the Pacific northwest where the southern resident killer whale population is rapidly dwindling.

The success of this effort was possible due to the diligent efforts of a few key groups and individuals, including (but not limited to) the **Vancouver Aquarium** staff, directors and veterinarians, **Jeff Foster's Rescue team, John Nightingale, David Huff, John Ford, Lance Barrett Lennard, Marilyn Joyce**, the **Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Clint Wright, David Bain, Marilyn Dalheim**, and others.

The Path Toward Reunification

In our perspective, the idea of reunification became reality when external and internal forces compelled the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS, now known as NOAA Fisheries) to initiate the capture of the calf. NMFS, despite even the opinions of its own assembled panel of experts, delayed the decision to bring Springer in until it was almost too late for her. Fortunately, internal efforts by SeaWolf and a few other key players impelled the agency to initiate the steps necessary to bring Springer in.

The tide of public pressure, and the threat of negative internal publicity and Congressional inquiries, and even concerns by the WA State Ferry system, finally encouraged NMFS to start the collection and delivery process. The last barrier to reunification was removed after NMFS told the public that the project was failing because... "no vessel adequately suited to carry Springer back to BC was available."

SW Boardmember **Bob McLaughlin** ultimately procured the donation of the 'Catalina Jet', a well-known 144-foot,



Springer in loading sling, Manchester, WA



Project team & Vancouver Aquarium staff monitor Springer's condition during trip

high speed catamaran that was owned by the **Nichols Brothers Boat Builders** on Whidbey Island. “The \$8-million dollar vessel was fast, comfortable, and the Nichols Brothers were very happy to loan us the vessel for this project,” said McLaughlin, “We rigged a tank aboard the vessel, measuring 6-meters by 1.5-meters in size – essentially it was a modified cargo box, and we located on the rear deck of the ship.”

The plan finally seemed scheduled to go through. Then, on the morning of Friday, July 12, the reunification team decided to postpone the operation, as the Catalina Jet developed problems with the propulsion system. Debris clogged the jets, and unremoved barnacles on the hull prevented the catamaran from reaching its top speed of 40 nautical miles-per-hour, a speed that was necessary to reduce Springer’s travel time aboard the vessel.



Springer greeted by Kwakiutl Band members, Dong Chong Bay, BC

The project was recommenced at 5am on Saturday, July 13. The Catalina Jet’s hull and propulsion system was

repaired, and the 740-kilometer journey from Manchester Bay to Hansen Island was anticipated to last between 10 to 12 hours. “Springer was vocalizing calmly, and appeared to be quite docile and relaxed when we transferred her from the sling into the tank,” recalled McLaughlin. “The team wrapped her in towels soaked in ice and put a shade over her body to keep her cool – the goal was to drop her temperature a little to match the colder Canadian waters where she would be taken.”

SeaWolf’s Boardmember **Bob Wood**, piloting the “**Shelmar**”, travelled to Johnston Strait to prepare for the Jet’s arrival. The Shelmar’s twin jet engines and



Arrival at Dong Chong Bay & transfer to barge, Hanson Island, BC

high speeds helped her keep pace with the Catalina Jet in the Strait, and Bob Wood was also

provided the Shelmar (which had been used to monitor Springer off Seattle since January 2002) as the official media support and staging vessel during the planned off-loading effort at Hanson Island.



SeaWolf’s Captain Bob McLaughlin takes a turn piloting the Catalina Jet enroute to BC

After an uneventful journey through the Strait of Georgia, the Catalina Jet arrived at Dong Chong Bay on the northeast end of Hanson Island at about 6:45pm on Saturday, July 13. Rescue team members lifted Springer from the ship to a barge using a specially designed sling, and from there moved her into a netted pen in Dong Chong Bay. Waiting in the net were salmon, provided by members of the **Kwakwaka’wakw First Nations** band. Springer’s arrival was met by members of Canada’s First Nations bands, who presented the whale with a greeting ceremony, and offered commemorative gifts and symbolic items to members of the Vancouver Aquarium and the rescue team.



First Nation’s bandmember present Mask to VA’s John Nightingale, Hanson Island, BC

Springer was finally in a pen back in her home waters, and she fed on salmon contently.

Early on Sunday July 14 (1am), the first communication with her extended family occurred.

Springer’s grandmother’s pod, lead by **Kelsey (A-24)** passed the net pen. Springer responded to the calls by vocalizing loudly, pressing the net and breaching in the pen. The decision to keep her until daylight was made, since the team wanted to monitor her introduction to the pod, and as she called, her relatives responded, but they kept moving.

At 1pm that afternoon, the A-11 sub-pod (Springer’s cousin’s

group) lead by **Skagit (A-35)** and the pod's matriarch **Scimitar (A-12)**, passed the pen and stopped at the mouth of Dong Chong Bay, almost as if confused by the familiar sound of Springer's calls. The pod then turned toward the Bay and started a spirited vocal exchange with the calf. At that point, Researcher **John Ford** consulted the team, and the group decided to open the pen and let Springer free.

At about 3:20pm, the calf rushed outward, grabbing a salmon as she went. She had been affixed with 2



Jeff Foster oversees the transfer

yellow suction cup-mounted transmitters, designed to drop off in a few days, to help track her. Springer moved to 100 meters of the group and stopped; the group also stopped. Spy-hopping and vocalizing, Springer started playing with logs and kelp, and as the pod turned west toward Blackney Pass, Springer started to follow them, then turned back and let the

A-11s head to Robson Bight alone. "We think that the A-11's are a great pod to have her join," remarked Vancouver Aquarium's **David Huff**, one of the main veterinarians on the reunification team.

That same afternoon, SeaWolf Director **Michael Kundu** was leading a SeaWolf youth education field kayaking expedition, called 'Northern Venture 2002', just west of Robson Bight at approximately 4pm, when the A-11s passed under their kayaks. "We were watching for Springer after contact with the Robson Bight interpretative patrol boat, but she had turned back before the group had ventured into the Johnston Strait," said Kundu.

Springer was finally free, and continuous observation were conducted by a variety of whale advocates, including **Dr. Lance Barrett-Lennard, Helena Symonds, Paul Spong, Graeme Ellis, Jim Borrowman, OrcaLab**, and dozens of Northern Vancouver Island residents and businesses.



Springer in sling, being moved from barge to net pen in Dong Chong Bay

The Current Picture

As of July 31, 2002, Springer is healthy and in good form, along with whales from **A1, A4, A5, I15** and possibly **I31**. Researchers **Alexandra Morton** and **Helena Symonds** have confirmed that Springer is in the company of these whales, occasionally even venturing into Robson Bight/Michael Bigg Ecological Reserve, to the rubbing beaches.

The most promising recent news is that, three times since July 18, Springer has been seen close in the company of **A51 (Nodales)**, a 16-year old female whale from **A5 pod**. A73's grandmother Kelsey was also spotted near the company of the three youngsters early that morning, so it seems as if family bonds have finally been re-connected. Nodales and her 8-year old brother, **A61 (Surge)**, both also orphans, are excellent companions for Springer, and it is optimistically hoped that the A5 group will adopt Springer permanently. Lance Barrett-Lennard, and staff from the Vancouver Aquarium indicate that there have been no recent reports of Springer approaching boats in the past few days, so perhas she is learning how to be 'a wild orca' through the tutorage of her new, young companions.

Finally, Springers repatriation and reunification with her family seem to be a success story, and researchers are presently observation, and learning volumes, from this unexpected situation. SeaWolf salutes all the players, mentioned and unmentioned, who have made this effort succeed, and we hope these new alliances will result in many more positive, cooperative rescue and conservation alliances in the future.



Springer finally placed into pen at Dong Chong Bay. The next day, the A11s moved close to the pen & communicate with Springer. At 3:20pm, Springer is freed & rejoins her clan