Whale Culture Threatened by Big Oil's Pollution

Contributed by Bridget Algiere, Brandon Keim
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Editor's note: our new featured blogger Bridget Algiere from Reality Sandwich has inadvertently turned us on to more than whale culture, which is a whale of a subject in itself. It turns out that the Exxon Valdez spill spells the end of a most unique killer whale pod in Alaska. What do we do? "Fill 'er up!"

A recent study reveals how understanding cultural diversity amongst whales may help ensure their survival. The idea that whales could sustain a culture is a relatively recent hypothesis. It was not until the late 1960s that the recordings of humpback whale songs provided a glimpse into cetacean communication. However, over the last decade, two pods found off North America's west coast were found to have different dialects and feeding habits.

Sperm whales live in small social units linked by maternal lineage, and form larger groups only with other units from the same clan. In the Pacific, these groups are large and tightly linked. In the Atlantic, they're small and loosely distributed. Vocalizations vary widely between groups, as do their habits, from hunting patterns to babysitting, yet their genes are very much alike. Similarly, killer whales have highly varied dialects and ways of life, even while sharing the same habitat — the aquatic equivalent of a neighborhood populated by two different ethnic groups.

Original blog at
realitysandwich.com

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More on whale culture: Hidden Whale Culture Could Be Critical to Species Survival

Oil industry risk to whales

Unique Killer-Whale Pod Doomed by Exxon Valdez, by Brandon Keim, Wired, March 24, 2009

Most of Prince William Sound's animal populations will someday recover from the lingering effects of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. One, however, will not: a community of killer whales unlike any other in the world.

"It's a separate population. Their genetics, their acoustics, are different from any other killer whales that we see in the North Pacific," said Craig Matkin, director of the North Gulf Oceanic Society, who has studied the region's whales for three decades.

Known to researchers as the AT1 pod, the whales' home range fell within the 11,000 square miles of crude oil dumped by the ship when it ran aground March 24, 1989. Nine of the pod's 22 whales subsequently died, likely from oil ingestion — a blow from which the group, already struggling to cope with pollution and declining populations of the seals which they need for food, never recovered. [see above link for full report and links]