



ALISON WOOD
is a WDC policy
manager

As well as their family units, sperm whales also belong to larger communities known as clans



Family values

Whale culture is crucial to the survival of the community

The first whale I ever listened to was a sperm whale. It was 30 years ago, aboard *Song of the Whale*, and we sailed from the Azores into the deep Atlantic realm of the sperm whale.

Lowering hydrophones (underwater microphones) into the swell, we discovered whales talk to one another a lot, regardless of whether it's day or night. Standing on the moonlit deck, under the stars, listening to whale conversation beneath the silvery waves, is one of the most magical experiences of my life.

And I didn't know then that the otherworldly voices I heard belonged to a family of sperm whales vocally expressing their cultural identity.

Female sperm whales live in family groups with their youngsters. Their commitment to one another is absolute, their bonds unbreakable and their lives communal and interdependent. Life on the move in an ocean that is itself in a state of flux means sperm whales are surrounded by the unfamiliar. The only constant is their family.

To feed they must venture into the perilous abyss in search of squid. Sperm whale life is not easy and family is everything – it's their



CLAN IDENTITY
 Protecting whale culture is important because it matters to the whales. For the individuals, their families and clans, culture is an integral part of their way of being. The whales' shared indigenous wisdom and the way they do things are important to them – their cultures are their identities, they define who they are.

Sperm whale families use codas, a unique form of click-based communication, to talk to one another



Shane Gero listening in Dominica

reason for being, their home, their refuge, their one and only certainty.

DIFFERENT CLANS

Families of sperm whales belong to bigger communities called clans and each clan has a distinctive behavioural pattern. One clan might swim in a wiggly formation and stay away from land, another may prefer to swim in straight lines and stay closer to land. Families from different clans do not meet and mix, even if they live in the same region or hear each other while roaming.

Sperm whales are chattiest when they are socialising near the surface and before they dive to hunt. Scientists call these social calls 'codas'. They are patterns of short click sequences ... click-click-clickclickclick, or click-click-click-click-click. Families have unique codas and seem to produce them to reaffirm their bonds to one another and broadcast their identity.

Baby sperm whales take two or three years to learn their family's coda repertoire. As with human youngsters, they spend years learning how to be a responsible grown-up, including how to

'Social learning and knowledge sharing is the basis of sperm whale culture'

feed themselves, how to relate to others so that they can belong, and all about their family traditions in relation to hunting, defending and travelling behaviour.

EARTH'S LIVING HERITAGE

Social learning and knowledge sharing is the basis of sperm whale culture and is crucial to the survival of their families and wider cultural community. Although all sperm whale families hunt, roam, socialise, defend and

babysit, their culture determines how they do these things – and this varies a lot. Think of their culture as a set of essential tools used by the family or clan to solve problems, thrive and survive where they live.

It's time to put our differences with Earth's fellow beings to one side and embrace our remarkable similarities and shared futures. We are all in this together and so we need to shift away from thinking about 'them and us' and towards thinking about 'all of us'.

All cultures – whale, dolphin, human, bird, elephant, chimpanzee and many, many others – are part of Earth's living heritage. Protecting them should be the most natural thing in the world.

WHY CULTURAL DIVERSITY MATTERS FOR CONSERVATION

To give sperm whales a fighting chance to cope with so many human threats and survive, we need to protect their cultural diversity. We now know that for deeply cultural beings like these, conserving genetic diversity is not enough. Your support has already enabled our

expert team to gain the recognition of international conservation policymakers for this approach, and we've worked in partnership with whale biologists and the Convention for Migratory Species. Shane Gero is collaborating with

other whale researchers to map sperm whale cultures globally so that this can be integrated into conservation policy. Adding cultural diversity to action plans often complicates conservation strategies, but it matters because it offers a recipe for conservation success.



Conservation successes are no fluke

ACCRA'S TALE

Accra is three years old and the youngest member of her Caribbean sperm whale family. She still nurses and is dependent on her family for just about everything. Having recently come through the babbly stage, Accra has mastered the family language of codas. When the sea is rough and noisy, Accra reassures herself by

nuzzling against her grandmother, Lady Oracle. Granny touches her granddaughter affectionately with her flipper and she suckles. Accra won't go hungry and is safe with Lady Oracle while her mum, Rounder, hunts squid. Lady Oracle babysits Accra alongside her youngest child, Aurora, at the surface. Rounder

needs her whole family to help her raise Accra. Over many years Accra will learn through her family's collective knowledge and wisdom – their culture – how to belong and survive as a Caribbean sperm whale.

● To learn more about Accra's family visit The Dominica Sperm Whale Project at www.thespermwhaleproject.org

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