

Orca in the Arctic Ocean

Icy, crystal-clear water, mountain landscapes with peaks of snow, cloudy red-orange sunset and in the middle of it all: a large, majestic male orca in the fjords of Norway, photographed by Adun Rikardsen and published in 2018. His image also made him Nature Photographer of the Year. It shows the power of the killer whale, the adaptability and uniqueness of the animal and its habitat, all of this is depicted in the image and so much more is behind it....

Orcas are one of the most intelligent creatures on our planet. They live in complex social structures, in other words, just like us humans, they have family, this is called pod or school. They care for the weak, share their food with the youngest, the elders teach their skills to the young, they communicate with each other, can plan and like us, each orca family has its own culture. They are very similar to us humans on many levels, yet very importantly, orcas grieve just as we do, if not more so. They are at least as attached to their family members as we are because of their strong social sense. In fact, many researchers believe that orcas feel even stronger emotions when they lose someone because the area of the brain responsible for emotional attachment is even larger than in humans. When an orca strands, the whole family grieves, they wait for him, often this behaviour leads to another stranding as the family tries to help the animal. When a juvenile dies, the mother often keeps it on the surface for almost a week and takes it with her. If a single orca is stranded and cannot find its way back to its pod, then it is doomed, because a single orca cannot survive without its family. The pods stay together for life, only a few animals leave to breed, but they stay close to their mother for life. So, it is very bad when an orca loses an animal of the pod. Unfortunately, due to current developments, there are more and more strandings of orcas, trapping of the animals or accidents with fishing nets. Many of the animals that are native to harbours become victims of strandings as their environment changes due to shipping traffic and they must resort to other food resources closer to shore. In addition, orcas are also captured for our amusement. Various water parks around the world keep orcas that are wild caught. Especially the number of water parks in China and Russia has been growing rapidly in recent years. But there are still such parks in Europe, too, where the majestic animals are kept in very confined spaces, sometimes with unfamiliar food and no occupation. Especially for such intelligent animals, this is torture, which can be seen, among other things, in the non-natural behaviour and the high number of diseases that the animals develop.

In the wild, the animals not only have family, but they can also live out their often very sophisticated hunting behaviour. Just as the orcas' language differs from region to region, their hunting behaviour and food also varies. Orcas off New Zealand, for example, hunt close to the coast and eat rays, among other things, from which they surgically remove the liver during the hunt, as this provides the most energy. They have so refined their hunting methodology that they know that the rays are defenceless if you turn them on their backs due to a reflex that then paralyzes them. Orcas use this trick when hunting rays and sharks. Another school of orcas on the coast of South America hunt mainly seals, stranding themselves to get to their prey. It's a balancing act, because after stranding they must use the waves to get back into the water. The older orcas teach the younger ones these complex hunting techniques by practising with them, for example with a dead animal or even with seaweed. This behaviour shows how intelligent orcas are, they have the second largest brain of all creatures on earth and the third largest in relation to body size. Orcas put a lot of time into raising their young and working out their hunting methods, so they rely heavily on the other members of the family for this too. Another reason for the death of the animals is fishing nets or ghost nets. This does not only affect orcas, but other whales also suffer from these nets as they get entangled and drown. There are millions of ghost nets worldwide. The death of whales is not only bad for their families, but whales also make a significant contribution to the mitigation of climate change, because whales are CO₂ reservoirs, they store on average as much CO₂ as 1375 trees.

Orcas are therefore extremely intelligent animals that bear a lot of resemblance to us humans, which is why this unique animal has been given a place in the exhibition. Because they belong to the nature of our earth, which is worth protecting, because they also suffer from the influences of humans. Even if you don't recognise it at first glance, there is so much more behind the picture. By studying these animals, we can also learn how to protect them, for example by supporting organisations that campaign for the removal of ghost nets, thoughtful consumption of fish or organisations that campaign for the welfare of orcas and further research into these animals.

The fragile paradise – Essays on issues of selected photographs

