flying free

RSPCA faces the future
A LEADING New Zealand orca researcher, Ingrid Visser has formed a trust to "Adopt an Orca", a conservation plan to protect these magnificent animals who roam in our waters.

What are orca? Best known to children and movie-goers from the film Free Willy, orca are the largest species of the dolphin family and are sometimes called killer whales.

Many people believe that orca are the kings of the ocean and above danger. But, says Ingrid, such people are sadly mistaken.

"Orca have problems to deal with, many of which are man-induced. Everyone is aware of whaling for the big whales like humpbacks and sperm whales, but not many people realise orca are hunted, even in New Zealand waters.

"Although whaling is illegal in New Zealand, it continues down in the Antarctica. Small cetaceans, such as orca, are not protected down there."

Orca are also under threat from nets. They either become tangled in them when chasing fish, or get caught in drift nets which still float unattended around our coast.

One reason some beach strandings occur is because of entanglement in nets. Another key factor in strandings is when a cetacean eats a plastic bag, which can either get stuck in the stomach or in the airway, causing death.

But one of the greatest dangers orca face today comes from boats, where they can be hit and badly injured by propellers.

Ingrid quotes the case of Ben, a young orca who liked to hunt for stingrays with his family, until one day he chased a ray into shallow water and got stuck on the beach.

He was refloated by a group of volunteers and kept out of trouble for another year, until he was again spotted, this time with wounds on his back caused by a boat. His fin was sliced in two.

Ingrid said she held little hope for his survival.

"But his family must have looked after him, because a year after he was hit he is still alive. The back part of his fin has collapsed, he is no longer the pretty animal he once was, but he is alive!"

Ben is not among Ingrid's adoptees, but for $45 a year through the Adopt an Orca Trust, you can adopt Rocky, or maybe Corkscrew (named because he has a twisted dorsal fin), or what about Star and her calf Rinji? Two for the price of one.

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What you can do to help orca

- Don't let plastic bags blow away from you on the beach.
- Don't throw plastic bags overboard.
- Be responsible when you are out in your boat and see orca or dolphin. Either stop your engine and let them pass, or drive at a steady speed in a single direction.
- If you are in a boat and meet a dolphin, approach parallel to, and slightly behind, the slowest dolphin. Or stay well clear, move ahead of them and then stop your boat.
- Do not cut a dolphin off from its group and do not feed the dolphins.
- When within 300 metres of a dolphin, travel no faster than idling speed (no wake).
- Dolphins have very sensitive hearing both above and below water, so keep quiet. Sudden loud noises, such as a person splashing into the water, can alarm the dolphin.

PM gives Japan the message

Prime Minister Helen Clark has backed a Greenpeace petition calling for a global whale sanctuary and says her Government will continue New Zealand's opposition to whaling. She also accused Japan of "chequebook diplomacy" by using aid packages in the South Pacific to boost the number of countries supporting Japan at the International Whaling Commission. The PM said: "This sort of approach is deplorable. Protection for whales is at the forefront of public attention again because of Japan's refusal to acknowledge global opposition to its whaling programme in the Southern Ocean."