

# Orca are Ingrid's life

Ingrid Visser travels the country following her passion — orca



Roundtop the New Zealand orca stranded at Hokianga harbour in 2006. Photo: Juan Copello

By ANDRÉ HUEBER

After 17 years, Ingrid Visser still gets butterflies in her stomach when the orca hotline starts ringing. Depending on the time, weather and location of an orca sighting, Ingrid will tow her red inflatable to the nearest boat ramp and launch it by herself before speeding out to sea in anticipation of an encounter.

In the rush to get into the water with the mammals there often isn't time to anchor and she hopes her boat doesn't blow away.

Dr Visser, 42, moved to Matapouri on Northland's Tutukaka Coast with her sister and parents when she was 13. She established the orca research trust in 1992 after completing a zoology degree.

One of the first encounters she had was while studying at Leigh Marine Laboratory near Warkworth.

"One day someone yelled out 'Orca'. I grabbed my mask, snorkel and fins and had a phenomenal encounter with them. It jelled in my mind that this was what I wanted to be doing."

There are only around 200 orca (orcinus orca) in New Zealand and Ingrid has named many of them.

New Zealand orca made more approaches to humans than anywhere else in the world, Ingrid said. The reason for their friendly behaviour stemmed from the high number of orca strandings and the subsequent rescues.

"There's lots of intimate human contact — and it's traumatic for those involved. The empathy people have towards stranded whales manifests itself in such a way that the animals can understand that people are trying to help them."

"It's like someone at car accident who doesn't speak English. Humans are a soothing voice and an arm."

Her research led her to become the first person in the world to discover that orca fed on stingrays.

"People asked me what I had been smoking — either I was wrong or the orca were strange. They had become stuck and couldn't think outside the box."

She said she was fortunate to be the only orca

researcher in New Zealand.

"It's difficult to be the only one and there's not enough support people to borrow ideas off but it was a good thing in hindsight. It made me adapt more quickly to what orca were doing versus what they 'should' be doing."

Ingrid's research methods have caused controversy, with some people critical of her getting in the water with orca.

"As observers we're likely to influence their behaviour and some people believe the change is greater if I get in the water with them, and they'd be right, but just because change is there, doesn't mean it's bad."

The work of chimpanzee researcher Jane Goodall and gorilla researcher Dian Fossey had shown what happened when humans spent a lot of time in an animal's habitat, Ingrid said.

"The animals become habituated to humans and, although their behaviour might be slightly influenced by people, you get to see them acting and doing things you wouldn't see any other way."

The thrust of the orca trust is to protect orca and their habitat. Ingrid doesn't get paid but has her expenses covered through donations.

"A fair bit of the funding is from my own money."

Ingrid also works part time as an eco-tourism guide in Antarctica and New Zealand.

"Everything I earn goes back to the trust, but I don't have a problem with it. It's my life and what I do."

It was her ambition to have an endorsement fund with full-time paid staff and scholarships for students, so "what I've started doesn't end with me".



Ingrid with 6-year-old Fuego (Fire) off Waiheke Island. She says New Zealand orca make more approaches to humans than anywhere else in the world. Photo: Juan Copello

## Recent New Zealand orca strandings

- Ben, Mangawhai, 1997
- Double Dent and her son Rudie with his brother or sister, Taiharuru 2004
- Roundtop, Hokianga, 2006
- Rakey Cousteau, Manukau, 2008
- Nobby, Papamoa, 2008

If you see orca anywhere around the New Zealand coast, Ingrid would like to hear from you on 0800 SEE ORCA

For more information on NZ orca check out [www.orcaresearch.org](http://www.orcaresearch.org)