

Secrets of Whales: Brian Skerry, James Cameron film 'alien species on our planet'

21 Apr, 2021 06:08 AM

[Video]

Video / National Geographic, Disney+

By **Thomas Bywater**

Writer and Digital Producer

A film-maker's encounter with orca of Northland surprised him - they invited him to dinner, writes Thomas Bywater.

While James Cameron was in a Wellington dive tank filming imaginary underwater aliens, on the other side of country, another film-maker, Brian Skerry, was about to have a close encounter of another kind.

The American photographer has been diving with whales for four decades, but what he saw in the waters around Northland took him by surprise:

An invitation to dine with a pod of Killer Whales.

Diving out of Tutukākā with Kiwi marine biologist Ingrid Visser, they found themselves at the centre of a hunting party of orca.

Since being set aside as a reserve in 1971, the waters have been reclaimed by New Zealand's aquatic taonga. "It's the place where I first saw the possibility of marine conservation," says Skerry, who is a regular visitor to the shores.

The coastline around Tutukākā and Poor Knights Islands has been a favourite with marine photographers since Jacques Cousteau in the late 1960s, but no camera had ever seen this.

The mother of the pod was flipping stingray on their back. Performing the trick for her young calves, it is a hunting technique unique to New Zealand's pods.

"It was just extraordinary."

More extraordinary still, Skerry found himself the focus of attention for the whales – presented with an eagle ray, caught by an orca.

"We got very lucky not only to see the orca hunting rays, but then to have this moment where she drops it in front of me. And looks at me and then the ray as if to say: 'hey, are you going to eat it?'"



Close encounter: An orca presents Brian Skerry with a tasty morsel, near Tutukākā. Photo / Disney+, Hayes Baxley [sic: photo credit should be Kina Scollay].

It is a feeding frenzy of black whale and white teeth. In the murky Northland waters, it must have been hard to tell if he was considered as a guest or the next course.

They are called "Killer Whales" for a reason, aren't they?

"Definitely they're capable of that – but there's never been a recorded incident of an attack on humans in the wild." Being face to grinning face with the largest predator on the planet, is an encounter Skerry describes "like being scanned by a supercomputer". There is a recognition between species with intelligence, with culture.

Over the past three years, Skerry has been collecting encounters like the one-off near Tutukākā for a book and TV series, *Secrets of the Whales*. Using spy cameras in the remote reaches of the Arctic, or diving into the middle of a hunt – Skerry and his team have captured many never-seen-before moments. However, their biggest discovery was made observing changing behaviour, from New Zealand to the Arctic Circle.

Whales keep "secrets" not only from humans but from one another.

"Like humans, genetically identical species have different culture depending on where they live geographically," Skerry says.

Hunting techniques and secret knowledge is held by separate pods and sometimes individuals within families of whales.



Alien Intelligence: Orcas in New Zealand follow a unique hunting technique. Photo / Disney+, Kina Scollay

Orcas are the most numerous whales not only in New Zealand's waters. A pod of black fins are a not uncommon sight darting around the shallows from the Hauraki Gulf to the Norwegian Fjords. While New Zealand's whales have

discovered a taste for rays, Norwegian orca have developed techniques for catching herring. In Patagonia, whales have a dramatic method of launching themselves halfway up a beach to catch unsuspecting seal pups.

"Each has worked out a unique feeding strategy for eating their preferred ethnic foods. That's described as culture," Skerry says.

The whale encounter near Whananaki showed a hunting technique not known anywhere else in the world. The idea that we share our planet with other intelligent species has gradually left the realms of science-fiction and become the basis of science fact. This is an angle that has caught the attention of director James Cameron, who is currently filming his Avatar film sequels in New Zealand.

Looking back at footage of the on a monitor in Wellington, Cameron is confronted by what can only be a "recognition of intelligence".

Skerry and Cameron have worked on subsea projects before, and they are turning Skerry's book into a documentary as remarkable as anything in the Avatar sequels. *Secrets of the Whales* has plenty of parallels between Cameron's Hollywood projects.

Alien actor and long-time collaborator, Sigourney Weaver is to narrate the documentary for National Geographic.

Although both film-makers have a shared interest in underwater exploration, Cameron has praised Skerry's nature photography as an inspiration.

"Every time he goes into the water with his camera he has a chance of seeing something humans have never seen before," Cameron says.

Secrets of the Whales delivers on its promise, showing never-before-seen glimpses of these animals. Beluga calves playing under the icecaps, a mother Sperm Whale suckling a calf and what appears to be a pod of orca marking a death in the family, to name a few.

However, the biggest revelation to emerge from a lifetime diving with the animals is how much we share with the marine mammals.

"These whales play games," Skerry says. "They show grief and mourning and invest a lot of time in the next generation."

"They are an alien species on our planet but are very much like us."

National Geographic's Secrets of the Whales is released on Earth Day, April 22, on Disney+

Last accessed: 22/06/2022

<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/travel/secrets-of-whales-brian-skerry-james-cameron-film-alien-species-on-our-planet/WW6QIIQQ6EW4TL4XCHPULJKI2I/>

Archived 22/06/2022:

<https://archive.ph/bARYS>