

Stuff

# National Portrait: Ingrid Visser, Orca researcher and protector

Nikki Macdonald 05:00, Sep 15 2018

[Video]

An orca stranded in Marlborough was helped back out to sea by volunteers and orca expert Ingrid Visser

An email to Dr Ingrid Visser bounces back, again. "I've had to unexpectedly head over to Europe to help Morgan the orca," the message says, as if that were a perfectly mundane out-of-office response.

It's just another day in the hectic life of New Zealand's orca woman. No wonder her last boyfriend joked he needed a satellite tracker to find her. Relationships, she says, start with oohs and aahs, and end with "Honestly?".

"It starts with 'Wow, you work with whales and dolphins' and becomes 'When are the whales and dolphins going to come second?' It starts with 'Wow, you work down in Antarctica' and becomes 'When are you

ever home?' 'Wow, I've seen you on TV' becomes 'Are we ever going to do something where people don't recognise you?'

"The animals come first. There's not many guys that like to play second fiddle to a whale."

Call it passion or obsession, but everything plays second fiddle to Visser's killer whales. The 52-year-old blonde dynamo, who has such trouble with numbers it took her a year to memorise her own phone number, has battled her own limitations and the scorn of the academic establishment to build from scratch an understanding of New Zealand orca.



ROSA WOODS/STUFF

The life of an orca researcher is hectic and unpredictable, but even after 25 years on the job, Ingrid Visser rarely comes away from an orca encounter without experiencing a wow moment.

Ruddy-cheeked Visser cradles a hot chocolate and strips off the Yeti-layers she's donned against a brute Wellington day. It was 18° C back home in Tutukaka, Northland.

She's down for an expensive conservation conference, but if there's a call to her orca hotline, she'll be out like a shot, hitching up the Naiad inflatable and scanning the horizon for distinctive tall black dorsal fins.

Since 1992, when she had no boat and a tiny car that couldn't have pulled the skin off a cup of hot milk, Visser has identified 130 individual orca around New Zealand.

Some she recognises immediately – the boat propeller-slashed fin of Ben, whom she saved in 1997. He was stranded and appeared to be bleeding from the mouth so was going to be shot. She hired a helicopter to reach the orca before the guy with the gun.



SUPPLIED

Visser with Miracle, who was stranded and refloated in 1993 and has since had a calf.

Then there's Miracle, whom Visser rescued from stranding in 1993. Whenever she sees Visser's boat she comes up to check her out.

One orca likes rubdowns, to another she blows bubbles. Of course they have personalities, she says: "100 per cent". They even have culture – behaviour taught through generations, not passed on through genes. Like the small group that hunt dolphins like stealth bombers.

Visser knows her interactions with orca threaten her reputation as an objective scientist, given her vocal opposition to orca being kept captive and made to do tricks. But she never feeds them, never

entices them and never restrains them. And developing relationships helps gather data for her research.



Growing up, Visser was fascinated with whales and dolphins and dreamed of being a vet.

Her father, a Dutch immigrant, wanted to take the family to visit Holland, but flights were too expensive. So he bought a yacht and the family sailed around the world for four years instead.

Visser was 16 when they left so finished school by correspondence. She'd already been inspired by the book her dad had given her, *The Boy Who Sailed Around the World Alone*. The real deal just reinforced the idea you could shape your own future.

*"It inspired me to realise that you don't have to be ordinary. You don't have to fit into that box, of the 2.5 kids and the dog and the station wagon and the picket fence, yadi, yadi. It's not even a matter of thinking outside the box. It's actually imagining there is no box."*

*They survived storms so epic that the boat heeled at a 45° angle, looking up at the waves, which towered so high dolphins surfed above them. She saw so many whales and dolphins she could identify them in the dark.*





RICKY WILSON/STUFF

*Volunteers help a stranded orca at Marlborough's Marfell's Beach. Visser and army helpers managed to safely refloat the whale.*

*When Visser returned to New Zealand, she worked at an aquarium while studying marine biology. That both cultivated her anger at the captivity industry, and set her on a path to researching orca in New Zealand.*

*The aquarium included migratory sharks, which would smash their snouts trying to get out of their tanks. No longer pretty, the aquarium would fish for replacements.*

*"That was the pivotal point for me. So I quit my job. I came to realise that education doesn't outweigh welfare. We cannot use that as an excuse, because what are we teaching if that's education? Are we*

*teaching them that it's OK to abuse animals, it's OK to put them through agony, mental and physical, just so that we can 'teach our kids'."*

*Before she quit, Sir David Attenborough launched his book *Trials of Life* at the aquarium. On the cover were the orca that hurl themselves on to the beach in Argentina to grab sea lions. "How do I get there?" she asked her hero. "He's the one that said, 'Listen, why don't you just look at doing it here?' And so away I went."*

*It was 1992 and no-one knew anything about orca in New Zealand. Visser combed newspaper articles and whale watch logs for sightings, laboriously documenting when, where and how many.*



IAIN MCGREGOR

*Orca pop up through sea ice in Antarctica.*



*She was living in a condemned building in Leigh, with fins, mask and snorkel always at hand. So when someone shouted orca, she jumped in without thinking. It was the wrong thing to do – she didn't know enough about how orca behave. Even now she would watch before approaching. But it was still an extraordinary encounter. The mother was carrying a stingray – the first indication of the New Zealand orca's food of choice.*

*From sightings, photographs and observation, Visser began to painstakingly catalogue individuals and their behaviour.*

*"I had a zero database. I had nothing to start with. So it was this blank canvas. And that was really exciting."*



Visser with Rudie, who stranded himself at Taiharuru, in Northland.

She struggled with pompous, paternalistic academics who scorned the public's citizen science sightings. She still worries that university students are treated like "something to be utilised, not as something to be cherished and nurtured".

But she carried on anyway, such was her passion for the animals and for increasing their public profile.

Now, Visser has become an international advocate for protecting orca against boat strike, marine pollution, habitat destruction and captivity. The decaying teeth and drooping dorsal fins of captive orca say it all.

"It's all about the profit margins, greenwashing in an attempt to line the corporate coffers, which become corporate coffins."

Morgan – who she went to Europe to help save – is a wild orca being kept in a Spanish marine park, ostensibly for research. Now she's pregnant, in direct contravention of the law. Visser is leading the fight to free her.

Twenty-six years since she began researching orca, Visser hasn't lost the buzz of getting an orca hotline call and setting off in hot pursuit.

"I get the goosebumps when I'm in the car driving towards them and I get the butterflies – will I find them, won't I find them. Who it is that will be there, what will they be doing? And it's rare that I'm out with orca and I don't see something that still wows me ...

"Who gets to do that in their life? There's not many of us that wake up on any given day and go 'bring it on!' "

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