

Ben the orca who was stranded, run over by boat, now thriving 24 years on

Denise Piper 05:00, Mar 22 2021

Stuff



TERRY HARDIE/ORCA RESEARCH TRUST

Dr Ingrid Visser says Ben was originally going to be shot when he stranded in 1997, but she is now very pleased he was saved.

[An orca](#) who has twice dodged death is proving to be a poster boy [for researchers](#) thanks to the scars of his adventures.

Ben the orca is helping researchers understand [where the whales go](#) in New Zealand waters and how far they can travel.

In 1997, he stranded at a beach near Mangawhai, just north of Auckland, said Orca Research Trust [founder Dr Ingrid Visser](#).

The original plan was to shoot the stranded orca but Visser managed to intervene and Ben was successfully helped back into the water after 21 hours.

[Video]

Ingrid Visser helps rescue another stranded orca

An orca stranded in Marlborough in 2017 was helped back out to sea by volunteers and orca expert Ingrid Visser. Video first published November 2017.

“The results show these animals should be given a chance, where we can,” she said.



INGRID VISSER/ORCA RESEARCH TRUST

Ben the orca suffered significant damage to his dorsal fin from a boat strike, but the damage now makes him easy for researchers to spot.

The next year, Ben was spotted with substantial damage to his dorsal fin due to a boat strike, which Visser originally thought could kill him.

“Because the injury was so severe, we had grave concerns if he was going to survive at all – now he’s hunting sharks and rays with the same mates that he was hanging out with before.”

Since his injury, Ben – with his easily-recognisable dorsal fin – has been spotted by researchers, dolphin watchers and citizen scientists more than 140 times.



ROSA WOODS/STUFF

Whale researcher Dr Ingrid Visser wants boaties to be more careful around orca.

Each time he was identified, the Orca Research Trust logged the details using software originally designed for plotting the safe passage for ships.

Visser said over 21 years, Ben has been spotted in 48 locations cross New Zealand, including the Bay of Islands, Whangārei Harbour, Auckland's Hauraki Gulf, Tauranga Harbour, Kaikoura and as far south as Banks Peninsula.

He has swum at least 40,000km – the equivalent of a trip around the world.



FAYE LOWREY/FACEBOOK

Dr Ingrid Visser says orca need more protection from boaties, such as these caught harassing a pod of orca in Northland in January 2020.

“We have compelling evidence of the distances that Ben can and does travel, and they are remarkable. He has been documented swimming over 190km in a single day, which is just amazing given his injury.”

Ben is now the poster boy, or case study, for a chapter in a scientific book about the management and conservation of marine mammals.

Visser said Ben’s story reminds the public of the need to slow down and take care around these animals to avoid boat strike.



INGRID VISSER/SUPPLIED

Dr Ingrid Visser says orca need protection from human activities in the water – such as craypots which entangled this orca, and aquaculture lines.

New Zealand has one of the highest orca boat strike rates in the world, which could partly be due to the very shallow waters orca tend to swim in, she said.

[More protection is needed](#) for the “acutely threatened” species, Visser said.

But Ben’s story also tells of the positive impact humans can have when they intervene in a whale stranding.

“His story is so fascinating as it also includes a stranding and a rescue, but it might have been a completely different story, as the

original decision by the authorities was to shoot him – so thank goodness that never happened.”

The chapter, written by Visser, Tracy Cooper and Terry Hardie is published in the book [Contributions to the Global Management and Conservation of Marine Mammals](#), which is free to download.

The authors encourage all sightings of orca to be reported to 0800 SEE ORCA (0800 733 6722).

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<https://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/124592496/ben-the-orca-who-was-stranded-run-over-by-boat-now-thriving-24-years-on>

Archived 22/06/2022: <https://archive.ph/Sg2zS>