



## KILLING ME SOFTLY

when I first got in the water. She let the shark go and it hid under me. Miracle chased it out and proceeded, with another croa, to eat it. This is the first record of arca, anywhere, pating make. The sub-adult male (left seemed fascinated with the deaterity of my fingers, which I clicked.

## ORCA litten & photographed by INGRID VISSER

## MY FIRST CLOSE encounter with an orea

mak place in May 1991. I was a student at Suckland University's Leich marine lab when I heard that orea had been sighted in the bay.

Grabbing my sporkelling year, I sprinted down to the beach and direct in. Nearby, the tall fix of an adalt male was

loging to glimpse him, but moments later, as I handed up for a breath, there was a large female. side and looking down at me. We surfaced for sir together, then I dived back down while she circled see before heading off. A few minutes later she was back, this time with a calf. Thes mum past me, then the calf started circling me rapidly, while I man many and reard region to hill eve contact.

It was a game played under Mann's watchfull eye, and lasted until distincts forced me to mm. Ales, the morie was broken. The female mam up and both creatures mayed seducite

When I began studying New Zealand orca in 1992, a few neonle mild me they could be seen close to shore. No one really knew what they were doing there, but suggestions included muring, civing high and hunting. As my research developed, it became apparent that most of the

cade a body's length from the beach, at times orca hazzed in the water column-that is, beon the flaor itself. However, shallow-horson

their faces like a beauty face-mack. The rest do successful: a young once was found in 1998 with stingers baths kidged in her back, chin

and throat, and she died from an allergic reac-Foreging for rays is a risky occupation, and

action; such lessons help build the distinctive New Zealand orca culture. Once a raw has been iesesobilised, youngeters are given the opportunity to participate, although this may creat!

ly charing the spoils of a kill. Elemobranche (skates, rays and sharks)

are relatively primitive vertebrates and their necessary and he reduced to insensibil ity. Forced come its back, an elemedeanch becomes meriorden and defeareless, a state harren as topic immobility. Orea have learns allowing them to come in safely for the kill. One way of doing this is to flick it iren the sir. so when orce are harring rays, it isn't uncommon to see them treated as Frishees. To occupe, rays will often make for ex-

tremely shallow water, even coming in so close that they end up flogging about on the beach. It is this exactive behaviour which draws the new into the shallows, where they apparises become strended. Taxically they free themsuborn but oversionally human belo is needed. and I believe this to be low they have formed a connection with people. Once back in the water, they are perhaps sufficiently curious to

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of once exceedings in the world, so if this notion is correct, it is no coincidence that New Zer-Send own incoracy with bushare many than went others. The few animals that first southe encounters with people have started a trend even young orea are now getting in on the set, being particularly keen on tagging divers' fires.

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New Zuland is an archaic and surprising archipelage. A land where also run into plains, glaciers coexist with deserts, and rivers float on the surface of the sea. It's the habitat of parrots too heavy to fly, insects that grow to the size of rodents, and a bird that lays an egg a quarter of its own weight. It is a territory of modest dimensions, but quite improbable contents.

For 20 years, New Zealand Geographic magazine has sought to capture this unique country in words and pictures, and to produce a defining record of our environment and society.

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