

 COMMENTARY

# Orcas iced in: a hot topic in the frozen North

BETHANN G. MERKLE

Last week, while the world watched with bated breath, a pod of orcas (*Orcinus orca*) swam in an ever-shrinking zone of open water. Each time they came up for air, frigid water sloshed onto the surrounding ice and froze, compounding the problem little by little. Much farther north than normal for this time of year, the killer whales were clearly out of their element.

Caught in Hudson Bay when the water froze over, these giant ocean mammals were in a real fix. The story put the tiny northern Quebec village of Inukjuak on the map. CBC coverage, YouTube videos that went viral, and news feeds running the story as far away as the United Kingdom, Taiwan, and Australia contributed to a firestorm of media focus on the animals' life-threatening predicament.

Depending on when you tuned in, you might have thought the villagers were going

to save the whales by cutting holes in the ice — a highly dangerous endeavour on unpredictable floe ice. You might have heard that Fisheries Canada was going to send an icebreaker, or that global interest would raise enough concern and funds to make that a viable option. You might have heard listeners calling in to suggest that local hunters harvest the whales if there were no other options, and other callers rebutting the idea by stating those villagers have no tradition of harvesting killer whales. You might have seen online forums where people bemoaned the fact that humans could be so heartless as to ignore such a life-and-death plight, while others claimed this was a natural event that became known to the public only because of its proximity to a village.

Regardless of what you heard or saw, the situation raises some interesting questions. Where do we, as a species capable of concern, collabora-



Villagers watch as a killer whale surfaces for air near Inukjuak, Quebec last week.

tive action, and logic draw the line? Should the government re-route icebreakers busy keeping shipping lanes open in order to save the lives of possibly a dozen animals swimming far beyond their normal range? Should the local villagers risk their lives for the dubious mission of opening more holes in the ice? Should listeners cozy in the relative southern climes have a say in what happens way up there in the frozen North? Does the synergy of social media

and charismatic megafauna overwhelm the scientific reality that whales are likely trapped in the ice more often than we realize?

As majestic as a killer whale may be, should we forget that the simple facts of winter can render any animal powerless in a moment? Should we overlook this opportunity to stand in awe of the complexity of nature — natural events, the power of water in its different states, and the incorrigible human will to

grapple with it all?

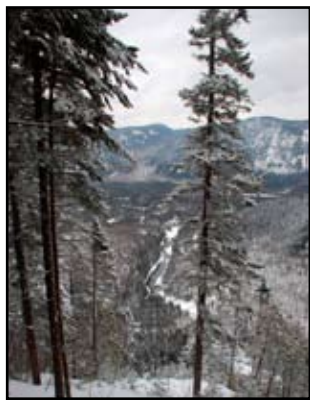
*NOTE: These killer whales are part of the designated Northwestern Atlantic Eastern Arctic population. According to the Fisheries Canada Website, killer whales in this population have "been identified as Special Concern by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). [The species] is currently being considered for listing under the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA). Pro-*

*tection is currently afforded under the federal Fisheries Act. If listed under SARA, it will be afforded additional protection and a management plan will be developed."*

*As of Thursday, January 10, local hunters confirmed that the whales are no longer there and there was a lot of open water. Fears remain, however, that, because of water currents and moving ice in the bay, the whales might have moved on but be boxed in elsewhere.*

## Knee-deep in snow in the Vallée Bras-du-Nord

A PHOTO ESSAY BY BETHANN G. MERKLE



In the heart of the Saint Raymond-de-Portneuf region, the Vallée Bras-du-Nord is entirely removed from the bustle of city life. Dirt roads wind past small farms and sugar shacks, all blanketed under snow. With every curve, you can feel the distance growing between tranquil snow-packed trails and the slush of Vieux-Québec.



At the end of one of those dirt roads sits the Accueil Shannahan. Part of the award-winning coopérative de solidarité de la Vallée Bras-du-Nord, this cheerful rustic lodge sells passes for the co-op trails, books overnight guests into nearby

chalets, and serves hot cocoa to warm up chilly skiers.

According to the co-op, their mission is to provide an eco-tourism project conducive to harmonious and sustainable development of the region. Taking the cooperative concept to a new level, the VBD co-op is a joint effort among many property owners, businesses, employees, organizations, and associations in the region. For example, the trail network is maintained by wilderness work-therapy initiative which socially reintegrates troubled youth.



To appreciate the full effect, book in advance for one of the yurts or chalets a ways up the trail. Strap on your skis or snowshoes, and head for the bridge. A one-person limit makes this humble swinging footbridge the sole gateway into the trail network.



Clearly marked trails enable day hikers and weekend campers to easily find their way.



Snowshoes are recommended for winter hiking, as snow falls thick and deep.



At the end of a day's hiking through the largely quiet woods, a yurt like this one is a welcome sight.



Rustic amenities are available, albeit a short walk away.



Basic yurts and more luxurious cabins are available for the adventurous, such as these French and American hikers.



Though not terribly deluxe, the yurt is an economical and adequately spacious shelter for solo hikers and small groups of people.



A spectacular view is another fine reward for several kilometres of uphill hiking. Gazing into the valley, sufficiently remote and undeveloped, one can well imagine being one of the first to ever explore this area.

Today, though, the co-op website describes it this way. "The Vallée Bras-du-Nord is a tangible model, lively and inspiring, of sustainable development. It is a park where

outdoor enthusiasts, tourists, landowners, farmers, forestry workers, and businesses cohabit. There is an underlying dialogue and consultation which continue to balance economic, social, and environmental demands."

To experience this wild and woodsy collaborative valley firsthand, check out <http://www.valleebrasdunord.com> or call 1-800 321-4992.