

Guest Column

Chasing orcas at 11.5 knots

By Thomas J. Misa
Special to the Weekly

Chasing whales for commercial harvest had long lost the romantic allure of "thar she blows" by 1907, when the famed Moran Shipbuilding Company of Seattle launched the first American-built steam-powered whale chaser. With a top speed of 13 knots, Tyee Junior simply wore down the whales it chased. For a while, dozens of similar chaser boats each killed hundreds of whales. We know how that story ended.

Chasing whales for recreational harvest today employs diesel-powered boats with 20-plus knot speeds. On Sept. 7, during a Salish Sea voyage, I experienced some of the best

— and some of the worst — of the whale-watching industry. We were on a calm passage when a passenger shouted, "There they are, spouts at 3 o'clock." The pilot and guide hadn't seen the action but they swung the boat over, and we chased five orcas for the next hour. It was thrilling and it was horrible.

At the initial sighting, we were in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, not far from rocky Smith Island. The orcas were swimming south down the coast of Whidbey Island, and they were magnificent. For a while the two big males were perfectly synchronized in their breathing and diving. It was a mesmerizing ballet, graceful and powerful. We inched closer so everyone on the vessel's starboard side got incredible views.

Our boat's powerful diesel engines easily paced the five orcas. They picked up speed. Soon, they were "cooking," gushed the guide. "I've never seen orcas swimming at 11 and a half knots!" The orcas slowed up nearing shallow water. "They must be tired," suggested the guide, "I know I'd be tired by that." Finally, beyond Point Partridge, we peeled off. We'd followed them 8.5 (statute) miles on my GPS track. Another of the commercial whale-chasers was closing in. A little later we stopped close enough to buoy 1, near Smith Island, to chase off two mammoth male Steller sea lions that were resting on the buoy's platform.

We repeatedly closed to within 100 yards of the fast-swimming orcas, at over 11 knots boat speed, and we were much closer to the two sea lions. In accordance with federal law, the state of Washington requires all boats to maintain ample distances. Boats may approach orcas no closer than 200 yards. Within 400 yards, boat speed cannot exceed 7 knots. Clearly our vessel was not following these rules.

The financial incentives in the whale-watching industry are at odds with federal and state laws. Each chaser boat benefits from "going close," and the post-trip gratuities pocketed by the crew further reward illegal behavior. The best-practices "guidelines" issued by the Pacific Whale Watch Association, with its 32 member companies (seven in Friday Harbor alone) and around 100 vessels, are falling far short. It's hard to imagine that law enforcement could ever cover the Salish Sea's nearly 7,000 square miles. Gov. Jay Inslee might ask the whale-watching industry to develop technology as a means of self-policing.

It is feasible to track warm-blooded orcas that regularly breathe on the surface and send out plumes and splashes visible with satellites. A Google search for "tracking whales satellite images" is eye-opening. Each whale chaser already tracks itself through AIS. The maps of boats and whales could be correlated, and the companies and vessels that maintain proper distances could earn the privilege of continuing to operate.

If the whale-watching industry continues to engage in illegal activities, it should be shut down. We don't yet know how this story will end.

Thomas J. Misa, a native of Port Angeles, recently moved to Lopez Island. He is a professor of history (emeritus) at the University of Minnesota. His website is tjmisa.com.



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current representation of the Evergreen Freedom Foundation and Glen Morgan, both ardent oppo-

nents of labor unions and Democratic and progressive candidates, organizations, and elected officials. Power represents Morgan (a former employee of the EFF, now the executive direc-

tor of Citizens Alliance for Property Rights) in four lawsuits filed in Thurston County against the Island County Democrats and the 11th, 43rd and 46th Legislative District Democrats. Power also represents the EFF in protracted legal proceedings in King County against Service Employees International Union 775.

As they say, you can learn a lot about a person by the company he keeps. The EFF is so radically anti-labor that its website says it doesn't even recognize Labor Day as a national holiday. And Morgan has been engaged in a campaign of partisan harassment and disruption of anything and anybody Democratic over the last few years, including filing hundreds of complaints with the State Public Disclosure Commission against Democratic candidates, organizations, and elected officials.

Needless to say, the San Juan County Democrats have endorsed Randy Gaylord, who has the experience that matters. Readers are encouraged to vote for Randy, whose family and career show true Democratic values.

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COMMUNITY CHURCH

Please join us Sun. mornings. Adult Bible study, 9:30. Worship Service, 10:30. Nursery (birth-3 yrs) and Jr. Church (4-12 yrs) provided during worship service. Small groups meet throughout the week. 91 Lopez Rd., in the village. Pastor Jeff Smith 468-3877. www.ourlcc.org.

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Welcome you to worship with us on Sundays at 10 a.m. Fisherman Bay Road at Sunset Lane. 468-3477. The Rev. Nancy Wynen, Vicar to the Grace Episcopal Church. Everyone welcome!

LUTHERAN CHURCH IN THE SAN JUANS (ELCA)

Please join us for worship and children's Sunday School at 9:00 a.m. in Center Church on Davis Bay Road. For Friday Harbor and Eastsound services info, call Pastor Beth Purdum Eden at 370-0023.

ST. FRANCIS CATHOLIC CHURCH

Come worship with us at Center Church on Davis Bay Rd. We welcome you to join us for Mass at 10:30 a.m. on Saturdays, spring, summer & fall. Winter Mass 1:15 pm Saturday changes with ferry schedule. Call 378-2910 for Mass times on San Juan and Orcas Islands.

LOPEZ ISLAND FRIENDS (QUAKER) MEETING

Everyone welcome. Sunday mornings at 10 am at Sunnyfield Farm, 6363 Fisherman Bay Road. Children's Program provided. For more information: <https://www.quakercloud.org/cloud/lopez-island-friends-meeting>, 468-2406, or lopezfriends@gmail.com.