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"Saving Luna" recalls the riveting and polarizing tale of the killer whale

By **Stephan Michaels**
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Two years after a tragic accident ended the saga of the wayward killer whale known as Luna, documentary makers Suzanne Chisholm and Michael Parfit bring the gregarious little orca to the Seattle International Film Festival in a thought-provoking account likely to stir debate. From the opening montage of watery coves and misty mountainsides that establishes the remote setting of Nootka Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island, "Saving Luna" sets out to transport audiences beneath the surface of this compelling story, and does so.

As was widely reported, the 2-year-old orca had gone missing and was presumed dead before he mysteriously appeared in the waters of Nootka Sound in July 2001. One of our endangered southern resident orcas, Luna was alone, some 200 miles from his pod's prime territory.

Killer whales are among the most social of mammals and, having no other orcas with which to communicate, Luna made startling contact with people and boats. Some locals were delighted, but others were alarmed. This put the young orca at risk and created a dilemma that posited science, politics and cultures at an impasse.

Marine-mammal experts were at odds with policymakers over whether and how to reunite the orca with its pod, while the indigenous people of Nootka opposed any intervention, maintaining that nature be allowed to take its course.

On assignment for Smithsonian Magazine, Chisholm and Parfit traveled to Gold River, B.C., in the spring of 2004 to cover Luna's attempted capture by Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans. The married couple wound up living in that inlet town for nearly three years, becoming advocates for a whale.

As the film begins, Parfit narrates, "There is a wall, built of fear and respect, which normally stands between



Images from "Saving Luna," playing at the Seattle International Film Festival. The documentary chronicles the filmmakers involvement with the killer whale that appeared alone, far from its pod, in B.C.'s Nootka Sound in 2001.



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Movie preview "Saving Luna"

11 a.m. Saturday, 1:30 p.m. Sunday, SIFF Cinema, 321 Mercer St., Seattle Center (206-324-9996; www.siff.net).

humans and wild beings. We humans tell sweet and magical fables about going through that wall and making friends with a mysterious creature on the other side. ... But we don't think it could actually happen."

That theme resounds throughout the film: Was it possible to actually befriend a wild animal such as Luna, and could friendship have saved him?

To some, this idea might verge on anthropomorphism, but for Parfit, it is a legitimate way of understanding how Luna broke down that barrier.

"My sense of it," explains the filmmaker, "is that the social need that he had and that we have, that we call friendship, is extremely complicated in our lives and in theirs. In the details it's going to be different. But that big thing we think of as 'friendship,' which encompasses all of those emotional structures, is a good metaphor for what he needed and a good metaphor for what we sensed when we looked in his eye."

And a look into Luna's eyes is what viewers get. We are virtually introduced to the playful, charismatic orca, sometimes through stunning underwater photography, and sometimes through the moving accounts of people whose encounters and interactions with Luna are captured on tape. We are also afforded a view from the cultural perspective of Nootka's Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation Band, for whom orcas are esteemed protectors of the sea and who believed Luna embodied the spirit of their recently deceased chief.

The captivity contingency

These vantage points shed new light on the dramatic events in June of 2004, when the First Nation band intervened in the DFO's effort to relocate Luna with his family and pod. At the time, department officials acknowledged that their attempt might well meet with failure. Now we hear from DFO marine scientist John Ford, "most of us were not convinced that it would be successful."

One contingency was to place the orca in a marine park aquarium. In "Saving Luna," some locals voice suspicions that Luna was likely bound for captivity, and the film presents some evidence to support that notion. We are shown correspondence from one such facility to the DFO expressing "considerable interest" in the orca, stating Luna "will enhance our breeding program."

Parfit notes that their investigation neither points to any conspiracy nor concludes that Luna's captivity was a fait accompli, but it does indicate the contingency was elaborate. "Logistics were already in place to take him to a captive facility soon after his release, if he continued to play with boats," he says. "It was a very advanced and detailed plan, and that's the one place where the department was not frank with the public."

To the tribe, however, it was a foregone conclusion that Luna was headed straight to captivity. In the film, hereditary chief Jerry Jack speaks adamantly. "That was their bottom line. They were going to sell him to an aquarium."

Stewards of Luna

The film presents an eye-opening depiction of the attempted capture, as tribal members paddle out in wooden canoes to rally for Luna's freedom. The sound of their chanting fades beneath Parfit's narrative, evoking a mythical image.

"Luna followed the song, and they turned into the wind. An ancient people trying to make a modern legend of sea and spirit with a little whale."

The tribe ultimately prevailed and was granted a stewardship permit to keep Luna from interacting with boaters. No longer a dolphin-size infant, Luna had damaged some boats by playing too roughly, and a handful of anglers had threatened to kill him.

Here we become aware of a powerful emotional bond between Luna and First Nation steward Jamie James. By examining this fablelike connection, the filmmakers make perhaps their best argument that friendship, or something akin to it, could indeed keep Luna from harm.

Getting personal

This poignant portrayal of an interspecies relationship does invite debate, as the filmmakers reveal their own personal involvement in the tale. Chisholm acknowledges to the audience, "For us, the idea of getting involved in a story that we're trying to cover was a fundamental break from journalistic rules."

Venturing into the political arena, Parfit and Chisholm proposed that Luna be provided consistent and structured human interaction to hopefully eliminate haphazard encounters. Chisholm says the decision to cross over into advocacy took a lot of soul searching.

"We were still reporting the facts; we were reporting the truth," offers Chisholm. "We didn't feel that we were losing our objectivity in that sense, but we did get involved in that we tried to change the outcome of this individual's life. It really felt like morally we had no choice."

Things become even more personal, if not more controversial, when Parfit jumps in and assumes an unauthorized role after the First Nation's permit had expired.

"We felt compelled and driven," explains Chisholm, "based on the evidence that showed again and again that you couldn't keep Luna away from people. Mike's goal in going out there was to have a presence on the water when there was no stewardship and hopefully prevent unwanted interactions."

"It was agonizing," confides Parfit. "Yet we felt so strongly about it because of all the information we had gathered. We felt that when Luna was with us, he was safe."

The end isn't everything

In a story rife with human conflict and finger-pointing, "Saving Luna" navigates deftly through these contentious waters. It does, however, pose a curious footnote to the orca's sad demise in a freak accident with a tugboat: "The department, which had prosecuted a woman for petting Luna's nose, did not conduct a serious investigation into his death."

Yet the film doesn't dwell on the tale's heartbreaking conclusion. Instead, it succeeds by keeping its focus on the live Luna.

"The fact that the story ended is not the point," muses Parfit. "Luna represented something extraordinary, and we didn't want to overshadow that by the circumstances that ended the story."

Stephan Michaels is an award-winning freelance journalist who covered the saga of Luna the killer whale for several publications, including the San Francisco Chronicle and Peninsula Daily News.