

A REVIEW OF COEXTINCTION: WHEN ECONOMIC INTERESTS ARE PRIORITIZED OVER THE HEALTH OF OUR NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS.

MEDIA REVIEW

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Directors Elena Jean and Gloria Pancrazi, who were brought together by a mutual passion for Orca whales, began this project in 2017.¹ Both directors play a part in the film and seek to find the reasons behind the dwindling numbers in the Southern Resident killer whale populations. You follow them on a journey across the Pacific Northwest as they investigate those reasons and you witness their discovery of the complex interconnections of life that we find in the water, on the land, and through the people. The cast includes Biologist Alexandra Morton; Kenneth Balcomb (founder of the Orca Survey, 1976);

¹ *Coextinction*, dir. By Elena Jean and Gloria Pancrazi (Coextinction Films, 2021)

Indigenous leader Chief Ernest Alfred; Tsleil Waututh land defender Will George; and Jessie Nightwalker of the Palouse Tribe.² The movie examines how their stories are interwoven with the plight of the Southern Resident Killer Whales.

The overarching message in this film is a call for the recognition and removal of systemic obstructions to the changes needed to stop the destruction and violence towards our natural world. Ecological crimes are being committed by unaccountable corporations that are supported by a colonial systemic network of settler bureaucracies, political entities, and court systems. When Indigenous Nations and stewards attempt to protect our natural world, these colonial networks silence them because economic interests are paramount in this modern world. In this journey, Elena and Gloria also discover their important role as settler allies in support of Indigenous stewards who are attempting to stem ecological destruction and establish their rights over land, water, and resources.

Currently there are only 74 individuals within the Southern Resident killer whale (*Orcinus orca*) population; these have been divided into 3 family groups and named by scientists: J, K and L-pods. For the most part, the film focuses on the J-pod and the movie begins with the heartbreaking story of Tahlequah.

In 2018, Tahlequah gave birth to a baby calf that died shortly after. Tahlequah carried her dead calf in grief for 17 days, nudging its body to the surface over 1000 miles. This was an unprecedented length of time for

² 'Full Cast & Crew' in *IMDB*
<https://m.imdb.com/title/tt15450268/fullcredits/cast?ref=m_tfc_2> [accessed 24 November 2022]

mourning and the story caught the attention of the world. In the movie, it is mentioned that many researchers felt that Tahlequah was trying to tell us something, to show us that something was gravely wrong. Scientists have established three main reasons that the Southern residents are not doing well: a reduction in the quality and quantity of wild salmon, noise and disturbance from vessels, and pollutions in the water. Only 25% of the orcas born in past years have survived. In 2019, during filming, a new calf is born in the J-pod and its well-being is followed closely throughout filming. All the family members in J-pod, including the infant, are visibly malnourished with their skulls showing.

One of the main food sources of the Southern Resident killer whales are the wild salmon that migrate to and from the Pacific Ocean. Each whale needs upwards of 200lbs of salmon a day and salmon counts have been diminishing each year. Additionally, noisy vessels that use the same waterways as the whales impair the echolocation Southern Residents use to locate and hunt the low quantities of salmon that are available. To reduce noise pollution, government restrictions have focused on recreational vessels and whale watching tours, yet for commercial vessels — which are much larger and create far more noise underwater — only voluntary restrictions have been given.

In the film, land defender Will George is protesting the Trans Mountain expansion project in Tsleil Waututh traditional territories that will increase oil tanker traffic in the Burrard inlet by 700%. This increased

chance of oil spill is an unacceptable risk to the Tsleil Waututh Nation.³ At the end of the film you are provided an update that Will has been arrested for peaceful protest and sentenced to 28 days in jail for contempt of court. Chief Ernest Alfred and the Namgis Nation are protesting the Norwegian fishponds in Alert Bay. The salmon from the farms shown in the film look very unhealthy and can spread disease and lice to the wild salmon populations that must migrate past the farm pens. Jessie Nightwalker is petitioning for the breach of the Lower Snake River Dams. These massive dams were built in the 60's and 70's and inhibit salmon passage, which has caused salmon populations to plunge, removing this food source for other apex predators such as the orca and grizzly.

The Indigenous leaders in this film are protesting the corporate extraction projects that continue to infringe upon the rights, title, and interest of their nations and those of the natural world and animals in their territories. These are sacred obligations of stewardship to defend and protect the land, water, and air. In the context of coextinction, salmon and orcas are the focus; however, many other species are harmed in the circles of interconnection by economically driven projects.

For thousands of years the Southern Resident killer whales and Pacific Westcoast Nations have relied on salmon populations to survive. The salmon are the lifeblood of the salmon people and are an important resource of medicine and food sovereignty; they also serve as an important cultural symbol for of the Pacific Westcoast

³ Tsleil Waututh Nation, 'Assessment of the Trans Mountain Pipeline and Tanker Expansion Proposal Assessment Report' in *TNW Sacred Trust*

https://twnsacredtrust.ca/wp-content/uploads/TWN_assessment_final_med-res_v2.pdf [accessed on 24 November]

Nations and for people worldwide. I think we can all agree that the economic benefits and interests which continue to be prioritized by colonial systems are not worth the extinction of any of the sentient beings we share the natural world with.

Pancrazi and Jean have created a remarkable film that will emotionally touch and motivate anyone who watches. It highlights the disturbing actions contributing to the looming extinction of the Southern Resident killer whales. This story shows us what needs to change for the reversal of these interconnected and imminent tragedies. It shows us that our understanding and positive action in these heartbreaks have power.