

Panel 07

MOTHERS AND GRANDMOTHERS

Orca societies around the world are matriarchal. The oldest female leads her pod and shares her wisdom, including her knowledge of good places to hunt and areas to avoid.

In most species, animals do not live long past their reproductive years. Orcas and humans are among only five species where females can live much longer. The other three species are also whales: narwhals, belugas and short-finned pilot whales.

Scientists have a theory—the Grandmother Hypothesis—to explain this. The idea is that with orcas, as with us, wisdom is the key to the future. Grandmothers care for young whales. In lean years, their knowledge of history and territory help their pods find food.

Many Indigenous societies on the northern coast of British Columbia—and in many other parts of the world—are matrilineal. Clan affiliation, rank, rights and privileges pass down through the mother's line.

A MOTHER'S LOSS

In 2018, Tahlequah (J35) lost her daughter less than an hour after giving birth. For 17 days, Tahlequah held her child's body aloft for other orcas and the world to see. Her "tour of grief" shone an international media spotlight on the plight of the endangered Southern Residents and forced people to ask: Can orcas grieve?