

Panel 08

NAMES AND NUMBERS

Most orcas around the world are unknown to humans. In the wild, only whales who are tracked by researchers, live close to shorelines, or have unique physical traits like visible injuries are identified by numbers or names.

In 1971, the world's first orca census was conducted in the eastern North Pacific. Canadian scientist Michael Bigg proved that individual orcas could be identified on sight. Markings on their backs, known as saddlepatches, are unique, like huge fingerprints. Dorsal fins are also distinctive. Cuts and nicks on their skin never vanish. Suddenly, it was possible to keep track of individual orcas.

Bigg gave each group of whales (or pod) he encountered a letter and each whale a number. This system of cataloguing is now used to study orcas around the world.