

Transcript

Raising humpback whale calves

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Rachel Cartwright:

Well, here in Hawaii, I'm working with humpback whales. The specific interest of my research team is to look at the health and well-being of humpback whale calves. This area that we're in right here between the four islands is a key breeding area. It's an area that mums specifically choose as an area where they can raise their calves. We're working with an endangered species here. This species have come back from the very, very brink of extinction, and if they're to make a healthy recovery, we've got to ensure that the youngest animals are doing well and can move forward and breed successfully and return to these areas.

The key question I'm trying to answer here in Hawaiian waters is exactly which areas are most important for females during the period of time they're raising young calves. Those calves are really the future of this recovering population.

Right now, we're really focused on critical habitat. Humpback whales come in to the Hawaiian islands, but the mother-calf pairs specifically go to certain areas. What we're trying to do is first of all establish where those areas are and then look at how they use them, and hopefully this information can ensure some really accurate, effective management of these regions. And then, protection could be a little bit more stringent, but then it can be accurately targeted.

One of the things that is really hard to understand is this massive migration that they make. They come 3,000 miles from the waters of Alaska into the feeding areas to breeding grounds like this. And there's no food here. So they're going to be fasting the whole time they're here.

Well, the idea of coming to these waters really is to escape predation because if these calves were born into Alaskan waters, they're perfectly big to be warm enough, so it's not that the water's too cold. It's that you've got predators like orca, and they're going to prey on these little calves. So the mothers make this massive migration to get out of the range of those predators. So this whole migration here is one of the main features that increases the survival of their offspring.

Once the calves are here, as we are beginning to understand their behaviour through the studies we're doing, we're getting to see what aspects the calves develop here that then ensure their future survival once they get back to where they're going to have to deal with those predators. So they're down here to escape predation and mature enough to be able to withstand predation when they go back into those predator-rich waters.

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