

Review by BENJAMIN SAWYER

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Obee, Bruce and Graeme Ellis. GUARDIANS OF THE WHALES: THE QUEST TO STUDY WHALES IN THE WILD. Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Books, 1992. 169 pp. US\$34.95 hardcover ISBN: 0-88240-428-8.

As we enter a period when there is pressure within the International Whaling Commission to permit the resumption of commercial whaling, GUARDIANS OF THE WHALES is a subtly passionate and beautifully graphic reminder of the absolute wonder of these sublime creatures. While not an overt defense of the rights of whales to live unmolested by man, this book achieves an even greater power in environmental consciousness because of what is implicit throughout the text and embodied in stunning photographs that come close to a visceral reality: respect and love for whales in their own domain. Among books that I have seen on whales, GUARDIANS OF THE WHALES is unique, for it chronicles the often interrelated lives of that small cadre of scientists and naturalists who set out in the early 1970's to learn more about whales in the oceans of the world.

This approach to the study of cetaceans, considered almost unthinkable as recently as the 1960's, has yielded vastly more knowledge than the previous, more passive methods of observation and experimentation in public oceanaria and dissection on the slipways of whaling stations. It reflects new values, a new sensitivity and respect by those venturing into the whales' natural oceanic world and being with and interrelating with them where they live. This was a fundamental breakthrough, not only in methods, but in thinking, and GUARDIANS OF THE WHALES provides an excellent synthesis of the personal histories of the "new" whale scientists, their methods of observation, and the provocative discoveries that have unfolded from their work. This book, oriented to the educated and thoughtful layperson, tells the story of human lives changed, deeply and in a committed way, by the presence of the great whales. I felt the humility among these scientists, an attitude of heart that perhaps has to underlie any true ecological world view. Four whale species are highlighted: orcas, Pacific gray whales, humpbacks, and minke. Interwoven throughout the chapters devoted to them are the related stories of their students, such as Michael Bigg, Graeme Ellis, (whose photographs grace this book), Paul Spong, Alexandra Morton, and Jim Darling. These people live passionate, dedicated lives, usually in harsh climates and often on the lean end of affluence. The evolution of their creative work has brought new methods of study to the fore: photo identification (to prove the habitual return of specific whales and pods to certain locations), and in-the-water photography.

While commercial whaling and its history are certainly a poignant and ominous background theme, two more current ethical and ecological whaling issues are treated more fully here: the "rightness" and rationale for captivity of whale and dolphins in oceanaria, and the impacts of the increasing number of whale-watching boats on the whales' own oceanic environment. Relating to the first, the scientists do not always agree, and arguments from both sides are heard, as well as the history of captivity.

The second is still shrouded in mystery: we simply do not know what the real impacts are of this now sizeable business. How are orcas, who navigate by echolocation, affected by the cacophony of sounds produced above them by an endless stream of boats? Or a gray whale, migrating north from Baja California, who can now expect to be "watched" all the way by craft launching from every harbor along the coast of

western North America? While there is little scientific data yet available on the impacts, there is clearly an unease voiced here. For the person who wants to go beyond a scientific, data-oriented view of marine mammals sharing our planet, GUARDIANS OF THE WHALES takes the next step into the emotional and spiritual relationships that have drawn, almost irrevocably, certain humans into the realm of these fellow beings. It remains a realm of great mysteries.