



Intra-Species COMMUNICATION

By Tony Wu

Digital illustration © Christopher Hart

One of the highlights of my schedule is my annual migration down south to observe and photograph humpback whales in the Kingdom of Tonga. Over the years, I've seen and learned a lot about these magnificent animals. Perhaps more importantly, I've learned a lot about what we don't know about them (and ourselves).

For instance, humpbacks in the southern hemisphere tend to have white bellies, whereas northern-hemisphere humpbacks tend to be dark all over. There are exceptions to the rule, of course, and I have noticed one or two whales here with primarily dark colouration each previous season.

A couple of seasons ago, however, there seems to have been an explosion in the number of dark whales. I positively ID-ed seven — all adults, which means that they've either been around all the time without anyone noticing, or that they've come from someplace else.

Ok, but no big deal, you say?

In the same season, I also photographed and ID-ed four individuals with completely white pectoral fins. Most humpbacks around Tonga have pectoral fins that are white on the bottom, but dark on top. The ones I've

seen, again all adults, have pectoral fins that are white on both sides.

I'm not sure about other humpback whale populations, but I'm quite sure this trait is rare in the Tongan population. Old-timers here can, at most, recall seeing a couple such whales over the past fifteen years or so. Suddenly, there were at least four, all adults... hmmm.

I asked a few of my cetacean researcher friends what's going on, and in short, no one's certain, which really isn't too surprising given our limited understanding of large cetaceans in general.

As fascinating as observations like this are, perhaps the most puzzling thing concerning whales for me is not the whales themselves, but people.

This year, as in the past, I've been asked (sometimes accosted) by tourists from New Zealand and Australia with questions like: "Why do Japanese people want to kill all the whales?" and "Are you here to hunt the whales?"

Setting aside for the moment that I'm not Japanese, it's amazing how little people understand about each other, much less how little we understand about whales.

Anti-whaling NGOs, mass media and politicians in the southern hemisphere

have convinced many people that everyone in Japan consumes whale everyday.

The inconvenient reality that very few people in Japan actually consume any whale at all doesn't get in the way of anti-Japanese sentiment, sushi boycotts (silly but real), and emotionally charged diatribes about the plight of whales in the face of voracious heathens hell-bent on hunting them to extinction.

It's all I can do in these instances to try to explain the facts. Some people listen; others prefer to hang on to their self-righteous indignation, however ill-founded.

Most Japanese people do not consume whale; in fact, most would rather go whale watching than have whale for dinner. Whale watching is a growing industry; whale eating is not. The Japanese government's efforts to legalise whaling have nothing to do with public opinion or desire. Those are the facts... like it or not.

The full scope of the issues involved with the whaling debate is too complex and involved for a short column like this. But if you can at least see that the general media hype is completely untrue, then at least we will have made some progress toward understanding one another, before trying to understand another species. ■