

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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## **BC Humpbacks Bring Hope to Planet Earth**

*- Do Canadians know why?*

Port McNeill, Vancouver Island, BC – Just in time for Earth Day, Canadians will be able to watch the episode of Planet Earth III that features British Columbia’s Humpback Whales. On April 21<sup>st</sup>, the stunning and inspiring footage resulting from the Marine Education and Research Society (MERS) working with this world-acclaimed nature documentary series will air on BBC Earth.

Jackie Hilderling, MERS Humpback Researcher and Director of Education and Communications stated, *“We could never have imagined our research boat carrying the extraordinary wealth and volume of camera gear and working with famous nature documentarians, let alone that Sir David Attenborough himself would say the name of one of the Humpbacks we nicknamed and that we would spend weeks looking for whale poo.”*

BBC producer Fredi Devas first became interested in the Humpback Whales in BC waters after learning of MERS’ research on a novel Humpback feeding strategy dubbed “trap-feeding”. This feeding strategy is used under very specific conditions by some Humpbacks near northeastern Vancouver Island. If juvenile herring are in small, diffuse schools, these Humpbacks set a “trap” by positioning beside the fish with their mouths wide open. The fish then collect near, or in, the mouth of the Humpback to escape predation by birds.

In 2011, a young whale named Conger was one of only two Humpbacks known to use this jaw-dropping new feeding strategy. MERS has now documented that at least 32 Humpbacks have learned to trap-feed. It is Conger’s name that Sir David Attenborough says when trap-feeding is explained in the episode.

*“It was wonderful to watch producer Fredi Devas, who has filmed all over the world, fall in love with the area, experiencing the abundance and biodiversity of marine life sustained in BC waters”* said Hilderling.

Humpback Whales are ambassadors for how productive these cold, high current, oxygen and plankton-rich waters are. Humpbacks bulk up with small schooling fish and krill in BC to be able to migrate and sustain themselves in warm water breeding grounds where there is little to no food for them.

Christie McMillan, MERS Humpback Researcher and Science Lead shared, *“Commercial whaling only ended in British Columbia in 1967. When we began documenting the return of Humpbacks from the brink of extinction, we wanted to know who individual Humpbacks were and to make it count for conservation. We applied our research to create awareness and action for the threats they continue to face – climate change, entanglement, vessel strike, and noise.”*

The return of Humpback Whales provides a message of hope and capacity for human values to change. It is now understood how important whales are for the world's climate.

The MERS team spent considerable time looking for whale feces when working with the Planet Earth III film crew in order for this connection to be communicated in the episode. By defecating at the surface, whales fertilize algae leading to carbon capture. [It's estimated](#) that every large whale sequesters (removes) approximately 33 tons of carbon from the atmosphere. That's the equivalent of around 30,000 trees.

The Marine Education and Research Society's involvement with Planet Earth III was motivated by the opportunity to communicate the vital importance of whales and how our daily actions connect to the welfare of whales.

Thank goodness for second chances.

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**For media inquiries and access to the media pack: [jackie@mersociety.org](mailto:jackie@mersociety.org), 250-230-7136**

#### **Available for interviews:**

- Fredi Devas – producer for Episode 7 Planet Earth III
  - Jackie Hilderling – MERS Humpback Researcher and Education and Communications Director, boat operation and whale knowledge for the BBC
  - Christie McMillan - MERS Humpback Researcher and Education and Science Lead, boat operation and whale knowledge for the BBC
  - Caitlin Birdsall – MERS Executive Director
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#### **Where to watch the Planet Earth III footage:**

- Episode 7, "Human", airs on providers carrying BBC Earth on April 21st. There is a [nationwide free preview event](#) to April 28, 2024.
- [Watch with the Marine Education and Research Society](#). We have two events where we will show the footage we were involved with, answer questions, and provide behind the scenes information - April 21<sup>st</sup> online and April 28th in-person in Port McNeill.

#### **The BBC film crew MERS worked with:**

- Fredi Devas - producer, whose work includes BBC's "Seven Worlds One Planet", Planet Earth II "Cities", and "Frozen Planet"

- Bertie Gregory - National Geographic filmmaker and presenter and star of National Geographic's "Epic Adventures with Bertie Gregory"
- Hayes Baxley - Emmy Award winning producer, director and lead cinematographer of "Secrets of the Whales" (Disney +)
- Tavish Campbell – British Columbia's own acclaimed nature videographer and storyteller for conservation

#### Background links:

- BBC's Making of Planet Earth III article "[\*A second chance with giants: Learning from humpback whales\*](#) - by Jackie Hilderling & Christie McMillan, Humpback Whale Researchers, Marine Education & Research Society"
- MERS Blog - [\*Trap-Feeding – a new Humpback feeding strategy\*](#)
- MERS Blog – [\*Filming Conger the Humpback Whale – Planet Earth III\*](#)
- MERS Blog – [\*What Whales Do for You – Whale Pump, Whale Poo\*](#)

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#### About the Marine Education and Research Society

[www.mersociety.org](http://www.mersociety.org)

The Marine Education and Research Society (MERS) studies threats to cetaceans and educates to reduce these threats, with a focus on entanglement and vessel strike. MERS works and learns in the Territory of the Kwak'wala-speaking people, northeastern Vancouver Island.

Our work revolves around three key pillars: research, education, and response. With a research focus on whales, we are driven to understand and reduce anthropogenic impacts on marine species. Our research directly influences our educational efforts to motivate behavioural change to reduce threats and inspire stewardship. We are primary responders for dead, distressed, and injured marine mammals (as tasked by Fisheries and Oceans Canada). Our research and education efforts inform communications around marine mammal rescue and response.