

Whale Quest Kapalua

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Maui **Weekly**

2/7/2008 12:00:00 AM

Third annual event presents world-renowned cinematographers, photographers, researchers, marine art exhibit and expo.

“Environmental conservation is the culmination of good research and public education.” This slogan, promulgated by the Hawai‘i Whale Research Foundation, speaks for many of the organizations and individuals who will participate in Whale Quest Kapalua at the Ritz-Carlton, Kapalua Resort. The three-day weekend event is free and open to the public Friday, Feb.15, through Sunday, Feb. 17.

This outstanding event includes a charity golf tournament to benefit three groups: Whale Trust, Center for Whale Studies and the Hawai‘i Whale Research Foundation. With a silent auction offering a National Geographic trip for two to Antarctica valued at \$23,000, this event is a bonanza of educational excitement and visual delights.

Seminars feature whale behavior research, including: capturing whale behaviors and encounters on film (Blue Planet, an award-winning BBC Discovery Channel series); spying on humpback whales through sound recording; defending and protecting humpback whales navigating sonar infested waters; displaying the best “critter cam” photography of whales both underwater and at the surface, for which National Geographic is famous; whale watching, a boat trip with a Whale Quest naturalist (fees apply); and interaction with the educational art expo.

It has only been within the last 200 years that the main Hawaiian Islands have been the locus of humpback whales breeding and calving during our winter months, approximately November to March, with staggered earlier arrivals and later departures of these magnificent marine mammals.

“The ways of whales, Earth’s grandest life-forms, are still steeped in mystery. But out in the wonderfully clear, blue, warm waters of the Au‘au Channel, investigators have been gathering new clues...” (Douglas Chadwick, National Geographic, 2007).

According to Meagan Jones, executive director of Whale Trust, a nonprofit research organization, “The population of humpbacks is increasing at an estimated 7 percent per year. An estimated 8,000 whales will be moving through Hawaiian waters this year.”

The humpback whale was on the brink of extinction before the International Whaling Commission declared a moratorium on whaling in the North Pacific in 1966, so the recovery to a viable northern Pacific stock is cause for celebration. Yet, among researchers there is still a guarded optimism regarding the future of this endangered species.

The sophisticated and painstaking research of identification will be revealed by Dr. Dan R. Salden, founder and research director of Hawai‘i Whale Research Foundation and emeritus professor at Southern Illinois University.

His film crew patrolled the Seymour Canal in Southeastern Alaska, resulting in a documentary video entitled Humpbacks—From Fire to Ice, which captures the journey of a mother and her calf. Screening of the video is Friday, Feb. 15, from 5 to 6 p.m.

Remarkably, Dr. Salden and his crew documented 130 unique humpbacks by fluke pattern in a five-day period. Reading the identifying fluke patterns with accuracy is crucial. Not only does it affect the overall count of whales, but also the length of stay of each whale because dates of sightings are based on the first and the last sighting of identified whales.

“Focusing on the life histories and maintaining catalogs gives us insight into social affiliation,

migratory timing, calving intervals and abundance,” Salden explained.

“Recruiting volunteers to take digital photos on-board research vessels is not a problem,” he said. But there is a need for help scanning and editing the images; hence, the need for funding. “As is, there is a backlog of data for the catalog.”

While today there is collegiality among researchers, cinematographers and filmmakers, there remain many a quandary of whale behavior. Krill, a zooplankton and primary food source for humpback whales, needs cold welling currents. A pod of whales that has been feeding in Southeastern Alaska was recently observed in the northern extremes—in Beaufort and Chukchi Sounds in the Arctic. Are whales, then, the canaries of the sea, warning humans of the dire consequences of global warming?

For a complete Whale Quest Kapalua schedule, visit www.kapalua.com, or call toll-free (888) 665-9160.

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