



Southern resident killer whales, or orcas, play a vital role in our coastal ecosystems and are a part of our culture and heritage in the Pacific Northwest. As you may know, in July 2018 an orca calf died and was carried by its mother for 17 days across over 1,000 miles. Separately, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and other researchers recently took immediate and drastic measures to deliver medicine to a malnourished orca, J-50, in the Salish Sea. NOAA confirmed that she is likely dead and her body has not been recovered. These events are heartbreaking, and have brought renewed attention to these endangered whales.

The Southern resident killer whale is listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act and the current population is estimated at about 73 whales, down from its estimated historical level of about 200 during the late 1800s.

In February 2016 NOAA, released a five-year action plan outlining conservation efforts needed to restore Southern resident killer whales. However, NOAA has not yet issued formal rules on actions the agency will take. Under the Endangered Species Act, NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service has the responsibility of working to restore the endangered orca populations. NOAA must do more to address orca conservation including protecting habitat, restoring salmon, addressing risk of vessel noise, and getting serious about sources of pollution and investing in stormwater treatment and management.

Studies have shown that declining Chinook salmon populations have led to increased stress and decreased birth rates among Southern resident orcas. I have taken actions to support Pacific salmon restoration including championing the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund (PCSRF). The PCSRF provides critical funding to facilitate recovery and sustainability of Pacific salmon populations by investing in science-based habitat restoration. I have also fought the administration's attempt to defund EPA funds used for Puget Sound cleanup. In my role as a Ranking Member of the Senate Commerce Committee, I have fought attempts to weaken the nation's science-based fishery management laws and the Endangered Species Act, both of which are crucial to salmon recovery. I also cosponsored S. 3119, the Endangered Salmon Predation Prevention Act, a bipartisan bill to manage predatory sea lion populations that habitually prey on salmon. This bill was signed into law on December 18th, 2018

I also recognize that discussions about orca recovery have included the removal of dams along the lower Snake River and Columbia River. In 2016, a federal judge in Oregon ruled that NOAA and other agencies needed to increase spill on the river system to improve salmon survival. This spill began in April 2018. I believe that we need to work to restore salmon, as well as orcas, using best available science. NOAA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and other agencies are working now to determine the best pathway forward on the Columbia River and I look forward to reviewing their findings.

As a member of the United States Senate Commerce Committee, I have been actively engaged on the issue of orca recovery. Please know that I will keep your concerns in mind as I fight in the Senate to ensure the recovery of this cherished species.

Thank you again for contacting me to share your thoughts on this matter. Please do not hesitate to contact me in the future if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Maria Cantwell

United States Senator

For future correspondence with my office, please visit my website at

<http://cantwell.senate.gov/contact/>