

Close Encounters With Humpback Whales and Perceptions of Experience

Zalyn Kieu and Susan L. Ross, Ph.D. CTRS, RTC
Public Health and Recreation Department, San José State University

Abstract

Close encounters with charismatic wildlife (those with widespread popular appeal) produce psychological benefits (Curtin, 2009; Muloin, 1998; Muloin, 2000; Neil, Orams, & Baglioni, 1996), peak experiences (DeMares & Krycka, 1998; DeMares, 2015; Smith, 2007; Vogler, 2012) and/or mystical experiences (Knoll, 2006). Research indicates that encounters with whales in particular, can elicit emotional responses of awe, spiritual feelings of the ineffable, and an alteration in time (Curtin, 2008). A review of literature indicates that no study to date has qualitatively examined the presence or absence of transformative and mystical aspects of close encounters with whales. This study aims to address this gap.

Method



This study employed a mixed method design for the purpose of examining lived experiences. Data collection included semi-structured interviews and a 30-item self-report scale (McClellan, et al., 2012).

Semi-structured interviews were transcribed and the narrative data were analyzed using content analysis that uses deductive approach for the purpose of theory building (Kyngas & Vanhanen, 1999) and NVivo software for further content analysis.

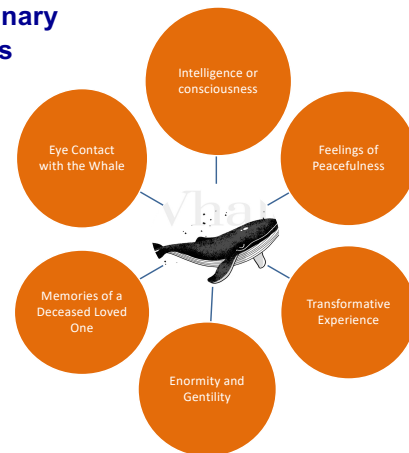
Background

Subjects participated in a multiple-day adventure travel program (based in Santa Cruz, California) in the South Pacific country of Tonga where they had opportunities to swim near and in some cases, touch adult and immature humpback and/or grey whales.

Research Question

“What is the subjective experience of having a close encounter with humpback and/or grey whales?”

Preliminary Themes



Subjects



8 subjects
Age range: 29 to 69 years
Gender: 25% male | 75% female
Race: 25% Filipino | 75% white

The primary criteria for inclusion in this study was willingness to participate in an 1.5-2.5 hour interview about their experiences with whales and respond to the 30-question self-rating scale.

Preliminary Findings

