

© Miles Ritter

WHALES ARE IN OUR NATURE

JUNE 8-11, 2026 • OTTAWA

WHAT WE HEARD REPORT

Prepared by the Canadian Wildlife Federation, Georgia Strait Alliance, Oceans North, and The Pew Charitable Trusts.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Canadian Wildlife Federation, Georgia Strait Alliance, Oceans North, and The Pew Charitable Trusts hosted *Whales are in our Nature* from June 8-11, 2026, in Ottawa, Ontario. Participants from government, Indigenous organizations and communities, non-governmental organizations, and industry came together with the shared goal of advancing whale conservation across three themes: coexistence of whales and fisheries, ocean noise mitigation, and spatial protections, monitoring, and stewardship.

The week opened with a public reception on World Oceans Day followed by three days of workshops where participants discussed conservation challenges, potential solutions, Indigenous perspectives from all three coasts, and policy and regulatory options to support whale protection and recovery. This report aims to capture and summarize the week's discussions and reflect what we heard rather than a consensus-based account. It highlights areas of shared understanding while recognizing differences in perspectives, priorities, and experiences.

Across sessions, participants agreed that the challenge for whale conservation does not lie in identifying problems, but in implementing tactical solutions through strong collaboration, Indigenous leadership, strengthened policy and regulatory action, and sustained investments. The central message was that conservation and sustainable economic development can advance together when grounded in science, Indigenous knowledge, industry expertise, and collaborative decision-making. Whalesafe fishing gear, adapted shipping practices, and spatial protections can reduce industrial impacts on whales while supporting healthy oceans, communities, and economies. The tools to protect whales exist—but need to be used. The sections below provide more detail across the week of *Whales are in our Nature*.



The week opened with a sold-out reception at the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa. The Honourable Joanne Thompson, Minister of Fisheries, provided opening remarks on the ecological, cultural, food security, and livelihood importance of oceans and whales. She also highlighted federal whale protection investments and announced that Canada will host the 12th Our Ocean Conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in Spring 2027. These remarks highlight Canada's efforts to build a sustainable ocean economy, grow stronger fisheries, protect up to 30 percent of the marine environment by 2030, and secure Canada's natural marine legacy for future generations.

Three short films underscored connections between Canadians and whales across all three coasts, Indigenous stewardship, and the role of industry in practical conservation solutions. From Atlantic Canada, Alden Gaudet, a Prince Edward Island snow crab harvester, introduced *On-demand Gear for Canada's Fisheries*, a short film about on-demand fishing gear (ODG) and its use in commercial fisheries within areas closed to traditional fishing to protect North Atlantic right whales from entanglement. From the Arctic, John Noksana Jr., Community Project Advisor with Oceans North, introduced an excerpt of *Two Harpoons*, which highlights the traditional Inuit harvest of beluga whales in Tuktoyaktuk and Rankin Inlet. From the Pacific coast, Shelly Kemp, QENTOL, YEN/W̱SÁNEĆ Marine Guardians Manager, introduced a clip from *Shared Waters, Shared Crisis*, which focuses on Indigenous and scientific efforts to support recovery of the endangered Southern Resident killer whale population. Together, the films highlighted on-water experience, collaboration, and sustained support for whale conservation, ecosystem stewardship, and coastal communities.

This event brought together public, government, parliamentary, Indigenous, and conservation audiences, and helped set the stage for discussions over the next few days on entanglement, habitat degradation, and underwater noise.


© Nicolai Gregory







Traditional crab and lobster fishing gear uses vertical lines to connect traps or pots on the seafloor to surface buoys, creating an entanglement risk for whales and other marine mammals, including the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale (NARW). Around 85% of NARW show scars from entanglement, and entanglement is one of the chief causes of death and serious injury to the population. Since an Unusual Mortality Event (UME) was declared in 2017 due to a significant number of NARW being found dead or entangled, Canada has relied on adaptive fixed-gear fishing closures, triggered by NARW visual or acoustic detections, to mitigate the risk of entanglement. To reduce the impacts of these closures on the fishing industry while maintaining effectiveness of NARW management approaches, efforts have been focused on the use of on-demand fishing gear (ODG) to allow fisheries to continue while protecting the whales. ODG eliminates or reduces lines in the water column by relying on a lift bag or a stowed rope and buoy attached to the trap or trawl. When the gear owner triggers the release mechanism, harvesters can retrieve their gear and catch as usual. Canada's *Whalesafe Fishing Gear Strategy*, released in February 2026, is intended to guide the implementation of ODG and other innovative fishing practices in fisheries with high entanglement risk, to achieve coexistence between productive fisheries and healthy whale populations.

Participants of this session emphasized that the main risk comes from vertical lines connecting traps or pots to surface buoys, rather than from fish harvesters themselves. While a line and buoy has been used for decades to retrieve gear off the ocean bottom, a transition to ODG in the presence of whales can allow fishing to continue without the entanglement risk. Through the use of ODG in areas closed to traditional fishing, whales and harvesters can co-exist.



"A strong economy requires a healthy ocean."
—Notable quote from session discussions

© Nick Hawkins

A Canadian snow crab harvester demonstrated the two types of ODG systems available, both of which retrieve gear without persistent vertical lines. One uses a stowed buoy line and buoy that releases in response to an acoustic command, while the other uses a lift-bag that fills with compressed air when acoustically triggered, bringing the pot or first trap in a trawl to the surface. Training and gear-lending programs, like the CanFISH Gear Lending Program, provide access and training to fish harvesters to help them use ODG in areas closed to traditional fishing gear. This type of program is essential to remove barriers to ODG use until regulations are in place to guide more broad implementation in fisheries. Broader adoption depends on harvester confidence in the technology, fishery-specific adaptation, regulation changes to allow ODG, and financial support to facilitate capital investment. Currently, on-demand fishing is enabled through Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) issued experimental licenses with limitations surrounding trawl lengths and gear types. Although recent regulatory amendments allow for the authorization of ODG in commercial fisheries, permanent integration within commercial fisheries operations will require significant industry input and stakeholder engagement, as outlined in *Canada's Whalesafe Fishing Gear Strategy*. Key challenges include integrating new ODG systems into fishing practices under the pressure of time-area closures that occur in the middle of fishing seasons, enabling enforcement to monitor the fishery successfully when ODG is being used, addressing privacy and gear-location issues, avoiding gear conflict, and ensuring the technology reduces entanglement risk without creating new concerns such as underwater noise.

"With success, there will be more right whales and we're going to need more of this."

"Changing fishermen's perspective is difficult, [they are] used to fishing a different way. The older generation doesn't want to change and learning new technology is hard."

—Notable quotes from session discussions



© Nick Hawkins

Seafood buyers and suppliers are increasingly interested in sustainability-certified lobster and crab because of concerns with whale entanglement. Certification systems such as the Marine Stewardship Council, Ocean Wise, and Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch already consider marine mammal impacts, and whalesafe seafood could help fisheries and retailers meet sustainability goals. Consumer education and storytelling are important to build demand and justify added costs, but additional labels may also increase complexity for buyers and consumers leading to further collaboration and education needs.

Participants discussed that there may be consumer willingness to pay a premium for whalesafe seafood,[1,2] but questioned whether demand would be sufficient to support meaningful production volumes unless lobster caught with ODG becomes the only viable option. Participants also discussed that traditional and on-demand-caught seafood are not separated during processing, so product segregation would need to occur through individual processors; and, in the U.S., product sourcing traceability has generated litigation related to the Seafood Import Monitoring Program, which is intended to address illegal fishing and food fraud but has been criticized by some industry groups as costly, trade-restrictive, and overly burdensome.

"We need to get to a point where we're not piloting [testing/trialing] gear anymore."

"The market drivers help us."

"Lobster is the last product they need to reach 100% sustainability with their company."

"Partners want to be more transparent about sustainable sourcing."

—Notable quotes from session discussions

1. Zheng, Qiujie, et al. "Valuation for Lobster Harvested Using Ropeless Technology to Reduce Right Whale Entanglement and Extinction." Marine Resource Economics 41.3 (2026): 169-192.
2. "Overwhelming Majority of U.S. East Coast Residents Support Stronger Protections for Right Whales." The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2021.

Canada's Whalesafe Fishing Gear Strategy released in February 2026 and focused initially on NARW, provides a national process for reducing whale entanglement risk while supporting productive fisheries. It focuses on taking a fishery-by-fishery approach to implementing tools such as ODG, low-breaking-strength rope, reconfigured gear and/or adjustments to fishing timing and duration as methods to avoid or mitigate the risk of entanglements of large whales in fishing gear, based on the risk profile of the fishery and their operational need and realities.

Successful implementation of the Strategy will depend on collaboration with fishers, Indigenous communities, and other stakeholders; robust data to complete risk assessments in order to prioritize high-risk fisheries for piloting whalesafe gear types; funding for adoption; and monitoring, including through programs like Canada's Marine Mammal Response Program. Trade diversification and growing demand for sustainably sourced seafood from European and Asian markets may also encourage adoption. Key implementation needs include interoperability of ODG systems, enforcement training and engagement, harvester support, and long-term evaluation towards conservation outcomes.

"The Whalesafe Fishing Gear Strategy is the first piece of evidence that we are not following the U.S., and that we are not responding to external pressures, and that we are making our own path forward."

—Notable quote from session discussions



© Nick Hawkins

Key Takeaways from Coexistence of Fisheries and Whales:

- Building harvester trust through direct engagement and firsthand trials is key to on-demand gear adoption.
- Innovative technology requires changes to both fishing and enforcement practices, as well as regulatory amendments.
- Collaboration and information exchanges are key to understanding needs and to overcome barriers to adoption.
- *Canada's Whalesafe Fishing Gear Strategy* will guide the implementation of ODG systems across Canadian fisheries where there is high co-occurrence of large whales and fisheries leading to mitigation of this threat in high-risk areas. Significant collaboration with gear experts and users is required to guide this implementation.
- Sustainably sourced seafood is in demand by large companies, buyers, and consumers.
- Understanding supply chains and facilitating partnerships across steps in the supply chain is essential to developing markets for whalesafe seafood.
- Storytelling furthers understanding of why these efforts matter (product and work of those involved) and will support their adoption and reinforce value across the supply chain.



© Nick Hawkins

The High Ambition Coalition (HAC) for a Quiet Ocean, co-chaired by Canada and Panama, was launched on June 10, 2025, and aims to reduce underwater radiated noise and protect marine biodiversity. The coalition includes 38 countries, and its work focuses on quieter ship design and operation, ocean soundscape protection in marine protected areas, vessel-impact reduction, and capacity-building to assess and reduce ocean noise through regulatory and policy tools. Current efforts include voluntary measures, international policy development through the International Maritime Organization (IMO), coordination tools, and future work on a global underwater noise study and policy roadmap.

Underwater Radiated Noise (URN) is a global issue and identified as a threat to the recovery of multiple whale populations, including Southern Resident killer whales (SRKW) whose habitat overlaps with busy shipping lanes in the U.S. and Canada. Both countries have various vessel restrictions in place to address the threat of underwater noise to SRKW. Discussions clarified vessel measures in place in Canada, including Transport Canada's voluntary slowdowns, mandatory vessel restricted areas, no-go zones, a 1,000-metre approach distance SRKW buffer, and the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority's Enhancing Cetacean Habitat and Observation (ECHO) program's voluntary vessel measures. Participants noted that people on the water may struggle to distinguish between whales and killer whale ecotypes, making it difficult to comply with different buffer-distance requirements. Government officials explained that approach distance measures are designed to be precautionary and apply the stricter distances required for SRKW to ensure compliance. Smaller buffers for other cetaceans make compliance difficult, so guidance recommends treating unidentified whales as SRKW. While vessel behavior and community monitoring have improved, more operator education is needed. SRKW protections are hard to enforce because they depend on distinguishing SRKW from transient orcas. Guardians report whale-watching vessels ignoring and not complying with approach distance buffers and clustering near whales, prompting the need for simpler, year-round protections for all orcas, including a 1,000-metre buffer. Participants also highlighted inadequate on-water enforcement, citing limited government presence and patrol capacity. For example, it was discussed that only a few enforcement vessels cover the entire Salish Sea, resulting in delayed responses when incidents are reported.

There is a strong concern that URN is affecting whales across Canada, particularly toothed whales such as SRKW and Arctic belugas. Discussions highlighted that although international policy work is important, SRKW need immediate, regional action. While monitoring tools such as passive acoustics, whale song analysis, physiology studies, and community-led observation are improving the understanding of whale presence, stress, and noise exposure, it remains difficult to separate noise impacts from climate change and other cumulative pressures. Participants also noted that shipping noise is increasing in sensitive areas like the Arctic and Salish Sea, reducing whales' communication space, and adding pressure to already vulnerable populations.

Participants widely agreed that voluntary measures are not enough and that mandatory, enforceable protections are needed to drive industry compliance. Participants noted that solutions must be place-based and reflect local geography, species behaviour, cultural context, and community priorities, rather than relying on blanket approaches like slowdowns alone. Indigenous leadership and knowledge were emphasized as essential, given the cultural, food security, and stewardship impacts of whale decline. Speakers also noted that industry is unlikely to prioritize quiet design without regulation, incentives, and stronger technical capacity in shipyards because vessel design, anti-fouling systems, speed, and operational choices all affect noise.

"Underwater noise has doubled in the last few years in the Arctic because the voluntary measures aren't."

"Progress is not fast enough."

"You can quiet the ocean tomorrow if the industry employs these techniques."



"I cannot relate to profits and margins; I relate to animals. When we see them on the water, it's very special. It's very important to us that they're thriving and using the waters they call home. And we are actively invading their homes. We are actively hurting the animals in the water, and we need to start considering sacrifices. We should be talking about the animals and not the numbers."

—Notable quotes from session discussions

This session examined how Projects of National Interest (PONIs), impact assessments, and proposed federal reforms could affect marine species and ecosystems, coastal communities, and Indigenous rights in the Arctic and west coast of Canada. Participants raised concerns that faster federal approval timelines for major projects, including one-year review targets and parallel permitting, could weaken information gathering, cumulative effects analysis, environmental protection, and meaningful consultation.

They emphasized that Indigenous rights, the Duty to Consult, and obligations under the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* should be built into project reviews and supported by adequate capacity funding so First Nations can participate early and effectively. Speakers also called for stronger regional and cumulative effects analysis for shipping and industrial development, including through tools such as Transport Canada's Cumulative Effects of Marine Shipping (CEMS) initiative. They also questioned whether industry consistently provides strong, evidence-based project proposals and suggested that proponents should be required to better assess regional effects before projects are considered.

Speakers emphasized the need to make better use of existing impact assessment tools and integrate traditional knowledge, modern treaty obligations, and Indigenous-led assessment approaches. They noted that northern, treaty, and self-governance agreements may require different assessment models, including processes grounded in traditional knowledge, modern treaty obligations, and Indigenous-led assessments. Overall, the discussion reflected strong concern that current reform efforts for major projects may prioritize speed and investor certainty over environmental protection, Indigenous rights, and robust regional planning; whereas economic development can be done while minimizing impacts to the environment and communities.

"Unfortunately, what we're seeing now is moving away from a look before you leap approach."

"Many Nations are already at capacity to consult, so imposing rapid timelines means consultations cannot be meaningful."

"Inherent rights are not a hurdle or a check-mark, they should be integral to the process and discussed up front."

—Notable quotes from session discussions

Key Takeaways from Minimizing Noise and Sustainable Ocean Planning:

- While international progress on underwater noise is encouraging, participants felt sufficient protections have not been met for certain whale populations, such as the SRKW population.
- Some successes of voluntary measures for industry were shared, but overall, participants called for clearer, enforceable regional protections to drive industry compliance. Measures need to be tailored to local geography, species behaviour, and cumulative impacts, where solutions should be adaptive, localized, and designed for specific places and threats.
- Monitoring is improving but remains limited, while shipping noise is increasing in sensitive and previously quieter regions.
- Indigenous peoples emphasized that whales are deeply connected to culture, spirituality, food security, and stewardship. Indigenous leadership, knowledge, respect for rights, and meaningful participation and collaboration must be central to decision-making, including in international forums such as the IMO.
- Traditional knowledge also needs to be more meaningfully incorporated into decision-making, equal to incorporation of Western science into decision-making processes.
- Duty to Consult is often experienced as a box-checking exercise, while First Nations and communities face capacity constraints. Compressed timelines can conflict with respectful, meaningful consultation and engagement.
- *Building Canada Act* legislation and related discussion papers could create vulnerabilities for nature protection. Some participants discussed submitting feedback as part of the consultation process on the *Getting Major Projects Built in Canada* discussion paper.
- Standardizing requirements for project proponents to provide evidence, ensure accountability, and assessment of regional and cumulative effects before projects advance would further clarify requirements and mitigation of potential impacts.



© Oceans North

Indigenous-led and community-based monitoring programs support whale conservation, ecosystem stewardship, and youth engagement through tools such as surveys, kelp mapping, hydrophones, infrared cameras, and phytoplankton monitoring. Speakers emphasized that monitoring must be connected to cultural knowledge, food security, community leadership, and local priorities.

Participants described climate-related changes affecting their communities and ancestral lands, including storm surges, flooding, sea level rise, erosion, harmful algal blooms, warmer temperatures, and shifting species and abundance. They stressed that Indigenous knowledge reflects long-term observation and adaptation, but has often been misused or dismissed, and this knowledge reflects not only long-term observation, but also how communities have adapted to environmental change. Indigenous communities are already leading stewardship efforts and identifying solutions rooted in local knowledge and lived experience. Indigenous knowledge should guide decisions alongside Western science and not be treated as secondary or used only after decisions are made to justify or within Western science frameworks.

Participants raised concerns about limited enforcement capacity, limited local expertise among government officials, and the need for stronger relationships and long-term, consistent funding. Discussions noted that current engagement and consultation can feel extractive when communities provide boats, samples, people, and knowledge without adequate funding, continuity, recognition, or timely results. Speakers said better collaboration would requiredecision-makers to spend more time in communities, hear directly from Indigenous peoples rather than relying on brief or distant

"Our knowledge shouldn't be used to validate science after decisions have been made. It should inform what decisions need to be made."



"Whales, whales are in our nature, they are not separate from us, the killer whales are considered kin. Whales are in our nature, they are not separate from nature, they are not a commodity and how we treat them is how we should treat family."

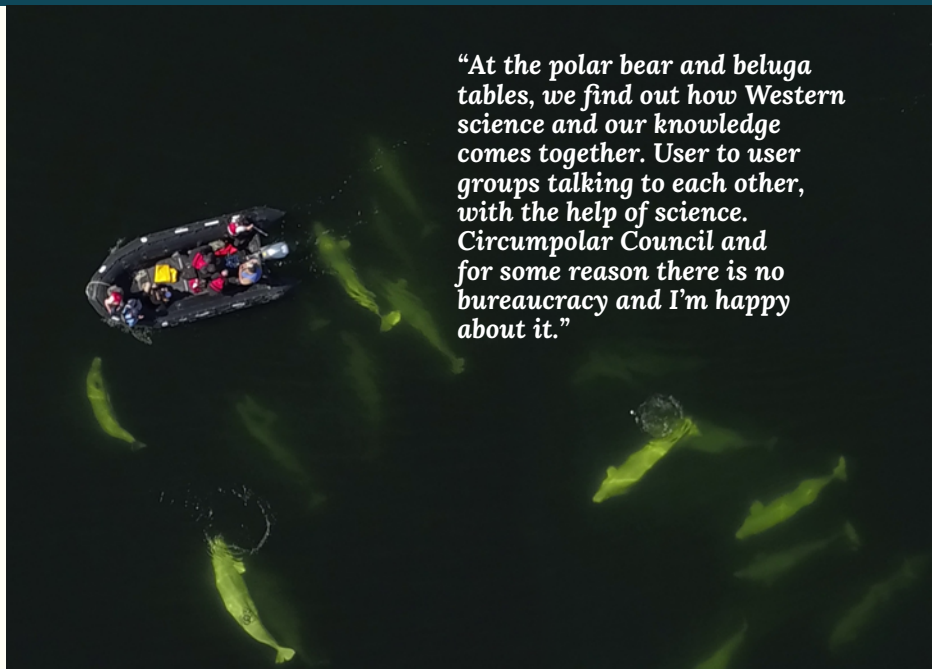
—Notable quotes from session discussions

engagement, and move beyond short-term project funding toward stable relationships that help communities.

Whales were described as deeply connected to Indigenous identity, kinship, spirituality, and responsibility to land and ocean. Speakers called for whales to be recognized as relatives rather than commodities, and for Indigenous peoples to have greater access to decision-making spaces that shape protections for land, ocean, and future generations.

"When you compare the data to thousands of years of knowledge in these areas, it's a much richer data set. Acknowledge the data set. We think about traditional knowledge in the past, but it is also adapting; using modern technology to create Indigenous knowledge."

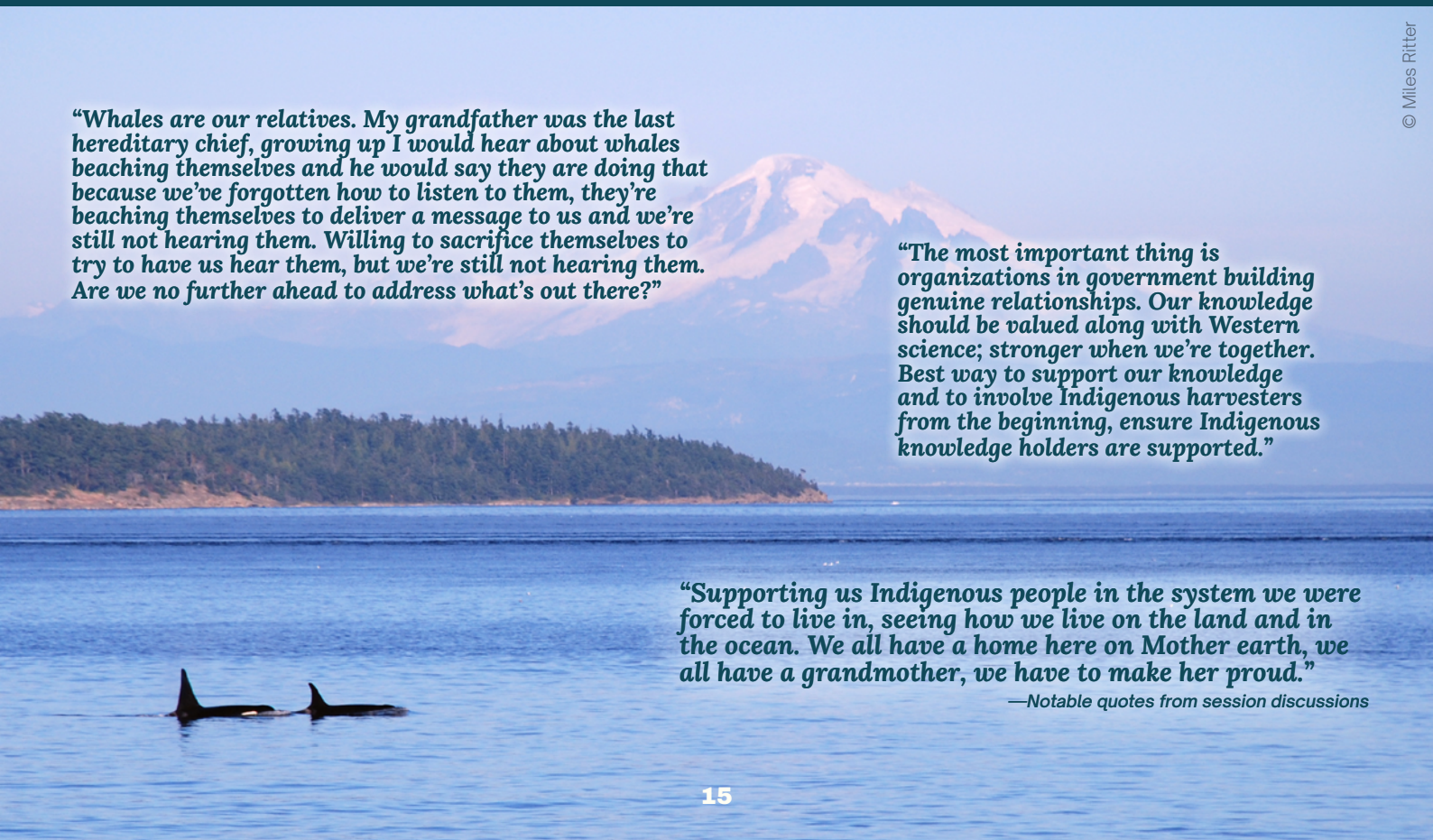
"What happens on the water, it's not just a story, it's data. We do have an annual report, but how can it be heard and valued?"



"At the polar bear and beluga tables, we find out how Western science and our knowledge comes together. User to user groups talking to each other, with the help of science. Circumpolar Council and for some reason there is no bureaucracy and I'm happy about it."

"Food security and sovereignty are to manage themselves; lack of trust and respect for Inuit knowledge has stood in the way of securing meaningful control for their communities."

—Notable quotes from session discussions



© Miles Ritter

"Whales are our relatives. My grandfather was the last hereditary chief, growing up I would hear about whales beaching themselves and he would say they are doing that because we've forgotten how to listen to them, they're beaching themselves to deliver a message to us and we're still not hearing them. Willing to sacrifice themselves to try to have us hear them, but we're still not hearing them. Are we no further ahead to address what's out there?"

"The most important thing is organizations in government building genuine relationships. Our knowledge should be valued along with Western science; stronger when we're together. Best way to support our knowledge and to involve Indigenous harvesters from the beginning, ensure Indigenous knowledge holders are supported."

"Supporting us Indigenous people in the system we were forced to live in, seeing how we live on the land and in the ocean. We all have a home here on Mother earth, we all have a grandmother, we have to make her proud."

—Notable quotes from session discussions

Federal spatial protection tools—including fishing closures, vessel restrictions (including slowdowns, approach distances, or no-go zones), restricted areas, and protected area tools such as national marine conservation area reserves, and marine refuges—help reduce impacts on whales and their habitats.

Participants noted that federal funding for endangered whales has increased since 2016, but expressed concern that many protections are interim. This can limit long-term certainty for protections, delay stronger regulatory measures as pressures, such as shipping, continue to grow, and prevent interim measures from contributing to Canada's commitment to protect 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030.

Speakers emphasized that spatial protections should be evaluated based on effectiveness in practice, not only by size. Monitoring, compliance, enforcement, and adaptive management are essential, especially for pelagic, mobile animals like whales. Participants also stressed the need for more holistic marine spatial planning, greater recognition and utilization of other spatial protection tools such as Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs), and meaningful collaboration with Indigenous peoples. Several comments highlighted that Indigenous communities often bear the burden of proof and the cost of consultation, while needing stronger direct action, long-term protections, and support for participation.

"When industry came, animals dissipated. But harvesters couldn't prove animals were closer before industry came and therefore got no compensation. The burden of proof shouldn't have been on harvesters but on industry."

"Many federal spatial tools discussed today but not as much emphasis on the importance and benefit of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas, such as the QEN,T IPCA implemented under Indigenous law by Tsawout First Nation within SRKW critical habitat or the benefit of the multiple IPCAs implemented by Nations in the Great Bear Sea for the benefit of whales and their prey or the establishment of salmon parks on the west coast of Vancouver Island."

"Long-term actions and adaptive management can happen together. [First] Nations want strong, direct action happening quickly. But Nations pay for their participation in the consultation process for Canada [without funding and support]."

—Notable quotes from session discussions

Key Takeaways from Spatial Protections, Monitoring and Stewardship:

- Indigenous peoples are at the forefront and need to be listened to and respected as leaders for the benefit and continuation of ocean stewardship and communities.
- Participants identified long-term, consistent funding and sustained partnership as priorities for effective collaboration.
- Indigenous science and knowledge are not about the past, but rich datasets that are ongoing and enhanced by modern technologies. Indigenous knowledge needs to be treated on the same level as western science and equally inform decision-making processes.
- Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas should be better recognized as key tools for whale and habitat protection.
- Spatial protections should be adaptable, localized, and assessed over time for effectiveness against conservation goals.
- Long-term protection, immediate action, and adaptive management can be pursued together and should not delay stronger measures.

