

*Kararehe: Animals in New Zealand Art, Story and Everyday Life*

During the mid-sixties a New Zealander called Paul Spong – a graduate of Canterbury University, subsequently trained in neuropsychology at UCLA – was hired by the University of British Columbia to undertake behavioural research on Skana, a captive Orcinus orca at the Vancouver Public Aquarium. Attempting to test the orca's visual acuity, Spong was suddenly nonplussed by a complete turnaround in his subject's performance. After weeks of scoring almost 100%, Skana suddenly got "exactly the wrong answer eighty-three times in a row". Recognising that these results could not be explained as mere mistakes, Spong began to suspect that Skana, having learnt how to pass the test, was giving the wrong answers on purpose. As his wife Linda asked, "[i]s there a Latin phrase for animal rebellion against scientists?" (Weyler 1986, 6-7, 19, 22).

One day Skana swam up and raked Spong's feet with her teeth, causing him – not unnaturally – to jerk them out of the water. This she did several times, until he decided to leave his feet where they were. As soon as he stopped reacting in fright, Skana gave up the behaviour. As Spong saw it, this was Skana experimenting with him.

Beginning to recognize not only that Skana was more intelligent than his first experiments had supposed, but that she was an active subject rather than a passive object in what he was doing, Spong began a series of more unconventional experiments. As with Opo, the cetacean's agency, rather than that of the human, began to define the encounter. At the same time Spong, who had no prior interest in cetaceans and only took the UBC job as a career move, began to develop a powerful emotional attachment to the isolated whale, who had been caught from the wild a few years before. This led to a famous moment of sentimental connection. He would stand at the side of the pool playing his flute to her, and she would listen and at times seem to reply.

Before long, Paul Spong's growing respect for Skana's intelligence led him to conclude that neither she, nor any other whale or dolphin, should be kept in captivity. Not surprisingly, he was sacked from his job as soon as he began publicly calling for the whale to be freed back into the wild. Nevertheless he continued to



Paul Spong and Skana.  
 (From Weyler, 1986.)

campaign for her release, and had nearly achieved his goal in 1980 when, sadly, Skana died in captivity. Her body was sold for dog food by the Vancouver Aquarium.

Yet Skana's legacy still continues today. Because after losing his job at the

Vancouver Aquarium, Paul Spong became a researcher of wild orca, and a campaigner not just against keeping cetaceans in captivity but also against the whaling industry. In 1973, he persuaded a group of Canadian activists, who until that time had been concentrating on protesting against nuclear arms, to begin a campaign to "Save the Whales". And it was this campaign, and especially the famous confrontation on the high seas with Russian whaling ships during the IWC meeting in 1975 – a moment Spong helped orchestrate – that resulted in the emergence of this group at the forefront of the environmental movement. The organisation in question was of course Greenpeace.

Paul Spong's sentimental engagement with Skana, then, was a formative inspiration for the course taken by the contemporary environmental movement. While trying to persuade the Greenpeace founders to get involved in the anti-whaling campaign, Spong took Bob Hunter, one of leaders of the group, to meet Skana in her pool. When Hunter leant down to meet the whale, Skana opened her jaws and gently enclosed Hunter's head between her teeth. Even Spong was alarmed. "One moment I felt more fear than I've ever felt in my life", Hunter told Spong after this experience, "then the next moment I felt a shower of absolute trust" (Weyer 1986, 144). Hunter, too, came away from the encounter committed to the Save the Whales campaign.

