



THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EYE

column & photographs
by TONY WU

Humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) are extraordinary animals. Weighing in at around 40 tons each and measuring up to 15 meters, these charismatic cetaceans are perhaps the first thing that pops to mind when most people think of the word “whale.”

Awe-inspiring breaches, energetic pectoral slaps, and magnificent flourishes with their powerful tails are some of the signature behaviors that make these baleen whales among the most easily recognized and widely loved inhabitants of the sea—the whale that everyone wants to see.

In this respect, I consider myself extremely fortunate, as I spend several weeks a year observing these marine mammals in the Kingdom of Tonga, which is one of a handful of places around the world where in-water encounters with humpback whales are permitted.

Over time, I’ve logged hundreds of hours with the whales—watching them from above the waterline, as well as swimming among them. (Of course, I’ve spent many more hours twiddling my thumbs while waiting for whales to show up.)

As you can probably imagine, photographing humpback whales is a challenge. Despite their size, humpbacks can be amazingly difficult to find. The ocean is vast, after all. Even when you do find them, the whales are often on the move, in murky water, or just not in the mood to humor you.

As I’ve learned from hard-won experience, just being in the right place at the right time with the right conditions also isn’t enough. There’s much more to consider, as I’ll try to explain in relation to the photograph I’ve selected for this issue’s column. If you’re contemplating giving whale photography a go, here are a few things to keep in mind:



Sometimes, you have to swim, and swim,

LEARN TO SWIM: This probably sounds obvious, but surprisingly, it’s something that many people who try photographing whales in the water don’t appear to take into consideration. In fact, it’s often experienced divers who fare the worst. People sometimes assume that because they’ve logged hundreds of dives, they’re automatically qualified to swim with whales. The opposite is usually true. When you’re diving, you don’t really swim much, and swimming at the surface requires entirely different skill than going from reef-to-reef underwater.

Even if you’re an expert swimmer though, handling yourself around whales isn’t quite the same as doing laps in a pool. Depending on what mood the whales are in, you may find yourself swimming the aquatic equivalent of a marathon, or sometimes spinning around and around to keep up with ceaselessly circling cetaceans. Some whales will sit 20 meters below, making you wait half an hour before they come up to take a quick look and dive back down again, while some baby whales will splash around and play with you when the circumstances are right.

What’s common to all these situations is that you need to be in complete control of yourself—whether that means swimming long distances, executing acrobatic moves in the water, or many times, just sitting still and looking natural. Humpbacks, like other cetaceans, are remarkably perceptive, and they can tell the difference between someone who’s “at home” in the ocean and a person who’s flopping and flailing around like a proverbial fish out of water.

It’s no mystery which one they prefer.



At other times, you just have to wait, observe and not disturb the whales.

and swim, and swim...





Interacting with humpbacks, especially calves, is about letting the whales check you out—not the other way around.

INTERACT, DON'T ATTACK: One of the biggest mistakes people make with cetaceans is becoming overexcited. When an adorable baby whale swims up from its mother resting 15 meters below to get a breath of air, it's completely natural (especially for photographers) to feel an irresistible urge to swim over for a better look and to snap photos up close. Unfortunately, this is precisely what you shouldn't do.

Think of it from the whale's perspective. You're minding your own business, and suddenly a bunch of strange, funny-looking beings flop into the water and start making a beeline for you with limbs flailing, water splashing. Any self-respecting whale would turn tail and immediately swim away, as usually happens. If instead, you float without moving much, limbs by your sides, curiosity will often get the best of humpbacks (especially calves), and they'll saunter over to have a closer look at you. Resisting the urge to swim toward whales can be counterintuitive, but it's often the secret to having rewarding, personal encounters.

FIND YOUR INNER WHALE: At the risk of sounding loopy, understanding and being “at one” with the whales is perhaps the most important step towards taking outstanding photographs of them. I mean this not in a hocus-pocus, mystical connotation, but in the context of how best to create an aesthetically pleasing humpback image.

From an artistic point of view, humpback whales are about size, power, and—most of all—grace. Expressing these three elements is the key to communicating what it means to be a humpback whale, and hence grabbing the attention of anyone who sees your work.

To be able to do this, you need to have some insight into what whales are doing when you come across them, how they’ll respond to you, and how they’ll behave thereafter. Of course, the only way to do this is to spend time with them, but it certainly helps to be observant and to learn as much about the whales as possible before attempting to photograph them.

This is, indeed, applicable to any type of nature photography, but particularly with whales, if you know what they are likely to do, you’ll have the needed split second to get into position and frame the shot, which makes all the difference between creating art and taking snapshots.

Size, power and grace—the three essential elements of humpback photography.



INTERACTING WITH WHALES

Many jurisdictions around the world either prohibit or severely restrict in-water encounters with cetaceans. While I understand and agree with the desire to protect both marine mammals and people, I don't believe that prohibiting interaction is the most productive course of action.

I've taken many people into the water to see and interact with whales. Without exception, everyone has loved the experience, and has walked away with a strong desire to ensure that the humpbacks receive the protection they need. In my view, separating people from nature serves only to reinforce ignorance and a sense of “it doesn't affect me” when it comes to issues like conservation.

Moreover, not allowing interaction with nature often leads to seemingly absurd beliefs becoming established as fact. When I first started learning about humpbacks about a decade ago, for example, there was a popular view that escorts were female whales acting as helpers or midwives for other female whales. In fact, escorts are horny males eager to mate. A simple drop in the water and look under the skirt would have been the easiest way to establish this, but onerous restrictions on in-water interaction helped perpetuate this misunderstanding.



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BE PATIENT: One of the things I figured out early on is that the term “whale watching” is entirely misleading. “Whale waiting” is a much more appropriate expression. I’m not sure what the ratio of my time spent looking for whales to time actually spent with whales would work out to be, but I’m certain it’s a ridiculously low figure. To make matters worse, many (perhaps most) encounters with whales end up being nothing more than a fleeting glimpse or cursory visit, and quite often, inclement weather, poor visibility, high winds, and other factors beyond control disrupt otherwise perfect photographic opportunities. If there’s one single character trait that’s essential for photographing whales, it’s patience—heaps of it.



Working with whales is largely about waiting for the right moment, with lots of downtime in between.

All of the considerations above, plus a healthy measure of luck, contributed to capturing this image. The whales in this photograph were a male/female pair, probably engaged in courtship/pre-mating rituals. When a pair of whales like this decide upon one another as probable mates, they’re usually alone and engrossed in what I can only describe as lovey-dovey behavior—caressing one another, intertwining their bodies, playing at the surface, and so forth. Since whales in this mood tend to be quite relaxed, they can also become friendly and inquisitive, as was the case in this situation.

Settling into the water and letting the whales make the initial approach was key to establishing trust. Once the happy humpbacks grew accustomed to our presence, two other observers and I were able to swim alongside them for extended periods of time, with the whales turning often to pass among and interact with us, as if involving us in their courtship rights.

It’d be a slight exaggeration to say that I saw this moment coming, but there were several points during this encounter when it just “felt” like the whales were about to do something. This was one of those times. In the blink of an eye, the whale closest to me lifted its pectoral fin out of the water and brought it down at full speed, creating this spectacular scene. Fortunately, having anticipated that something interesting was about to happen, I had a split-second head start and my camera was in place and ready to go before the whale executed this dramatic maneuver. ▣

For more of Tony’s work, visit: www.tony-wu.com

◀ This photograph captures the essence of a humpback whale—strength, presence and agility, with a hint of playfulness.