High-resolution archival tags provide new insights into the underwater foraging and echolocation behavior of resident killer whales capturing Pacific salmon

Brianna Wright
*Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Canada, Brianna.wright@dfo-mpo.gc.ca*

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Dtags as a Tool for Behavioural Studies of Resident Killer Whales

Brianna Wright

Biologist – Marine Mammal Program, Pacific Biological Station, Nanaimo, BC
Digital Acoustic Recording Tags (Dtag)

(Johnson & Tyack 2003, IEEE J Ocean Eng)
**Dtags** deployed on 31 fish-eating northern resident killer whales in British Columbia (2009-2012)

17 true-positive **foraging events** by 7 individuals: 9 Chinook, 6 chum, 2 coho
probable point of fish capture

beginning of chase?

Salmon foraging dive (201.9 m)
Dive (>1 m) types were categorized using 16 kinematic variables.

Dives with prey remains (n=17) used as a training set for iterative LDA.

Results: 701 = foraging, 10,618 = other behaviours.
Foraging dives are kinematically distinct

foraging dives, n=701  other dives, n=10,618
Whales target depths used by Chinook salmon

Salmon Escape Response:
- Bottom topography
- Visual camouflage
- Air-breathing predator
Pre- versus Post-capture Echolocation Behaviour

During searching/pursuit (pre-capture), killer whales spent a greater proportion of dive time echolocating, and emitted clicks at greater rates.

Mean proportion of time spent clicking:
- Pre-capture: 43%
- Post-capture: 20%

Mean number of clicks per second:
- Pre-capture: 6.2
- Post-capture: 1.1
Buzzes: Close-range prey targeting

- Trains with >50% clicks having ICIs ≤ 20 ms
- Present in 13 of 17 foraging events: mean=2.5/capture; duration = 5.9 s
- Primarily pre-capture, often at depths >100 m
Crunches: Prey-processing sounds

- Present in 14 of 17 foraging events: mean=3.6/capture
- Primarily post-capture, near the surface
- Salmon typically broken apart prior to being eaten (regardless of prey sharing)
Conclusions: NRKW Dtag Study

- Foraging dives are deeper, higher velocity, involve greater path complexity and more body rotation.

- Max foraging dive depths reflect the deeper distribution of Chinook salmon & salmon escape responses – disturbance mitigation should consider this.

- Prior to fish captures, both click rates and proportion of time spent echolocating were greater.

- Buzzes and crunches may provide acoustic proxies for prey capture attempts and successes: measures of foraging efficiency?

- Concurrent NOAA Dtag data from SRKW provides a valuable opportunity for a comparative foraging study of the two populations.
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