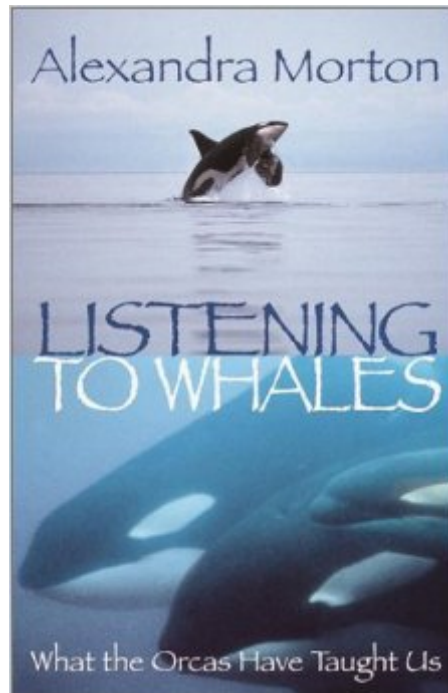


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# Listening To Whales: What The Orcas Have Taught Us



## Synopsis

For the past twenty-five years, Alexandra Morton has been at the forefront of whale and dolphin research, dedicating her life to the study of orcas (also known as killer whales). Now in *Listening to Whales*, Morton shares the spellbinding story of her career, her adventures in the wilderness, the heartbreak she has endured, and the rewards of living her life on her own terms. Born into an artistic family in Connecticut, Morton experienced a seismic jolt when at age twelve she first read the work of primatologist Dr. Jane Goodall and knew she wanted to study wild animals. Soon afterward, listening for the first time to orcas communicating with each other, she knew she had found her life work. In the late 1970s, while working at California's Marineland, Alexandra pioneered the recording of whale sounds by dropping a hydrophone into the tank of two killer whales. She recorded the varied language of mating, childbirth, and even grief after the birth of a stillborn calf. At the same time she made the startling observation that the whales were inventing and perfecting wonderful synchronized movements, a behavior that was soon recognized as a defining characteristic of orca society. In 1978, Alexandra moved with her husband, photographer Robin Morton, to a remote bay in British Columbia to continue her research with wild orcas. For a few idyllic years, Alexandra and Robin shared their passion for whales, cruising the green northern waters and raising a baby boy. But tragedy struck when Robin died in a terrible accident. Only the love of her son and her abiding dedication to whale research gave Alexandra the strength to continue her groundbreaking work. Her recordings of the whales that swim by her house have led her to a deeper understanding of the mystery of whale echolocation, the vocal communication that enables the mammals to find their way in the dark sea. She continues to be among the renowned researchers attempting to break down the barriers of interspecies communication. At once an inspiring story of a woman's determination to live her life on her own terms and a fascinating study of the profound communion between humans and whales, this book will open your eyes anew to the wonders of the natural world.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 320 pages

Publisher: Ballantine Books; 1st edition (April 30, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0345437942

ISBN-13: 978-0345437945

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 1.1 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.9 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (61 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,203,277 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #42 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Field Guides > Mammals](#) #577 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Animals > Marine Life](#) #1162 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Animals > Mammals](#)

## Customer Reviews

Alexandra Morton learns from listening to whales. It is surprising to think that only a few decades ago, no one had studied, much less made commercial recordings of, the voices of whales. Some, like the eccentric researcher John C. Lilly, had made much of the vocalizations of dolphins, but we knew a lot more about the animals who sang in the air where we could hear them. Morton has written about her scientific career in *Listening to Whales: What the Orcas Have Taught Us* (Ballantine Books). There is a good deal of scientific information in it, often understated and certainly not with the sort of detail Morton must use in her papers. She can specify that orcas do not use a single sound to match a single behavior, for instance; it is the frequency of the sound that makes a difference, signaling tranquility or the need for a pod to change direction. Resident orcas, near the shore, could be vocal and splashy, because the fish on which they feed have not learned to listen for them. Transient orcas, traveling the seas and living on alert mammals that pay attention to sounds of danger, have evolved to be quieter and more stealthy. There's plenty of general science in the book, about how orcas fish, mate, socialize, and raise families. But Morton's volume is one in a series of an appealing subgenre of memoir, that of the woman scientist. She was a high school dropout because she wanted to do research on mice more than doing regular studies. She chanced upon a job with maverick dolphin investigator, John C. Lilly, and then went on to do sound studies on orcas in tanks at Marineland. In 1979, she began to listen to orcas in the wild, using hydrophones originally developed to track submarines. At that time, orcas were a mystery; how they socialized, where they wintered, even what they ate could only be guessed at. Morton helped provide her share of answers, especially those bearing on their language. She married a man who photographed orcas underwater; he was eyes and she was ears. They had a son, and some of Morton's most endearing words have to do with how, in an extreme environment and with research duties looming, she handled little Jarret. She had to deal with widowhood, and primitive conditions in a wild area, but she loved the work. Sadly, her whales were driven away from her home waters because of salmon farming, which Morton covers in the last part of the book. Not only the whales

have suffered. Morton is not a pessimist. Her book shines with hope for her whales and her planet, but she makes it clear that we are going to make mistakes in predicting how we can "control" nature. She has become an ecological advocate for her home territory, learning such useful techniques as bypassing local government and talking (via Internet) to an expert she can partner with to do research on the respective individual effects of salmon farming on her world. Her findings are getting easily published this way without delay or grant-seeking. She is making a difference; it isn't known if it will be enough. Her book is a wonderful examination of a life she has lived on her own terms, and lived well. It is easy to catch her enthusiasm, and this would be a wonderful book for a young person interested in science.

This book is captivating and engaging. There were times I couldn't put it down. I purchased this book because my 7-year old daughter is very interested in whales. After reading particular sections of the book, I would tell her the whale-stories inside (such as the differences between the three kinds of orca groups: resident, transient, and off-shores) Together we learned a lot. I expect to return to this book several times over the next few years to read its stories and re-evaluate its contents. It has certainly become the launching pad for further exploration about orca whales. Although I quite enjoyed this book and strongly recommend it, I found myself wanting more scientific information than was provided. I would like to know more about the sounds of whales and communication techniques. Nevertheless, this book is part autobiography and part adventure. Ms. Morton has done much to shed light on just how far we have come in researching whales and other sea creatures. I really appreciated the acknowledgement of her mixed feelings about researching captive whales, where she personally benefited in her own research, and the necessity to keep these truly awesome creatures in the wild with their family pods. After reading this book, I realize just how important it is to NOT keep orca in pens for public enjoyment and entertainment. I also appreciated her views on conservation, and found her information on fish farms to be very insightful. Overall, I found myself becoming much more emotionally involved with this book than I would like to admit. A very good read.

'Listening to Whales' was a touching story of how a women's life was enchanted through her passion for marine life. We follow the author, Alexandra Morton, through her life and career- which often go hand in hand- as she evolved as a marine scientist and a woman devoted to her love: the orcas. We are taken from her first job as an acoustics expert in Marineland to her more profound passion which is to examine the killer whales in their natural habitat; the open ocean. This book was

not only captivating, but as I read through it I learned so many fun facts about orcas and dolphins and the life of a marine enthusiast. My favorite aspect of the book was the way she explained how her extreme passion for orcas came to be. I loved learning about how her love for marine life evolved from her love of frogs and grew from there. I find it so fascinating that as a small child something like loving frogs has evolved for decades and turned into her fulltime career. It proved how dedicated she has been to her work for so long and how there is constantly so much more to learn. I loved how she dedicated her young life to follow her dream, and this story showed how far you can come if you are persistent and dedicated. There wasn't any specific part of the book I didn't like. It was a story of this brilliant woman's dreams and stories, I don't think anyone is to say there was something wrong with it; it's an unedited, unchangeable story of her life. I think she had a good balance of her life-stories and experiences and her knowledge and history of her life with the whales. I would recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in marine life or anyone who has a passion that they want to pursue. It's a very inspiring story, which makes the book good for almost anyone.

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