



This is Hvaldimir

On a day like any other, a tame beluga whale suddenly appeared in Norwegian waters wearing a harness, creating headlines around the world. While the mystery of his origins has since faded from public interest, the heated debate of how best to protect him continues.

Words by Hugh Francis Anderson

Photographs by Fred Buyle





“He’s been trained by humans, he’s comfortable in human company, but we may be too anthropomorphic to assume that because he’s alone, he’s lonely.”

PREVIOUS: Hvaldimir examining his reflection in the dome port of a camera housing.

LEFT: Photographer Fred Buyle described his first sighting of Hvaldimir as an underwater apparition, "a ghost escaped from the depths".

I am being watched. From the water behind me, a fierce gaze burns into my back. The first light of day dances off the spindrift, whirling atop the mountains across the fjord. I turn instinctively, scrutinising the water. The snow beneath my deep-soled boots crunches, compacting into the dock as I turn to look. A glimmer of white glides beneath the surface and is then concealed. A splash. A spray. The deep inhalation of air. And then I see him. His head breaks the surface; his neck craned in my direction. The sheen of light-infused water passes over his white flesh. The darkness of his enquiring eyes. We are two beings that appear to be disconnected. He, a creature of the ocean that twists and rolls with fluid freedom. And me, upright and insubstantial, covered in layers to protect the fragility of my own life, free only to amble the coastlines. Our worlds seem completely detached. While there may be little to tangibly connect the two of us, something does. He looks into my eyes, and I into his. I see him and he sees me. For man and whale to be locked in such a moment is the closest thing I can describe to magic. This is Hvaldimir.

Hvaldimir, the name given to the adult male beluga whale discovered in Norwegian waters in mid-spring 2019, has, in the year since, become the topic of international speculation, increased and often heated debate, reached global viral stardom and above all, captured the hearts and minds of all who encounter him. And while the origins of Hvaldimir remain unknown, claims that he was trained as a spy by the Russian Navy have gripped public and media attention; his name a portmanteau of the Russian name Vladimir and the Norwegian word for whale, hval (pronounced val). During a week-long orca assignment in Arctic Norway with marine biologist and sailor Andreas B. Heide last November, I encountered Hvaldimir for myself while in a remote harbour near Skjervøy. Guided by Heide and the WWF's Global Lead, Vincent Kneefel, I spent almost an hour in the water with the remarkable cetacean. I began to understand the complexities of his new life in Norway; in a region where belugas are never ordinarily found. I soon discovered the force with which people would fight

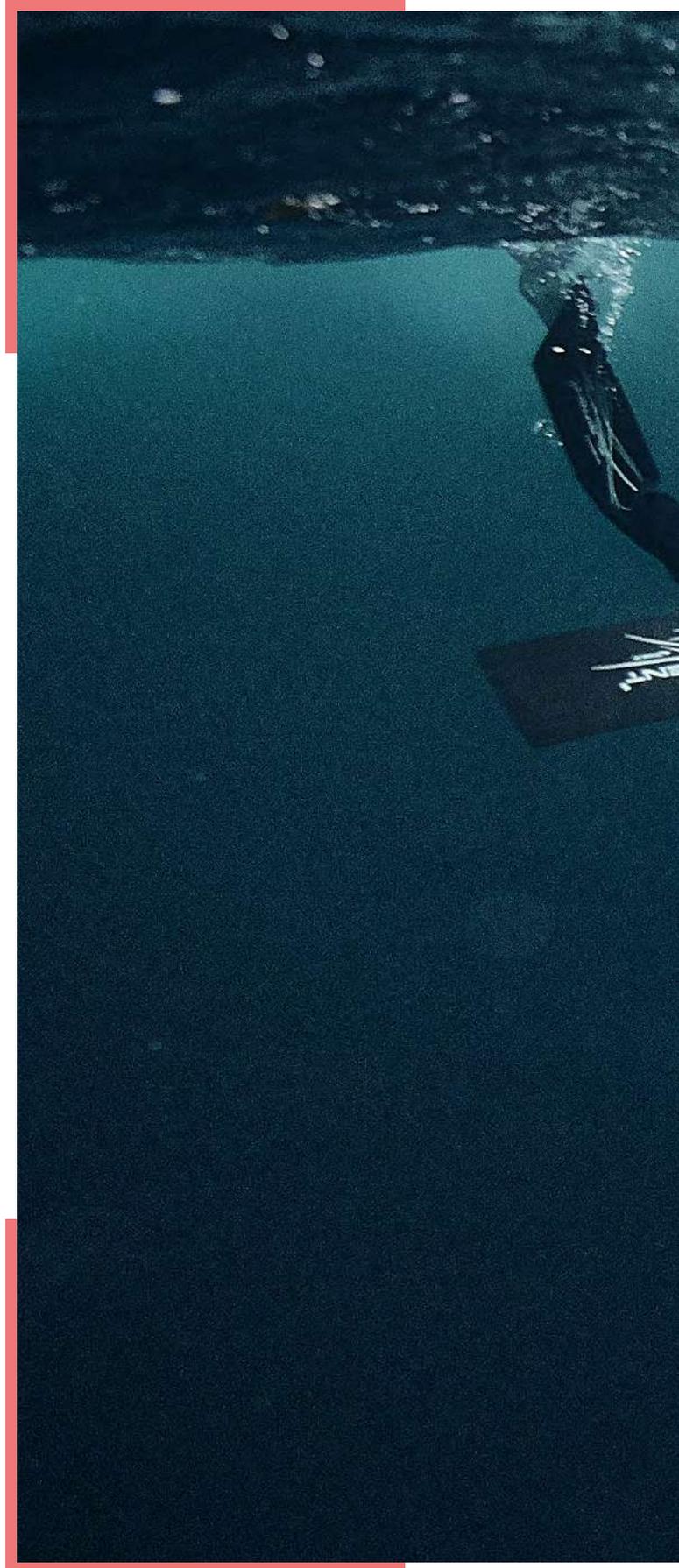
for this animal's welfare. Questions whirled. What do we do with him? Should he be reintroduced to a wild pod? Why should we care about one whale? What is our duty of care to him? However, when I returned home, I found myself asking one question: What is best for Hvaldimir?

It's April 26, 2019 and commercial fisherman Joar Hesten is working aboard his boat in the waters surrounding the island of Ingøy in Arctic Norway. The weather is calm, the darkness of winter slowly releasing its hold on the North. With just a few trips left of the season, he tries a new fishing area and points his boat towards a group of other vessels nearby. "When we passed through the boats, we saw a big white shadow in the water," he tells me. "I instantly knew that there was only one thing it could be, a beluga." As Hvaldimir approached the boat, Hesten saw that he was seemingly entangled in rope or fishing equipment. Yet the closer he swam, the clearer it became that he was wearing a harness. Hvaldimir rubbed himself against the boat, apparently attempting to remove it. "It was not good," says Hesten. "I thought that the whale was probably going to die a terrible death." After calling the local authorities, who informed Hesten that helping this animal was out of their jurisdiction, a local journalist put him in touch with Audun Rikardsen, a Professor in the Department of Arctic and Marine Biology at the University of Tromsø. Hesten forwarded images to Rikardsen and it was determined that the harness around Hvaldimir was not part of any known monitoring system in Norway. "I was looking into whether there were any whale specialists in the Tromsø area when Audun put me in touch with the Norwegian Fisheries, as they make all decisions about marine mammals." He made contact with Jørgen Ree Wiig, a Seafaring Inspector at the Directorate of Fisheries (DOF), Sea Surveillance Service. A marine biologist who has worked with the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission and is part of the International Whaling Committee's Bycatch Mitigation initiative, Ree Wiig ensures fishing laws are upheld and is responsible for aiding entangled whales in Norwegian waters. Ree Wiig joined Hesten to assess the situation. "He was interested in humans and in Hesten's fishing vessel," says Ree Wiig. "But my main concern when we found him was to get the harness off." This was eventually achieved when Hesten entered the water in a survival suit. "I just connected with him. I was never afraid in the water and I never felt any aggression; he was just seeking help," he tells me. "He came all the way up to my body so that I could feel him, and I reached out for the buckle and I could feel it just snap open. That was a really good moment." With the harness loosened, they eventually managed to remove it entirely and Hvaldimir was free. Hesten saw Hvaldimir swim out to sea in a north-westerly direction. "I said to him, 'Just continue until you reach Svalbard.'" But of course, he did not, and was soon spotted in the town of Hammerfest less than a week later.

French scientist and co-founder of the Norwegian Orca Survey, Eve Jourdain, was at her home in Andenes, when

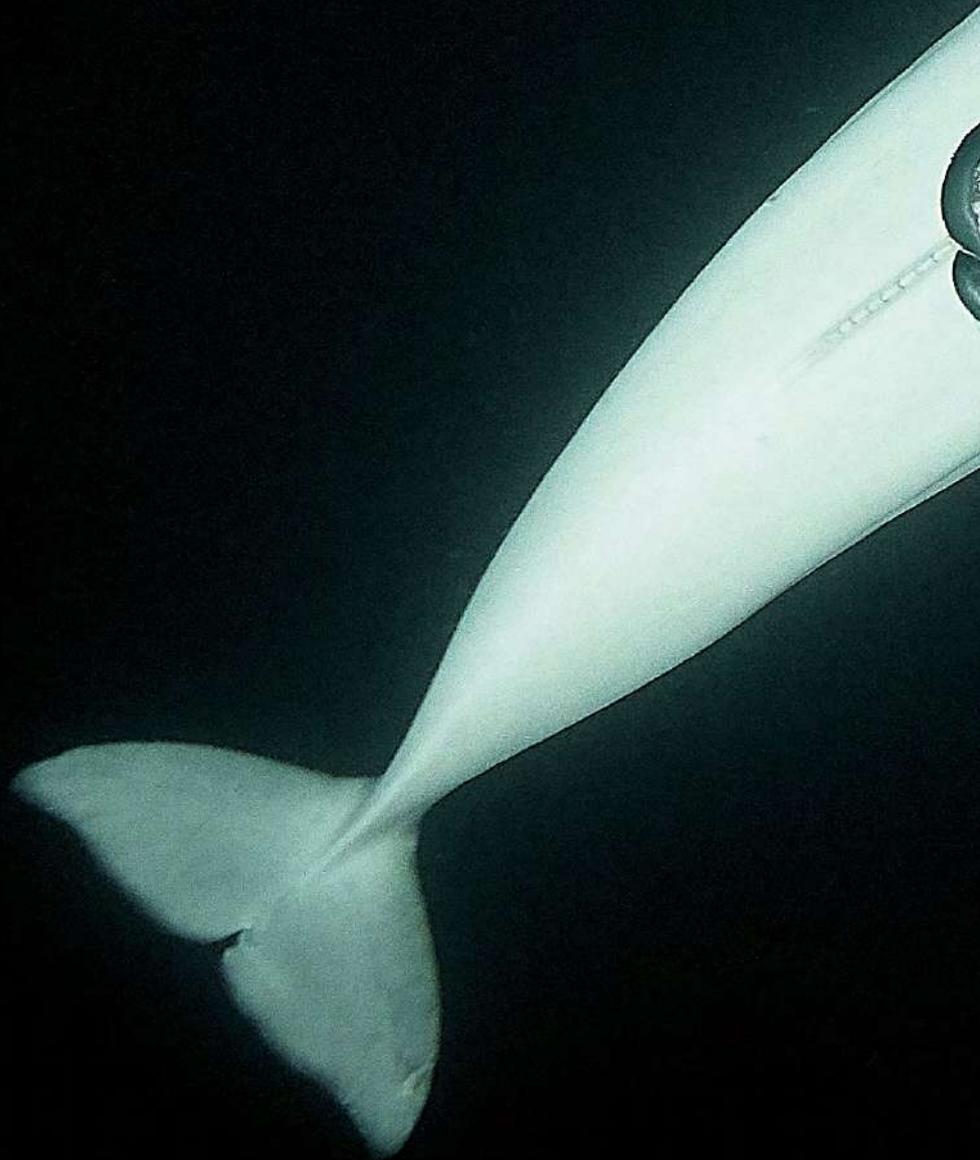
word of a friendly beluga whale appeared on the news. “I had a bad feeling because it was obvious to me that this was a tame whale,” she says. Two weeks later, she boarded a plane for Hammerfest. It would be three months before she returned home. “As soon as I saw the whale and the situation, it broke my heart. I try not to be too emotional as a scientist, but it was just such a unique situation. This animal was desperate for contact with people.” A former orca trainer at Marineland in Antibes, France, Jourdain had grown accustomed to the behavioural habits of trained whales. “I could see that he had been conditioned and he was doing things in the hope of getting food from people. He was doing tricks and people were very amused, but the truth is that he was doing anything he could to get food.”

Jourdain was joined by Rikardsen when on his way to conduct fieldwork in early May. He entered the water with Hvaldimir to check for injuries, of which he had none, and to affix a camera tag to determine whether he was feeding, which he was not. “When I saw him in the beginning in Hammerfest, I thought that he had been domesticated so much that maybe he should be transported to an aquarium because at that time he wasn’t feeding by himself,” Rikardsen tells me. “He really wanted to find company. He was biting me, playing with me.” In the meantime, Jourdain secretly fed Hvaldimir herring at night to keep him alive. During the day, she saw the local community wanted to help. “While doing the observations I worked on a report to send to the government to show that this was a domesticated whale that needed help; the problem would not resolve itself.” Three days later, Jourdain had approval from the government’s Directorate of Fisheries to begin a monitoring and feeding programme. She enlisted the help of Lindsay Rubincam, a former Marineland trainer who had coached Jourdain. Now a marine mammal management consultant, Rubincam’s time spent training captive belugas placed her well to better understand Hvaldimir’s behaviour and specific needs. According to her observations, she estimates that he is between eight and 10 years old. “He’s displaying a lot of sexual exploratory behaviour and is coming into his prime,” she told me. “He very well could have been born in captivity, but he was probably captured when he was around two.” This explains why he’s comfortable in the natural environment, “but some behaviours show an insecurity; he is not comfortable in storms or rough conditions.” Rubincam has also observed his affinity for boats, particularly ribs, sailboats and zodiacs. “He’s obviously attached to humans and sees humans as his reference, his family, his tribe.” Over the course of the three-month programme, Hvaldimir’s weight stabilised, he displayed signs that he was successfully feeding himself and at the end of July left Hammerfest permanently. Official observation by Jourdain and the NOS continued until December, when she submitted her final report to the

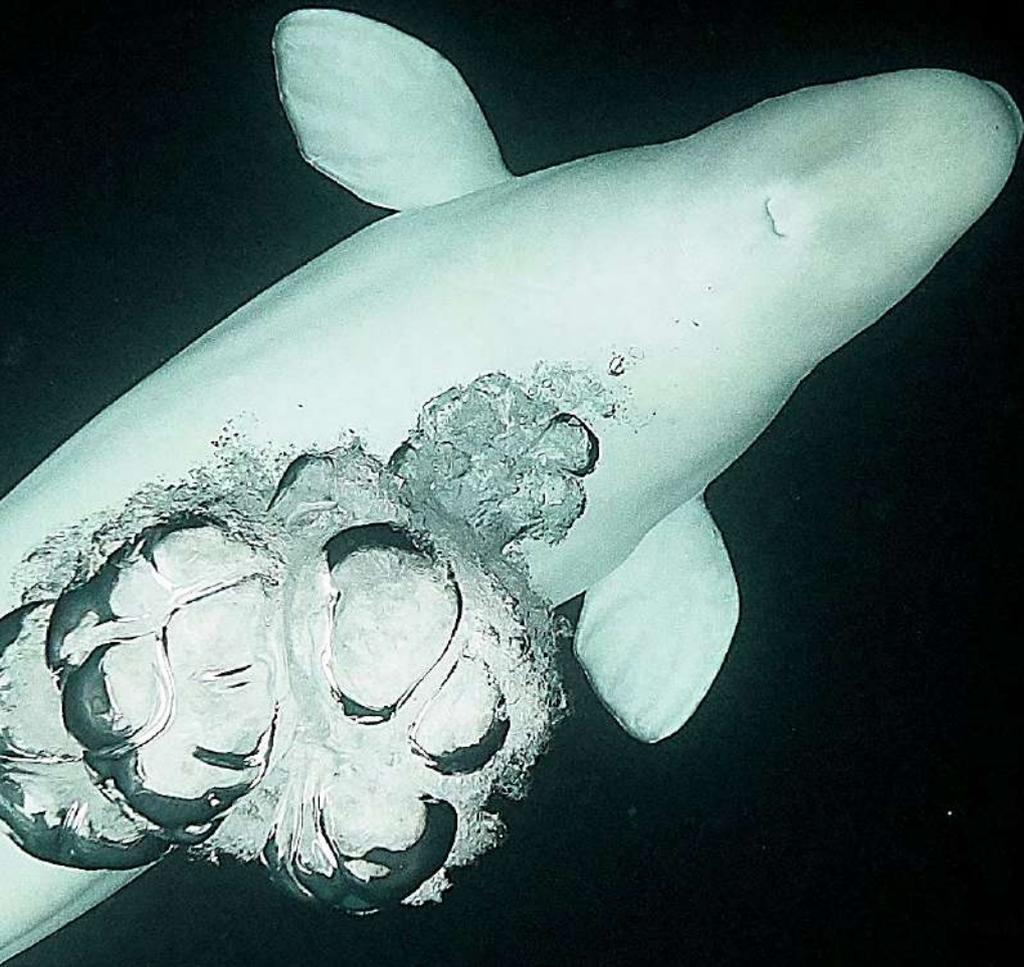


| *Hvaldimir investigates Fabrice Schnöller's 360° camera rig.*



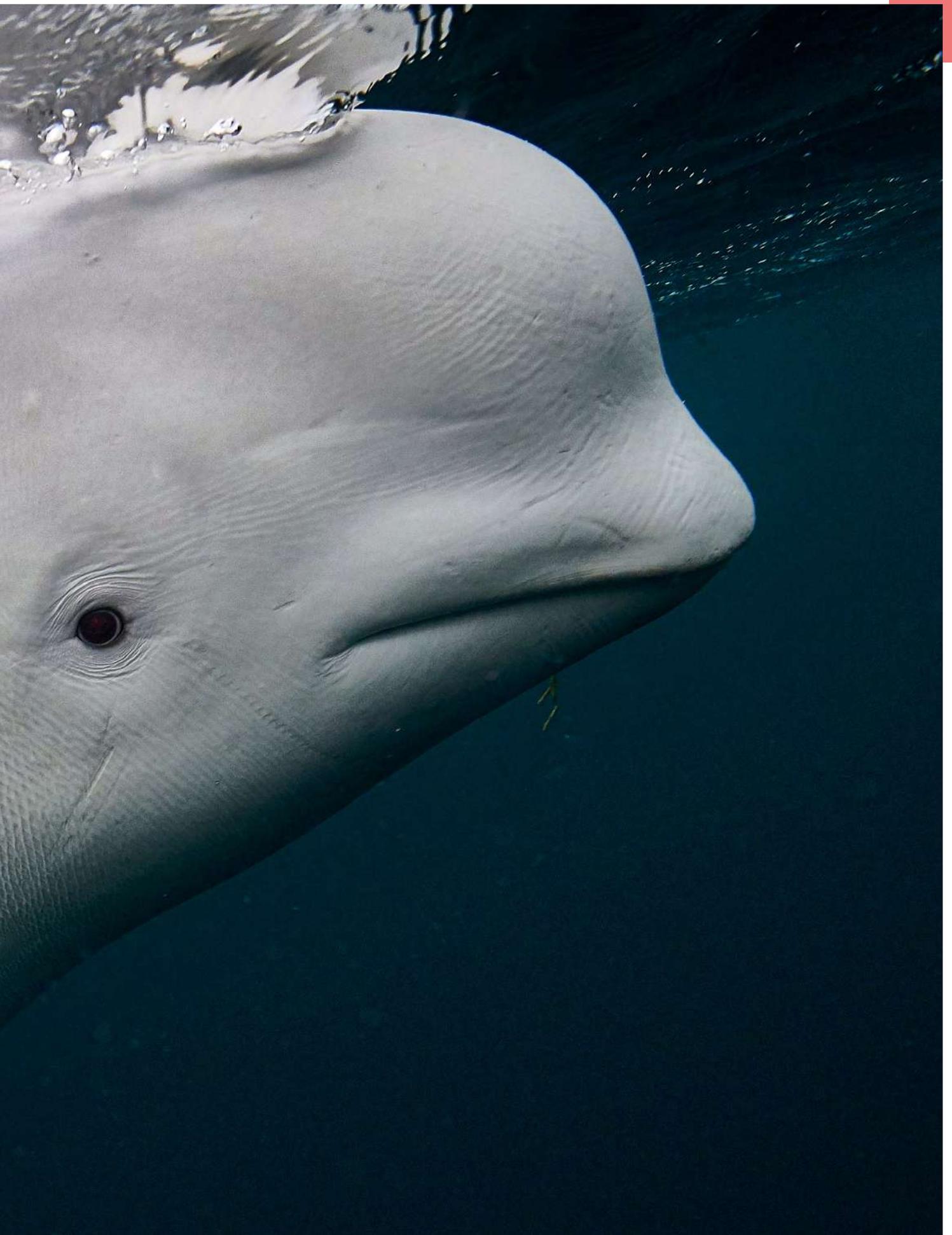


Hvaldimir is often seen blowing bubbles, more frequently than many cetaceans in the wild.





The soft tissue at the front of a beluga whale's head, known as the melon, aids in echolocation and communication.







government. “It was obvious that he was feeding on his own and we considered our mission completed.” But at this point, division within the community began to grow.

Since leaving, Hvaldimir has travelled extensively in Arctic Norway. I encountered him in early November in Bergfjord, 50 nautical miles from Hammerfest. Fabrice Schnöller and Fred Buyle, who study whale click communication through the DAREWIN Project, encountered him days before I did in the same vicinity. It was Hvaldimir’s desire for social connection that struck us all. “I felt a connection that I had never felt with a wild animal before,” Kneefel tells me. Buyle said that when he left the water it felt as if he was leaving a person behind. There was an understanding among these individuals, all of whom have extensive experience with wild cetaceans, that Hvaldimir craved social connection.

Clause Three of the Norwegian Animal Welfare Act concerns the treatment of animals, domestic or wild. It states: “Animals have an intrinsic value, which is irrespective of the usable value they may have for man. Animals shall be treated well and be protected from danger of unnecessary stress and strains.”

In supplementary material it states: “The interpretation of ‘stresses and strains’ is subject to a professional animal welfare assessment”. But in the case of Hvaldimir, there is clear divide between professionals. He may be deemed a wild animal as he swam into Norwegian waters of his own accord, and he may be considered healthy as he is able to feed himself, but his welfare is significantly determined by social interaction, which is where debate arises – namely, whether a reintroduction attempt to a wild pod would be best for Hvaldimir’s welfare or not. Official government views don’t appear to consider this. I approached the Norwegian Ministry for Climate and Environment and was told that the DOF was the responsible government agency with regards to Hvaldimir, and Ree Wiig the official representative for his case. “Here in Norway, the official point of view is that we see him as a wild individual because he’s feeding himself,” he tells me. “He’s quite well off now compared to where he started.” However, it is widely agreed that as he has been trained by humans, our duty of care must be viewed in a different light when compared to truly wild animals. “I understand that because humans have ‘done’ this, we should take responsibility. But we tried that with Keiko and he was rejected.” The well-documented case of Keiko, the orca made famous as Free Willy, who underwent a multi-million-dollar reintroduction attempt only to be rejected by wild orcas and eventually die, is a case referenced significantly when discussing Hvaldimir. However, orcas and belugas have different social structures. I reached out to Pierre Richard, a former beluga population biologist with the Canadian Federal Government in the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Arctic Research Division, to learn

| *Hvaldimir interacting with Fabrice Schnöller.*

more. Richard, who spent 30 years studying wild belugas, cites the work of Greg O’Corry-Crowe, a colleague and beluga geneticist, who via DNA sampling has established that belugas in wild pods aren’t necessarily all related, thus indicating they conform to a fission-fusion society. “The animals will break off from their pod of origin and will fuse with other pods so that there’s some degree of mixing,” he tells me. “They are social animals, but they are not in stable pods.” With this in mind, could Hvaldimir be accepted by a pod if a reintroduction attempt were to be made? As Richard notes, “I think there’s definitely a possibility that this animal could join other belugas if it found some. If he went north to Svalbard or eastward to the White Sea, he would easily find other belugas.” Yet in the same instance, because belugas are in a fission-fusion society and therefore do break away from pods, it’s also not uncommon for them to be found alone. During the course of Richard’s study of wild belugas, he has seen males travel alone for extended periods of time. As too notes Ree Wiig. “Young male marine mammals can swim off very far from pods. There are many examples of this with belugas in eastern Canada, so you can see that it is also natural behaviour to be alone.” But again, we must remember that Hvaldimir is a humanised whale.

With this in mind, some suggest that as Hvaldimir was trained by humans and has an affiliation to us, he may get the social interaction he needs from these encounters.

“From my background, I disagree with some people who would simply assess the situation and say he’s fine,” says Rubincam. “The difference is from a behavioural background as he’s been conditioned to have relationships with humans, and we don’t know if he was in a social environment with other belugas before or not.” Rikardsen notes that Hvaldimir may not know the right social language to join a wild pod. Jourdain herself says that the reality is that he would not be adopted by a wild pod and that “there are too many unknowns and for one individual, I think it’s unreasonable,” with others believing the chances of reintroduction are slim to none. Rikardsen also notes that in 2020, Hvaldimir has sought human interaction on an increasingly reduced level. He’s been trained by humans, he’s comfortable in human company, but we may be too anthropomorphic to assume that because he’s alone, he’s lonely.

Aside from the social interaction Hvaldimir requires, there are other issues that concern pro-relocation parties. As Hvaldimir has reached sexual maturity, we could see further complications. Rikardsen has seen Hvaldimir sexually excited and Richard notes that male belugas can become aggressive. However, for Hvaldimir’s reproductive needs and subsequent temperament, there is little remedy aside from a female beluga in oestrus. Ree Wiig notes that under government guidance it is advised

not to enter the water with Hvaldimir, so this should be of little concern from a public safety standpoint.

There is fear for Hvaldimir’s life due to the high level of marine traffic in Norway. I have seen evidence of a propeller strike on the left of his tail below the dorsal ridge, and his affiliation for boats makes them an even greater hazard. Most believe this will be the cause of his death in Norway. Yet these issues have been addressed as best they can. In harbours where he is known to be, strict guidelines are put in place and the authorities have even stopped vessels entering harbours in a bid to protect him.

There were initial concerns that Hvaldimir was at risk from transient orcas that feed on marine mammals, but when he has been seen near them, the orcas appear to ignore him. The largest concern is for the damage that Hvaldimir may cause. When he left Hammerfest, he was seen predominately around three fish farms. The concern here was that, if he penetrated the nets or caused damage, the DOF would have to step in to take measures. “As a Norwegian fisherman, I know a lot of the threats we pose to Hvaldimir. I’ve seen first-hand what happens when wildlife gets too close to our nets,” says Hesten. “There have been incidents where whales have penetrated the salmon nets. If he does something to a fish farm or creates chaos in some way, the fisheries have the right to put him down.” Hvaldimir hasn’t caused problems for the fisheries as of yet and, much like the orca concerns, seem by most to be of reduced importance.

But if relocation was deemed appropriate, what would this look like? Svalbard is the location that most feel would be best to attempt relocation and is the only protected area for belugas. Heide notes that as whales migrate between Svalbard and Norway, it would merely be helping him do what he should have been doing already. Buyle, among others, believes his chances of long-term survival in Norway are slim, so relocation is the best option. And Hesten has been working on founding an NGO with Heide called ‘Friends of Hvaldimir’ to specifically look into reintroduction options, though not blindly. “The idea is to relocate him to a natural habitat. And a natural habitat is not only where he can survive physically, but an environment where he’s with his own species,” says Hesten. “Of course, if it turns out that it is not possible to relocate him, we won’t do it.” The reality is that Svalbard is a heavily protected region; Ree Wiig says the laws are so strict relocation might not even be possible.

So, what is there to be done? The one suggestion that appears to carry weight is an attempt at creating a programme with dedicated members to monitor and socialise with Hvaldimir. Both Jourdain and Rubincam have cited that if Hvaldimir could settle in a fjord and have a consistent team to develop a bond with him

Beluga whale tail flukes are strikingly similar to those of a close relative with which it shares the Arctic waters – the narwhal.



*Exemplifying his
conditioned comfort
with human contact,
Hvaldimir swims
between Buyle and
Schnöller.*





“As soon as I saw the whale and the situation, it broke my heart. I try not to be too emotional as a scientist, but it was just such a unique situation.”



“Hvaldimir may continue to travel along the Norwegian coast, appearing in different harbours from time to time, seeking interaction when he wants it, but otherwise largely acting as a wild animal. Or he may disappear for good.”

| This is Hvaldimir.

and provide the social interaction he needs, that would sate current uncertainties. But, as a wild animal continuously on the move, this is no more than an ideal. “He needs a relationship with a few people who can actually take care of him,” says Jourdain. “It is sad, he needs social contact and his needs are not being met, but I can’t think of any ideal solution.” Similarly, Rubincam says, “Maybe there’s nothing to do, but what I would love is just to know that there was some investment in keeping an eye on him.” In discussing the future of Hvaldimir with Ree Wiig, it becomes apparent that his case is by no means closed. “We monitor his movements and what he does,” he tells me. “For me personally, I would like to see all the options for what could be done. So, if anybody has any solutions, I would like to hear them.”

If there was investment and agreement from the DOF and government to take an active approach to monitoring Hvaldimir’s situation, it would also offer an opportunity to study belugas. Schnöller, for example, sees this as an opportunity to better understand beluga vocalisations, a suggestion that Kneefel supports too. Rubincam, with the support of Schnöller and DAREWIN, has even put a grant proposal in for funding from the Save Our Seas Foundation (SOSF) to initiate the next step in Hvaldimir’s story. “Lindsay has submitted an application to the SOSF for a research project studying Hvaldimir’s behaviour and movements, but in particular his communication. The intention is that deciphering unique signatures in his calls may reveal where he originates from and could support plans for his rehabilitation,” writes SOSF on behalf of Dr James Lea, the organisation’s CEO. “The focus of the SOSF is entirely on supporting research and monitoring techniques to help promote the whale’s wellbeing and rehabilitation. We trust the expertise of Lyndsay Rubincam and her team to best manage the whale according to their complete understanding of the complex situation.” While it is promising to see an increased level of attention for Hvaldimir’s future, we can’t forget that he is moving of his own accord. This is a point that Rikardsen places particular impetus on. “Suddenly we might find that he just takes off. We don’t know if he’ll be here in a year or two. He might just disappear.”

This raises another element in the story of Hvaldimir; what he can do as an ambassador for change. “This is not just about Hvaldimir, this is really about the wellbeing of the beluga whale population as a whole and their survival,” says Kneefel. “I see him as a messenger for wild populations that are currently being impacted.” He may also bring greater awareness to the threats that face the Arctic in general. “If there’s an opportunity to use this ‘famous’ animal to gain human attention for the issues that may be facing the Arctic then that has value,” Rubincam says. Captain Heide agrees: “He has the potential to be a symbol for change and give hope in a time when it’s desperately needed for the oceans and nature as a whole.” Even Ree Wiig believes he can be an ambassador for change. Again, there are those who disagree. Rikardsen doesn’t believe Hvaldimir can make more impact than he already has, and Jourdain says that his impact is more localised, especially as Norway is a whaling nation. “He’s changed a lot of people here in Norway. As soon as you make eye contact with him your heart is melting no matter whether you’re a kid or an adult.”

What becomes clear when discussing Hvaldimir is the level of uncertainty that arises at almost every corner. There has already been conflict, claims of agendas that focus on personal economic gain, those acting egotistically as Hvaldimir’s saviours and the sense of ownership that comes with the aforementioned. I can attest to the emotive response Hvaldimir causes; he makes people feel strongly, and in such cases, this can cause hostility. But all must be put aside to answer the question: What is best for Hvaldimir?

With regards to Hvaldimir’s relocation, it appears a greater amount of research must be undertaken. There are still significant unknowns, and the chances of Hvaldimir’s acceptance into a wild pod a cause of much debate. The reality is that unless assurances that the probability of a successful reintroduction far outweigh failure, this option will not be considered by government. This is not to say that thoughts of an attempt are futile. Whilst it is illegal to catch a wild whale, Ree Wiig is adamant that “relocation could get the OK, but nobody has made a good proposition yet. There’s been a lot of talk, but we haven’t seen specifically what this is.” Perhaps it’s a question of time. The foundation of the NGO and the potential grant funding from SOSF show that steps towards a solution that is best for Hvaldimir are being taken. Only through investment into the cause can the necessary data be collected to make a cohesive decision. This is where greater discussion between all involved would form the backbone of a unified approach to Hvaldimir’s future. As Hesten says, “I hope we can put all our differences aside, look at this one beluga whale and work together.”

In the meantime, Hvaldimir may continue to travel along the Norwegian coast, appearing in different harbours from time to time, seeking interaction as and when he wants it, but otherwise largely acting as a wild animal. Or he may disappear for good. There is only so much we can do, and we must accept that even though we may be responsible for his past, we do not control his present and may only rudimentarily be able to safeguard and better his future.

