

NEWS BREAK

Article: **Who are these mysterious orcas swimming around Puget Sound**

Section: **NW, C3**

Sunday's News Break selects an article from **Sunday, March 29, 2026**, of The Seattle Times print replica for an in-depth reading of the news. Read the selected article and answer the attached study questions.

Feel free to adapt this lesson for your students. For instance, some educators may assign this as a homework task, while others might facilitate the reading and discussion of questions within small groups or larger class discussions.

****Please take a moment to review all NIE content before classroom use to ensure it is suitable for your students.****

Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1

- Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.2

- Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

Learning Objectives:

After reading the article, students will analyze the differences between resident and transient orca populations, evaluate scientific evidence used to identify individual whales, and explain how researchers determined the origin of the mystery orcas. They will also assess how diet and behavior influence survival, interpret why some populations are thriving while others are endangered, and construct evidence-based conclusions about what these sightings reveal about ocean ecosystems.

Pre-Reading Discussion:



- What do you think the article will be about, using this picture?
- Are there any clues? What can you infer?

Vocabulary Building:

Read this sentence, what do you think the highlighted words mean using *context clues*? A **context clue** is a word or words that are hints and refers to the sources of information outside of words that readers may use to predict the meaning of the word.

That could mean that even as resident orca numbers **dwindle**, traveling orcas will continue to appear in Pacific Northwest waters.

Dwindle Guess:

Dwindle Definition:

Comprehension Questions:

1. For the past few weeks, a pod of _____ orcas has been coming and going from the waters around Seattle and British Columbia, delighting whale watchers and making headlines as they swim through the waters that are home to the famous and endangered southern resident orca population.
2. Orca researchers, who painstakingly catalog every killer whale they see in the area, are intrigued. What two questions are they asking and want to find the answers to?
3. They've had some clues. For one thing, they were clearly not southern or northern residents. Why not? What do the North and south residents do?

4. That meant they were likely _____ orcas, which travel widely eating marine mammals.
5. The mystery orcas also sported bite marks from the _____ shark, a small deep-sea shark that leaves distinctive circular scars on whales, dolphins and large fish, research organization the Orca Conservancy said.
6. What did the bites suggest?
7. After documenting the new orcas, researchers officially cataloged them as what?
8. Orca experts hypothesized the animals were part of the Alaskan transient population. What tools strengthened that belief?
9. Shari Tarantino, executive director of the Orca Conservancy, said once the newly cataloged animals were entered into FinWave, an online database that uses AI to help people identify orcas using photo submissions, researchers made a surprising discovery. What was it?
10. Seeing new orcas in Puget Sound has provided an opportunity to broaden understanding of the transient populations, Tarantino said. Researchers already have noticed that the presumed Alaskan transients have been _____ with animals from the local West Coast transient population. “We weren’t sure what to expect with the two separate populations, but as it turns out, Transient killer whales in this region seem to be more socially fluid than our Resident ecotypes that do not intermingle,” she said.
11. Decades of research has shown that differences between resident and transient orcas could be stark enough to separate them as different _____.
12. Studies have shown that with a broader diet and a range of travel, local transient orcas have been _____.

Class Discussion Questions:

- What surprised (or stood out to) you in the article?
- At first, I thought _____, but now I think _____?

Deeper-Dive “Connect & Explain” comprehension questions for small groups, entire classes or journal entries and/ or essay prompts for extended enrichment:

- How do scientists determine that the “mystery orcas” are transients rather than residents? Explain what evidence (diet, behavior, markings) supports this conclusion.
- What clues suggest these orcas may have come from Alaska? Connect the evidence (like cookie cutter shark scars and past sightings) to what it reveals about their travel range.
- Why might transient orcas be more adaptable than resident orcas? Explain how diet and movement patterns impact their survival.

- How does the use of AI tools like FinWave change the way scientists' study marine life? Consider both advantages and possible limitations.
- What does it mean that transient orcas are "more socially fluid"? Explain how this differs from resident orca social structures and why that matters.
- Why is the appearance of new orcas in Puget Sound important to researchers? Connect this to broader understanding of ecosystems and species interactions.
- Make a claim: Are transient orcas better equipped to survive environmental changes than resident orcas? Support your argument with evidence from the article.
- Explain how one piece of evidence (such as scars, sightings, or AI identification) can lead to larger scientific conclusions. What does this reveal about how science works?
- What do these "mystery orcas" teach us about the health of ocean ecosystems? Use evidence to explain what their presence might indicate about environmental change.

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