



Netse Mot (one heart, one mind) for Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut

The Southern Resident Orcas of the Salish Sea are culturally and spiritually significant to the Coast Salish peoples whose territories overlap with that of the orcas. In particular, the Lhaq'temish people of Lummi Nation consider these orcas to be family. The Lummi term for orcas is qwe'lhol'mechen, meaning "the people under water," and ancestral teachings hold that there are kinship bonds between the Lhaq'temish and orca peoples.

In 1970, a number of young Southern Resident Orca relations were violently captured from their native Salish Sea waters and sold to aquariums. Only one of these qwe'lhol'mechen survives to this day. Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut, who has also been called "Tokitae" and "Lolita" in captivity, remains the star attraction of Miami Seaquarium, where she is held in the world's smallest orca tank, subjected to relentless sun and extreme social isolation.

In 2017, Lummi Nation was called to work to bring Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut home. In 2019, Lummi elders Squil-le-he-le (Raynell Morris) and Tah-Mahs (Ellie Kinley) invoked their legal, cultural, and spiritual rights in calling for her release and homecoming, and announcing their intent to sue on the grounds of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) should negotiations not be successful. They are represented by Earth Law Center on the legal front, and are working with the Whale Sanctuary Project on the operational front. There is now a comprehensive plan that details how to safely and responsibly bring Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut out of captivity and back home to the Salish Sea. The plan is grounded and guided by Lummi culture and oversight, and is a living document that will change according to Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut's needs as they change over time. The ongoing health and well-being of Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut, her Southern Resident Orca family, and the Salish Sea are centered in this plan.

Netse Mot is a Coast Salish phrase meaning "One heart, one mind." In the decades since Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut's capture, individuals and organizations have protested, petitioned, filed lawsuits, and otherwise campaigned for her release. The Indigenous call for the return of a sacred relative builds on this prior activism. It will take all of us –Indigenous peoples, faith organizations, environmental groups, and individual activists– working together to bring Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut home. When we are of one heart and one mind, we will succeed.

Summary of the Movement to bring Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut home

International Indigenous Support

- The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People reaffirms the inherent right of the Lummi People and the sovereign Nation to conserve, protect, and steward their current and traditional territory, including the Salish Sea, its ecosystems, and species.
- Indigenous Statement of Solidarity for the Lummi's call to bring their relation home has been signed by a number of Indigenous leaders around the world including those from New Zealand, Canada, Central Asia, the Pacific Northwest, and from the Sámi Parliament.
- Ceremonies held for Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut and her by traditional cultural and spiritual practitioners from Russia, Central Asia, Samish, Seminole, Lummi and others. Viewable on the SacredSea YouTube channel and "Ceremonies for Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut" Facebook page.

Political and Governmental action

- 1995: Washington Governor Mike Lowry and Washington Secretary of State Ralph Munro join a campaign to bring "Lolita" home after 25 years of captivity.
- 2017: Lummi Nation was called to bring Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut home and passes a Lummi Indian Business Council (LIBC) Motion in August of 2017.
- 2018: Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians (ATNI) passed Resolution 18-32 supporting Lummi and calling upon Washington State to likewise support Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut's return.
- 2019 Seattle City Council formally supports Lummi Nation's work for Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut.
- 2019 Sna'teng naming ceremony for Sk'aliCh'elh (the Southern Resident Orcas). Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut means "daughter of Sk'aliCh'elh." Witnesses at the Sna'teng included ATNI President and Suquamish Chairman Leonard Forsman; Chief Leah George-Wilson of Tsleil-Waututh; the Chairwoman of Tulalip Tribes couldn't attend but sent her blessing; representatives from Swinomish, Lummi; elected officials including Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu, a representative for Suzan del Bene; representatives from government agencies including WDFW and the Army Corps. The Mayor of Bellingham Kelli Linville sent the boats off at the harbor.

Legal action

- 2012-current: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and others including Animal Legal Defense Fund and Orca Network have brought a number of lawsuits pertaining to Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut against MSQ and pertinent agencies. A case involving the transfer of the license was originally dismissed but has recently been resurrected.

- 2018: Lummi Nation held a press conference in Miami and invited Miami Seaquarium (MSQ) to work with them on Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut's release and homecoming. MSQ declined.
- 2019: Two Lummi matriarchs, Squil-le-he-le (Raynell Morris) and Tah-Mahs (Ellie Kinley) announced in 2019 their intent to sue the Miami Seaquarium on the grounds of the Native American Graves Protections and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) if Miami Seaquarium continued to refuse to work towards Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut's repatriation.
- 2020: Earth Law Center announced that they would be representing Squil-le-he-le and Tah-Mahs as well as Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut herself.

Cultural & spiritual action

- 2018, 2019, and 2021 Totem Pole Journeys with the House of Tears Carvers qwe'lhol'mechen (orca) totem pole. Events with totem pole and with the *Whale People: Protectors of the Sea* traveling museum exhibit are attended by thousands of people, and widely covered in the press. At each event, there is a blessing.
- 2020 Miami water ceremony with Lummi and Seminole tribal members on the anniversary of Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut's 50th year in captivity.
- International Indigenous ceremonies held by traditional cultural/spiritual practitioners
- Facebook page "Ceremonies for Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut" creates an ongoing, collective prayer

Petitions, activism, and public support

- Over 600,000 people have signed on to petitions calling for Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut's release
- Thousands have attended Totem Pole Journey and related events
- Orca Network, a non-profit founded by Howard Garrett and Susan Berta, came up with the first plan for "Lolita's retirement" and have been working for Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut's release through lawsuits, public awareness, events, and other activism since 1995
- Miami activists protest every weekend outside the Seaquarium

Media

Long-form and ongoing coverage regarding Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut and Lummi include:

- Miami Channel 10 ABC affiliate with reporter Louis Aguirre
- Q-13 Fox in Seattle with reporter Simone del Rosario and others
- Journalist Ashley Braun is writing a long-form print piece
- "Resident Orca" feature-length documentary by Simon Schneider currently in production
- Audible audiobook by Bonnie Swift currently in production
- Seattle Times coverage by Lynda Mapes, as well as her soon-to-be-released book
- 1996 KOMO TV documentary "Lolita - Spirit in the Water" tells her story up to that point
- Any number of print articles, TV news stories, blog posts, etc