

Battle Creek Enquirer (MI)

July 10, 2007 B.C. native pursuing dream as whale researcher, photographer

Author: Stephanie Antonian
DOWLING ~

Part of being a good whale photographer is the ability to plunge into unknown waters without fear. No wonder Peggy Stap is a natural. In 1996, Stap began a remarkable journey, starting as a West Michigan greenhouse owner and becoming a top whale researcher, working in Hawaii and California. Growing up, Stap didn't dream of becoming a marine biologist ~ she didn't even see her first whale until she was 40 and on a whale-watching trip in Maui, Hawaii. Now Stap, 52, gets up close and personal with humpback and killer whales as a photographer and researcher for the Hawaii Whale Research Foundation (HWRF), a nonprofit research and conservation group.

Stap, who grew up in Battle Creek and now lives in Dowling, said her first whale sighting left her in awe. When she returned home, she couldn't shake the urge to know more about the gentle giants. After corresponding with several whale researchers she met on her trip, she decided to take action. "It was probably crazy, but I started sending my resume around to these research groups," said Stap, who then owned greenhouses and a wholesale flower business in Dowling. "I literally had no experience in the field, other than to tell them I was very organized and never got seasick." Her passionate approach caught the eye of Dan Salden, president and founder of the HWRF, and Stap began training aboard a Hawaiian research boat, learning to photograph and catalog whale flukes. In whale research, flukes ~ or tails ~ are used to identify and track individual whales. "I jumped right into it and tried to learn everything I could as I went along," Stap said. "I think they realized then that I was serious and dedicated and not some screaming tourist."

Stap talked with her husband, Dick, who owns a local landscaping business, and made the decision to sell her flower business and pursue her passion full time. By 1999, Stap had joined the HWRF as a researcher, where she received permits and trained to become a data recorder, photographer and videographer onboard the ship and underwater. In 2004, Stap became a co-investigator for HWRF, where she coordinated data for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's SPLASH program ~ the most comprehensive study ever attempted of the endangered North Pacific humpback whale population.



Kevin Hare/The Enquirer

In 2006, Stap was named principal investigator of HWRF's sister program, the Marine Life Studies in Monterey, Calif., which focuses on the foraging strategies of killer whales. "It is a lot of work and a lot of long days, but whales are just amazing," Stap said. "I never get tired of them, and I am so new at this still. The more I learn about them, the more I realize I still don't know." Stap, who still lives part of the year in Dowling with her husband, spends approximately half of the year between Hawaii and California. Along with her research, she speaks to environmental groups and classrooms about marine conservation. An accomplished marine photographer, her photographs of a killer whale hunt have appeared in National Geographic magazine. Peering over her books of whale photographs and pages of research, Stap said even she can hardly believe how far she has come in 10 years. "No one is too old to discover a new purpose or passion," she said. "One thing this journey had taught me is that if you really want something and work hard to get it, you can make your dreams come true."

Stephanie Antonian Rutherford can be reached at 966-0665 or srutherford@battlecr.gannett.com.

Stap's whale research · For more about Stap's research with the Hawaii Whale Research Foundation and Stap's special investigations, visit her Web site at <http://www.marinelifestudies.org>.

Peggy Stap talks about her work as a whale researcher and photographer.

Photo at:

<http://www.battlecreekenquirer.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?Site=A5&Date=20070710&Category=NEWS01&ArtNo=707100801&Ref=PH&Params=Itemnr=23>

Copyright (c) Battle Creek Enquirer. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.

Record Number: bat33505182