

MEETING LITTLE FLOWER: A GOODWILL AMBASSADOR FROM THE DEEP SEA

遇見花小香：來自深海的親 善大使

"Little Flower" is the name of a sperm whale who loves interacting with whale watching boats; his appearance gets crowds of whale watchers waving and cheering. Unfortunately, news of Little Flower's friendly behavior set off a fiery debate over marine conservation and education.

Whales have long occupied a special place in the public eye. Awe-inspiring in their grace and massive size, these incredible mammals serve as unwitting mascots of marine ecosystems. When we see pictures of starved whales lying on beaches, their bellies full of plastic waste, it touches us in ways that images of dead fish would not.

Yet, many argue, the best way to inspire an ecological conscience in a society is to bring people into direct contact with the animals that need protection. Taiwan maritime author Liao Hung-Chi, who is an avid whale watcher, believes that first-hand education is the only way to invest the citizens of his island nation in the health of the ocean that surrounds them. Thus, when he first came into contact with Little Flower, he felt like he'd been given a gift.

Little Flower is a sperm whale who, unlike others of his species, loves to interact with whale watching boats. When other sperm whales would swim off or dive deep at the first sight of a boat, Little Flower will come in close, then swim alongside or underneath the boat as if he enjoyed the company. His appearance inspires excitement and adoration from whale watchers. Yet when Liao Hung-Chi and others



Category: Documentary

Publisher: Route Culture

Date: 7/2019

Rights contact:

booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

Pages: 224

Length: 57,000 characters

(approx. 37,000 words in English)

first wrote about his extraordinary behavior, they set off a firestorm of dispute in the local media over whether or not the humans' exposure to the whale had gone too far for both parties. Liao's book takes us through the storm of opinions, policies, and debates into the clear waters of first-hand experience with the marine world.

Liao Hung-Chi 廖鴻基

Once a fisherman, Liao Hung-Chi later became a maritime author and experienced whale tracker. He is the founder of the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation, which is dedicated to raising awareness of Taiwan's marine ecosystems. His books include *Beggars of the Sea*, *The Whale's World*, and *The Kuroshio Current*.

MEETING LITTLE FLOWER: A GOODWILL AMBASSADOR FROM THE DEEP SEA

By Liao Hung-Chi

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

Preface: Mid-Autumn

Typhoon Tanmei was approaching the coast, still a distance away but bearing down hard, and set to collide with a high-pressure cold front moving southward. A succession of meteorologists sent out an early forecast predicting that Taiwan's windward eastern half would have few opportunities to moon-gaze during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Those who earn their living out at sea already knew that the Mid-Autumn Festival is one of two annual turning points in ocean conditions. After the Festival, the wind over Taiwan's maritime space reverses direction, and the northeasterly wind grows stronger, making seas rough as it pushes the water south. These temperamental conditions generally persist until Tomb Sweeping Day the following spring.

On September 24, the morning of Mid-Autumn Festival, the breeze was gentle and the sky cloudless and warm. Having learned that the 6:30 a.m. whale-watching vessel had caught sight of a sperm whale, I decided to hop on the 10:30 boat to see if I might have a last chance to glimpse something wonderful among the waves.

From mid-September until the Mid-Autumn Festival, whale-watching boats do not stick to their customary routes along the Hualien Plain, reaching open water by sailing either north toward Qixingtang Beach or south along the Coastal Mountain Range at Yanliao. In either direction, the goal is the same: to search the open sea for likely places to spot their old friends, the spinner dolphins. But come the Mid-Autumn Festival, the whale-watching vessels behave differently. They all seem drawn to the same destination, as if their boats were compass needles leading to a giant magnet hidden somewhere in the ocean off the eastern coastline. They head straight east toward a point 15 kilometers from the Hualien harbor, searching the coastal waters around 121°41' East longitude.

There, the vast Kuroshio Current scours the steep seabed off Taiwan's eastern side, and the upwelling it causes joins the littoral flow near the sloped coast of the island. Previous experience tells us that marine mammals often appear in this area off Hualien, pushed there by the Kuroshio Current.

This year, over five days and a dozen whale-watching trips, several sperm whales have been spotted here, and the boats have come from Hualien harbor out to sea like butterflies seeking something sweet.

The old friend of the whale-watching boats, the spinner dolphins, are 210 centimeters long and weigh nearly 80 kilograms. The sperm whale, the most common large whale to appear in these waters, is 18 meters long and weighs 50,000 kilograms. Comparing the two – one petite and the other enormous, one lively and the other ponderous – one is struck by not only their different sizes, but also their divergent behaviors.

The spinner dolphins like to play in the wake alongside the boats, the passengers cheering them on. Interestingly, while land animals of all sizes shy away from humans and flee at the sight of them, dolphins choose to come close to the boats. Passengers naturally fall in love with them. If a sperm whale comes close to the boat, carrying the mysterious scent of the deep ocean, passengers will often fall into an awestruck silence at first. Soon after, the deck will erupt with a volcano of whooping and shouting.

A sperm whale that decides to stay for a while beside a boat or emerges from the water will get the passengers' adrenalin pumping, their hearts beating faster, even holding their breath they hang over the gunwales, unable to wrap their heads around this enormous being that has entered their hearts. The mood on the boat will lift like an endless ocean swell.

The captains pay close attention to the way passengers react to different kinds of sea creatures. The captains of whale-watching boats are born of the sea, and although they can seem rough like fishermen, they're often sensitive and quick-witted. When a boat encounters a sperm whale, passengers' reactions may appear to be directed toward the enormous creature just off the side of the ship, but in fact some of that response reflects back in the form of appreciation for the voyage, the boat, and the captain. So captains are keenly aware of how their passengers' moods are affected by what they encounter at sea.

Perhaps this explains why the whale-watching boats in mid-autumn ignore the places where the dolphins play and seek the greater prize, heading straight to open ocean in the hopes to see the elusive great whales.

As the 10:30 a.m. vessel left the harbor on the Mid-Autumn Festival, the passengers had no idea that the ocean would be covered with a fine white foam, the surface of the water transformed from its usual clear calm by the season. Our captain sighed and told us: "The winds have picked up, so we'll have to ride the white horse." He was describing the effect of the north wind, which makes the whitecaps gallop.

Mother Nature will always have the last word, and an advance guard of waves had already approached the ocean off Hualien, the tips of the crests smashing apart in the wind, sending up bursts of foam in an unending swath of white. Everyone knew that in such conditions, our hopes of seeing a sperm whale before the end of the season might evaporate like sea foam.

Not long after the boat passed 45' East latitude, we were fortunate to see a group of spotted dolphins scattered across a large area. We didn't know if the high waves had aroused their mischievous side, or whether they were after fish that had been drawn to the surface of the

water. But they were unlike the groups of dolphins that would casually ride in the boats' wakes during the summer season. That day, they seemed not to notice our boat at all as they slipped between the enormous waves.

The air patterns around the approaching typhoon had influenced the water surface to the south, sending up high waves and preventing whale-watching voyages for at least five or six days. This part of the ocean would soon enter the northeastern monsoon season, making rough conditions more frequent.

These standoffish, leaping spotted dolphins seemed to herald the end of the year's whale watching with their deft movements through the waves. (Each year the main season for whale watching of Taiwan's eastern coast is from the Tomb Sweeping Day to the Mid-Autumn Festival.)

In mid-September, I arranged my work schedule to make more time for whale watching, and toward the end of the month I was lucky enough to see a great gathering of sperm whales.

Over the course of a few days, I had four separate encounters with sperm whales. I've had many experiences with the ocean and various sea creatures over the past twenty-odd years, but never before have I seen so many sperm whales in quick succession.

Aside from the encounters themselves, what surprised me most was that the longtime boat captain, the crew, and the announcer for the ride all recognized many of the ship-sized whales. They even had nicknames for them.

Clearly many of the whales in the coastal waters off Hualien had been there before.

One of the enormous whales who appeared seemed especially familiar with the boat. The crew called him "Little Flower".

When Little Flower swam up to the boat, along with my admiration for him, I found myself thinking of the idea of distance.

I was suddenly aware of the stink of diesel fuel, the shudder of our boat's engine. From what I've seen, even ordinary seabirds and fish will maintain a safe distance, and the nimble whales and dolphins even more so.

When whales and dolphins decide to come up to a boat, they will often keep a certain distance.

But Little Flower seemed completely comfortable with the boat, even friendly – one could even say curious.

After watching Little Flower for a while, I was convinced that he recognized the boat, or perhaps its crew.

Paying no attention to "safe" distance, he swam close to the gunwale, staying there for a while as though putting on a special performance of surface behavior for the passengers.

Little Flower treated the boat like an old ocean-going friend. There, where the Kuroshio Current and the eastern littoral current meet, he performed a land-and-sea play about a long-awaited reunion, called “Whale and Boat and People”.

After spotting Little Flower, the captain approached to about 100 meters away and cut the clutch. Our boat floated there as Little Flower sped toward us like a hunter after his prey. He came close to the gunwale, then slipped under the side of the boat and swam back and forth underneath, as though expressing his joy at seeing an old friend again.

I watched as the crew ran and shouted, then stood at the edge of the deck an arm’s length away from Little Flower, watching him with deep affection.

After being with Little Flower for a while, I felt the hard crust of life’s misgivings, reservations, and formalities begin to melt like butter under the sun. My spirit was revived, and I suddenly understood how very fortunate I was. And just like that, I became a member of the “Little Flower Fan Club”.

I knew that on each subsequent trip, my heart would be equipped with a Little Flower radar powered by the desire to find him again.

Little Flower is eight times taller than I am and six or seven hundred times my weight. My longing to see him again wasn’t like a picture puzzle needing that last little piece to complete it. After all, he is an enormous whale swimming in the gigantic ocean.

No, when this kind of longing enters a life, it takes over, easily infiltrating the imagination.

I knew that Little Flower had begun to lead my eyes and heart out toward the deepest parts of the Pacific Ocean.

Through my eyes, perhaps he would come to understand this island a bit better; and through his eyes, I would come to see the Pacific Ocean in a new way.

I didn’t foresee that those few whale-watching boats that came near Little Flower would ignite a firestorm among our media and ecologists. I was there for the entire experience with Little Flower, and I know that the subsequent attacks lacked an understanding of the ocean, whales, and whale-watching. Some expressed an obsession with an “ideology of ecological morality”, and I wrote several short articles in response.

The attacks and counterattacks are familiar.

I remember when Taiwan’s official whale-watching committee took to the sea twenty-two years ago to carry out an ecological survey on aquatic mammals. Each time we allowed ourselves to indulge in the gentleness and innocence of relating to the animals, we were forced to confront the reality of all the conflicts and wrangling that awaited us back on shore.

I’ve spent many years interacting with the sea, and many people have asked me, why do you care so much about the ocean?

Well, the sea might be rough and choppy, but everything out there was genuine; in contrast, the human world seemed perilous and disappointing. It's the natural selection that stems from real life experience.

When those sperm whales appeared that fall, I realized I had matured over the previous twenty-two years, and I faced the attacks with less resentment than I had before. With the wide, clean Kuroshio Current and the wonderful encounters with innocent sea creatures in my heart, I realized that the uproar I had returned to was just a normal part of the human world.

On the last scheduled boat that morning during the Mid-Autumn festival, having not yet encountered Little Flower or other sperm whales, I had a chance to speak with Tang, a guide for the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation. We spoke about Little Flower as we stood on the observation deck. He told me stories from the past several years about the sperm whales of the Pacific Ocean, told me how Little Flower got his name, and talked openly about his encounters with Little Flower and the feelings he'd developed for him.

Hearing Tang talk about his experiences with Little Flower, I realized that his work collecting stories about sperm whales was not part of a larger research project, but was rather an expression of his own personal interest in and affection for the whales. Nonetheless, he had gathered an impressive amount of information.

What moved me all the more was that these seemingly made-for-TV emotions between "man and whale" were real, playing out in front of me right there on the whale-watching boat.

Listening to Tang talk was reminiscent of the excitement of returning to shore through a strong headwind, high waves breaking over the bow.

It was a shame that my busy work schedule over the past several years meant I'd lost many opportunities to take whale-watching boats from Hualien and encounter Little Flower.

But what good fortune that I happened to take the boat that day.

After coming ashore, I felt that I ought to share my experiences with sperm whales with more people. Doing so would also be an opportunity to think more deeply about the ongoing relationship between the island of Taiwan and marine mammals.

From the early days of fishing and hunting to the present time of observation and appreciation, boats searching for whales have crisscrossed this swath of clear blue water like a needle darning fabric. The incident surrounding Little Flower takes us a step further in our conversations about the ocean and our island, about humans and whales, and the appropriate relationship between whales and whale-watching boats.

In the past, because of our common lack of knowledge about the ocean, "the ocean's right to speak" has been controlled by a small number of people. But the time has come for our island society to begin to use our own maritime point of view to contemplate and respond to what happens in the ocean waters surrounding us.

This book, with Tang's permission, presents his stories and materials collected from many years of interacting with Little Flower and other sperm whales, along with the experiences of other members of the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation, including those of people in the whale-watching business, boat captains, and boat crews. This book reports and follows up on

specific events to present the friendship between Taiwan and the sperm whales of the Pacific Ocean, as well as between the ocean and land.

A Long-Awaited Reunion

In mid to late September of 2018, Hualien whale-watching boats repeatedly saw sperm whales out in the open ocean.

On Taiwan's coasts and in Taiwan's oceans, the wave of sperm whale fever reached its peak over the course of five days.

It began on September 18, and for five days, ten different whale-watching boats saw sperm whales.

This is the record of a guide for the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation, taken from observations from the Hualien Turumoan Company whale-watching boats.

Date	Departure Time	Event
9 /18	08:30 10:30 14:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All three boats record sperm whale sightings
9 /19	10:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Record of one sperm whale sighting • Whale voluntarily approached the boat • Engaged in close-range spy hopping and other surface behaviors
9 /20	08:30 10:30 14:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All three boats record sperm whale sightings • Whales voluntarily approached the boat • Engaged in close-range spy hopping • Shuttled beneath boat and other behaviors
9 /21	08:30 10:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two boats record spotting sperm whales • Whales voluntarily approached the boat • Engaged in close-range spy hopping, shuttling beneath boat and other behaviors
9 /23	06:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boat recorded a sperm whale sighting

Chart Guide:

1. Individuals from a pod of whales often keep a certain distance apart from one another and spread across a wide section of ocean. The table above does not include those whales observed blowing water at a distance.

2. The observation deck is the topmost deck of a whale-watching vessel, standing four meters above the ocean surface. Observers include the boat captain, crew, and announcer; some observe with the naked eye, while others use binoculars to look for traces of marine activity on the ocean surface.

3. Photographs taken from these ten vessels were compared for similarities in behavior and physical characteristics, and they confirm that on seven separate occasions, the sperm whale the vessels encountered was the one called Little Flower.

According to Tang's many years of maritime records and observations, Little Flower has appeared a total of nine times in the waters off of Hualien:

Year	Date of Appearance
2014	7/27; 8/15
2015	6/9
2016	6/21; 10/2; 10/11
2018	9/19; 9/20; 9/21

From the information above, it seems that before the wave of sperm whale sightings in 2018, Little Flower appeared in Hualien's ocean waters on October 11, 2016, and was then gone for all of 2017.

After nearly two years, on September 19, 2018, he reappeared near Hualien.

Of course, these records of Little Flower's appearances only include those instances in which he came near a whale-watching vessel and that vessel managed to take a photograph clear enough to identify the whale in question.

It is possible that Little Flower visited Hualien many times each year. The ocean is deep and enormous, and a boat is tiny, so these records of our encounters represent little more than the attempts of a few tiny dots on the expansive ocean to locate a whale. There are also times when whales dive deep below the ocean surface and remain there for a long period of time. Moreover, the whale-watching season is limited to approximately six months out of the year, with few boats going out in autumn and winter, which also reduces the number of possible sightings.

When we on land accidentally encounter someone we know, we often say, “the human sea is vast” to indicate how unlikely the unexpected meeting is. Of course, the chances of encountering the same whale multiple times on the even more boundless expanse of the real ocean is nearly nil. It’s easy to understand, then, what a precious ecological record these sightings of Little Flower are.

For four years, whale-watching vessels recorded nine separate encounters with Little Flower. Amid our busy, business-oriented lives, even our meetings with friends on land may not be so frequent.

During the years Little Flower did not appear, Tang worried.

“We have records of him from 2014 to 2016, so why didn’t he appear in 2017?” Tang wrote on Facebook: “For two years, all of my thoughts have been with him, out of all the whales in the whole ocean, he’s the one I really care about.”

During this time, two beached sperm whales died on Taiwan’s coast. Members of the Foundation knew that Tang was collecting identifying information about notches in the caudal fin of different sperm whales, and they asked that he record information about the two beached whales.

“Can you imagine how that felt?” Tang told me heatedly. “It was like asking me to go identify a human body.”

He continued, “I started praying that they weren’t whales that I recognized, and especially that neither one of them was Little Flower.”

Thank goodness neither one was.

“But that was the wrong thing to pray for. Really I should have been praying that no more aquatic animals would beach themselves and die under unnatural circumstances.”

I asked Tang what he meant by “unnatural circumstances.”

“For example, eating too much plastic trash, or getting tangled up in a fishing net, or something like that.”

Little Flower didn’t appear for two more years, and until September 19, 2018, whale-watching boats saw no trace of him. Then Tang received some photographs of a sperm whale from friends who were out at sea, and before he’d even compared it with previous photographs, he felt something in his gut. He jumped up and shouted: “Little Flower’s back!”

He immediately telephoned a whale-watching company to ask about hiring a boat to take him out to see Little Flower.

Hiring a boat isn’t cheap, and there was no available boat or crew to meet his last-minute request. The whale-watching company told Tang not to rush things, and to first confirm that it was in fact Little Flower. Once he did, he could worry about hiring a boat. His friends all urged him to calm down: “It’s just a gut feeling, not a sure thing. You’re being too impulsive.”

Finally Tang was dissuaded from just wildly following his instincts. .

Afterward, Tang reflected: “After waiting for two years, my intuition that it was Little Flower might have had something to do with the spiritual connection I have with him. Thank goodness my friends kept reminding me that you have to act deliberately. You can’t just force

something to happen. And my friends and the whale-watching company all forgave me for getting so crazy about it.”

No impulsiveness or explosions – still, it hadn’t been easy for him to control his feelings about a possible long-awaited reunion. “Maybe it wasn’t Little Flower after all. I’d been waiting to see him again for such a long time. There were so many things I wanted to say but couldn’t. Of course! Of course! But who could really understand that feeling of regaining something that’s been lost? Who would listen to me describe that feeling of rejuvenation?”

The next day, a member of the Foundation who happened to be looking for a boat announcer asked Tang if he could work the 8:30 a.m. vessel on September 20. Tang describes it this way: “I managed to control my feelings about Little Flower for a day, and then the next morning I headed out to sea.”

The vessel was a fifty-ton whale-watching boat, piloted by the seasoned skipper Captain Hsin. The observation deck also held a so-called keen-eyed seafarer, Captain Wen-Lung, and the heroic young captain Jen-Tse, so one could say that the boat was filled to the brim with whale-watching elites.

Tang described the voyage to me: “Ocean conditions and whale-watching conditions were both good that day, and not long after we pulled away from harbor, we saw some old friends – a group of spinner dolphins. Another whale-watching boat lay at anchor not far ahead of us, waiting there like an announcement that sperm whales were in the area. Captain Hsin decided not to stop there, and he took the boat straight out into the ocean, because he had spotted a group of Fraser’s dolphins playing on the surface.

“As we neared the dolphins, another friendly whale-watching boat told us that they’d spotted whales blowing water further out. So our captain continued past the dolphins and into open ocean to bring us closer to the spray.

“We approached the spray, but as the captain tried to get a little bit nearer, unfortunately the sperm whale took a ‘shallow dive’ and disappeared from the surface.”

When sperm whales come up to breathe, they often stay at the surface for a while. Some will stay suspended at a single location and blow spray, while others will slowly swim as they blow. When a boat draws too close, a whale will either ‘shallow dive’ (dive without lifting its tail), or lift its tail and ‘deep dive.’

If a sperm whale takes a shallow dive, it may stay underwater for ten to fifteen minutes. If the boat waits there patiently, there is a chance it will see the whale breach again. But if the whale takes a deep dive, the boat will have to wait at least twenty minutes for another chance to see anything.

With their boat floating on the ocean, there was no way to guarantee they would see the whale breach again. Irrespective of whether the dive is deep or shallow, once a sperm whale is under the surface of the water and swimming away from the boat, no matter how long a boat waits there, it’s very likely that it will wait in vain.

Hualien whale-watching boats generally stay out for two hours; subtracting the hour it would take to get back to land, they had less than an hour left. Waiting for a whale also risked

'taking a turtle,' crew slang for a trip that yields no marine sightings. Experienced captains won't wait too long in the same spot, unless they've already had some sightings (which is like a tranquilizer for passengers).

If a boat is extremely lucky, when it tries to approach a sperm whale, the whale will remain on the surface for a time. On these rare occasions, the boat has an opportunity to get a little bit closer. The ocean is the whale's home; boats can only float on the water's surface, and can't dive under the surface like the whale. Whale-watching boats have very few opportunities to draw near a whale, and they often just observe the spray from afar. When they do have a chance to get close, they often end up spotting the whale just as it dives underwater.

Deep ocean diving is the sperm whale's specialty, and when a boat approaches, they have all the initiative. In contrast, the boat, when it isn't nudging forward on the surface with a clear objective in mind, can only passively wait. If the boat rashly speeds ahead, it will most likely be left with only distant evidence of the whale's disappearance.

Tang continued with his story: "We got lucky that day. Whales and dolphins kept appearing, and the boats sped around like busy bees collecting pollen, trying to find traces of whales on the water.

"After not too long, a friendly boat told us that they'd seen spray closer to shore. The captain turned us around and we headed back inland. A few minutes later, *Spray, spray!* [which is what observers say when they've spotted sperm whales blowing water], and everyone on the observation deck started to get restless as we saw the white mist of a sperm whale's blow not far off the bow.

"We tried to get close, but the whale saw us and lifted his tail and took a deep dive like he was flipping over a bucket of cold water. It was our second lucky break, but it didn't turn out too lucky. It was the second time we'd missed a whale when it took a deep dive.

"We had just enough time, so the captain decided to head back out to see if we could catch sight of the first whale we'd seen, which had taken a shallow dive instead of a deep one.

"When we got out to where we'd seen the first whale, we cut the clutch and just floated. We waited patiently, which seems hopeless and stupid, but is really the only thing to do out there. But then, after waiting for a while, we suddenly saw spray to our right off in the distance.

"As we approached, we knew it would likely be our last attempt, since we'd already been out for a while. The captain cautiously controlled our speed, easing the boat forward so as not to create any ripples.

"The whale must have noticed our approach. Then, totally unexpectedly, he dropped his head and swam toward us without hesitation.

"The captain let up on the clutch and set the boat adrift [turning the engine off entirely]. The whale came at us slowly from two o'clock on our starboard side.

"Once he neared the boat, he swam over to our port side, and then back over to starboard, and then dramatically shuttled back and forth.

"We were all mesmerized. No one thought to count how many times he went back and forth, and we didn't have a chance to wonder why he was doing it. What was he trying to tell us?

“Such delights are always short-lived, and we knew we had to head back soon. We didn’t want to even imagine the joy the whale had given us coming to an end. Still, no matter how much we resisted, the time limit mercilessly marched toward us.

“At that point, no one onboard could say for certain whether the sperm whale was Little Flower, who at that point hadn’t been seen for two years.

“When it came time that we absolutely had to leave, the sperm whale was right underneath us. Wen-Lung and Jen-Tse descended two levels from the observation deck to the main deck, hoping to get close enough to locate the whale and help Captain Hsin start up the engine again safely. We got under weigh slowly so as not to disturb or injure the whale with the revolving propellers.

“That day, we happened to have onboard a reporter from the website *Webwave*, who was photographing the entire process using a camera drone.

“After we left the whale, other whale-watching boats came over one after another. Since we’d been out there on our own, we were the only boat that got to experience what I just described.”

During this particular trip, Tang took many photos of the whale, and that night he would compare the photographs he and others on the boat took, to see if he could confirm that the whale had indeed been Little Flower.

Tang told me: “I thought it would be like before, when I first got to know Little Flower and could recognize him on sight. Although he’d gotten bigger, his behavior hadn’t changed at all. He was still curious about the boats, and came over to play. It was my eyesight that had gotten weaker, not his. That, and my belief in Little Flower.

“Some of my friends asked me, since Little Flower approached the boat on his own, isn’t that proof enough? Could there be another sperm whale that would show so much curiosity and get that close to a boat?

“I don’t know. I really have no idea whether there could be other whales just like him. I don’t have enough data to say. I feel conflicted about it. I hope there are more whales like Little Flower who want to make friends with whale-watching boats, but at the same time, I also hope that it’s only Little Flower that approaches boats like that.”

Why?

“Well, in either case, I’m grateful that Little Flower came back safely. I’ve been worrying about him for almost two years.” Tang began to speak directly to the whale: “But please, please, please, Little Flower, be careful.”

All of Tang’s ambivalence can be found in those few words.

Many animal specialists and conservationists believe that it is abnormal for a wild animal to approach humans, and that the habit is likely to lead to the animal’s injury or death.

The Media Storm

During that period of whale sightings, the sea became busy, and the coastal media reports also came fast and furious, though they lacked our enthusiasm about the return of Little Flower.

The media reported on our whale-watching excursion and the sighting of Little Flower in a flurry of articles on September 20 and 21. Online, print, and TV media outlets advanced like a simultaneous assault by land, sea, and from the air. The attacks built up like a water overwhelming a dam, flooding our longstanding and flourishing ocean flower gardens.

The whale-watching industry gives the media rare images of whales breaching the surface. The media gets stories and the industry gets some free publicity. For twenty years, the industry and the media has worked together with a tacit understanding.

But this time, cracks appeared. The long partnership disintegrated into a media-bashing of the whale-watching industry, and the criticisms got more intense as time went on. It got to the point that the media was publishing attacks on the industry's "unscrupulous businessmen." It even attracted the attention of a certain scholar, who wrote an article calling for the government to intervene immediately in whale-watching activities and prevent any inappropriate whale-watching boat behavior.

One could describe the background to this media event with the old expression "cutting off your nose to spite your face."

Here are some headlines from that period:

"Boats Surround Sperm Whale and Disrupt Ecology While Industry Sighs: We Police Ourselves"

"Whale-Watching Boats Come Too Close to Whales, Provoking Rebuke of Industry: Maintain Low Speeds to Avoid Doing Harm"

"Sperm Whales Play and Blow Water on Tourists, Author Criticizes Environmental Impact"

"Whale-Watching Ecotourism Businesses Emphasize: We Can Police Ourselves"

"Boats Surround Sperm Whale, Writer Laments 'It's Out of Control'"

"Boats Criticized for Coming Near Whales as Citizens Worry over Environmental Costs"

"Stealing a Glimpse at Whales: Many Boats 'Surround' Whales as Worries Grow over Ecological Fallout"

"Terrible! Three Whale-Watching Boats Surround Sperm Whale!"

"Whale-Watching Boats Surround Whales and Experts Warn of Danger to People and Marine Life."

The reporters might be different, but the argument, contents, and point-of-view seem to come from exactly the same copy.

Simply put, the media's negative coverage contained the following attacks on whale-watching:

1. Whale-watching boats do not maintain the proper distance from sperm whales.
2. Three whale-watching boats surrounded the same sperm whale.
3. They quote a passage from a travel writer's Facebook posting, which was exaggerated into: "It's out of control, these disruptions to marine mammal habitats."
4. Over more than twenty years of whale-watching, there have never been proper "whale-watching regulations," and whale-watching activities lack "legal oversight."
5. According to foreign research, the spray whales release often contains drug-resistant bacteria that can harm humans.
6. Cases outside of Taiwan in which humans have been injured by frightened whales tossing their tails have involved inappropriately close contact.
7. When humans approach large whales, both the humans and whales are put in danger.

After this string of attacks in the media, Tang opined: "There is definitely room for improvement in the whale-watching industry, but I still felt heartbroken by it all. Back when Little Flower used to come here, everyone loved him and was thrilled to see him. That was especially true this time, because we hadn't seen him for two years. But with all the media attention, everyone who works out at sea felt hurt. Little Flower's return wasn't a happy occasion this time."

Everyone who was on the scene that day was implicated in the media's repudiation, so it's understandable that they wouldn't be happy. But hurt? Why?

"A media storm in Taiwan often rages hard but then passes quickly – islanders generally have the ability to collectively forget something in a hurry – and you just have to withstand it for a bit and then it's over. But this this time was different. The reaction to the criticism we faced seemed different, both from those who disagreed and agreed with it, and from those who felt they had to respond.

"It wasn't that there was nothing the media could rightly criticize. But to those of us who knew the reality out at sea, most of the criticism seemed like unrealistic grandstanding. But because the situation on the water is always complex, everyone felt ambivalent about it, like kids who've been scolded and can't talk back. The media storm really affected everyone's mood. It was like everybody just went silent for a while."

I told Tang that we should be ready to accept reasonable criticism, but that we should confront unreasonable or unrealistic criticism with a clear explanation.

So on September 21, I reacted to the media storm with the following article, "Joyous Occasions":

For four consecutive days, whales have been sighted in the ocean off the coast of Hualien. On two of those days, a sperm whale nicknamed Little Flower voluntarily approached whale-watching boats. Little Flower was first formally recorded making contact with a whale-watching boat on July 27, 2014; this most recent sighting was the eighth time he has been spotted off the Hualien coast. In addition to his particular physical characteristics, Little Flower is recognizable by his habit of choosing to approach whale-watching boats.

Out at sea today, I personally witnessed our vessel maintain distance and cut its engine before Little Flower turned around and swam directly toward us. At that time, aside from the automatic response of wanting to “maintain a safe distance,” my feelings were joy and delight. Think of the destructive fishing practices of our past and the enormous amounts of waste we have dumped in the sea – through it all, we island inhabitants have benefited from the ocean’s grace. In the past, we merely lobbed our messages out across it, and have never genuinely given back to the it or its inhabitants. In fact, even our basic understanding of the ocean is lacking.

Yet these whales, ambassadors of the ocean, still want to come near our shores and interact cheerfully with our whale-watching boats, just like we’re all old friends. Such friendly interactions between whales and humans should be seen as joyous occasions.

But back on shore, there has been an eruption. Those on land fiercely criticize the whale watchers for getting too close. They claim that there are no rules regulating whale-watching activities, and complain that unscrupulous businessmen contrived to surround a whale with their vessels.

It goes without saying that we must be careful any time we take advantage of a natural resource. Rules and regulations are necessary, but they must be appropriate and built upon solid scientific research on each individual case. It isn’t that Taiwan doesn’t have rules regulating whale-watching; in fact, not long after whale-watching activities began in Taiwan, the industry employed expert guidance to establish “Rules for the Self-Regulation of Whale Watching.” These regulations were based largely on the whale-watching rules of other countries, which dealt primarily with large whales, and the baleen whale suborder in particular. More specifically, foreign whale experts were studying how the large baleen whales rest in bays (in certain seasons during the year, they will rest or mate in these semi-open water regions). The Taiwanese whale-watching regulations were built on this firm research foundation.

Our whale-watching areas are entirely in open water. Given our maritime environment and latitude, the whales observed off of Taiwan’s east coast are primarily of the toothed whale suborder, which consist mainly of small and mid-sized marine mammals. The largest among them, the sperm whale, only occasionally comes near shore on the Kuroshio Current, and these whales do not come to the area to mate or rest. The foreign ocean regulations are not a perfect fit for our particular circumstances. Moreover, there has been virtually no research done in Taiwan on the little-understood Pacific sperm whale.

Twenty-one years ago, when whale-watching activities were just beginning, the objections were very similar: We shouldn’t engage in whale-watching activities before rules and regulations have been put into place, or else we may disturb the whales’ natural ecology. More than twenty years have passed, and very little progress has been made in putting into effect rules that are appropriate for the Taiwanese maritime area; nevertheless, whales come and go on the Kuroshio Current. During this time, the relationship between Taiwanese society and the whales has completely changed. In the past, we viewed them as food, yet our attitudes toward them have transformed faster than in neighboring Japan.

As Dr. Jane Goodall has put it, “Only if we understand, will we care. Only if we care, will we help. Only if we help shall we all be saved.”

Little Flower repeatedly swims beneath boats. The ocean is his home, and he has all of its three dimensions at his disposal. If he feels harassed or disturbed, he can dive down seven or eight meters and swim for a while, easily escaping the reach of a whale-watching vessel. Furthermore, this was already the fourth day these whales appeared in the ocean off of Hualien. If the media reports were right and the boats were really disturbing them, given an animal’s basic capability to take refuge elsewhere, why would they stay for four days to suffer the boats’ encroachment again and again? If the whale-watching boats were harassing Little Flower like the media claims, would he return nine times in four years? Surely Little Flower isn’t suffering from Stockholm Syndrome, is he?

For a long time, maritime travel in Taiwan was tightly controlled, and the relationship between Taiwanese society and the ocean was basically “no contact, no understanding, no affection.” This disconnect has led to a great deal of careless and irreparable damage to the marine environment and ecology. An ecologist once said, harm caused by a lack of awareness is often the worst kind of harm. Whale-watching activities give us a chance to appreciate the rich ocean resources of Taiwan’s eastern coast. There have been more than a million hours of sea journeys taken over the past twenty years, and have thereby had the opportunity to see Taiwan from a maritime perspective. One could say that through whale-watching, we Taiwanese are able to go out into the world, and can begin learning how to respect the sea and peacefully coexist with marine mammals.

In my view, the Hualien whale-watching industry is not against whale-watching rules and regulations. Those regulations, however, should not be based on rhetoric, but should be tailored to Taiwan’s particular marine environment.