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New Year's Resolution

New Year's Day started like any other day for whale biologist Monica Zani. Peering from her Florida beach office window, she made a mental checklist of what she saw. The waves were flat like a sheet of glass. *Check*. The sky appeared clear. *Check*. She went over to her computer to verify the local radar. No rain in sight. *Check*. Wind speeds were under 17 knots, just like she hoped. The conditions showed promise of good visibility for whale watching from a plane. If the pilots gave the okay, Monica and the research team could be into the plane and off the ground by 9:00 A.M.¹

Catspaw

While in flight, Monica sat behind the pilot in the cramped space of the four seater plane.²

¹Zani, "RE: Valice questions," 1, 2, 7.

² Zani, "RE: Valice questions," 4.

Valice/New Year's Resolution

Dressed in her green flight suit and safety vest, she turned her body toward the left window with her eyes 2 miles on the horizon. "You have to stare out the window with your search image in mind," she said.³ On every flight, Monica and the team spot whales and alert ships of their location. Enough warning allows large ships to steer clear of the whales that swim in the area.⁴ On this flight, Monica hoped to obtain photographs of a single whale or of mom and calf pairs.⁵ The day's photos would be added to the right whale catalog.⁶

At 1,000 feet above the ocean, Monica noticed something unusual as the white caps below began curling into a wave of red. The pilot circled the plane for a closer look. "Is that blood?" he asked Monica and the team.⁷ Were their eyes playing tricks on them?

The redness floated as Monica watched helplessly while the nearly 55 foot long whale thrashed at the surface. Monica had never witnessed this behavior.⁸ She recognized the whale's white marking on its shoulder shaped like a Cat's paw. Could it be Catspaw, a female whale?⁹ Monica jotted down notes on her clipboard. Her assistant grabbed for the 400 mm lens camera.¹⁰ As the shutter button clicked again and again, Monica grew more desperate for answers. What was happening?¹¹ Suddenly, she noticed a calf rolling off the large whale's back. Catspaw just had a baby! Immediately after giving birth, Catspaw nudged her calf to the surface where it took its first breath. Monica was thrilled.¹² "Everyone in our office has spent so long studying these

³ www.neaq.org/conservation, 1.

⁴ Zani, "RE: Valice questions," 5.

⁵ Zani, "RE: Valice questions," 3.

⁶ Zani, "RE: Valice questions," 6; www.neaq.org, 3.

⁷ www.neaq.org/conservation, 2, 3; Zani, "RE: Valice questions," 3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Zani, "RE: Valice questions," 8.

¹⁰ Zani, "RE: Valice questions," 3.

¹¹ www.neaq.org/conservation, 2; Zani, Monica. "RE: Valice questions."

¹² www.neaq.org/conservation, 2; Zani, Personal interview, July 7, 2010.

Valice/New Year's Resolution

animals, and everyone who goes down to the calving areas is hoping to see a birth.”¹³

Fortunately, for Monica she was able to witness the first documented case of a North Atlantic right whale birth!¹⁴

Monica punched the “Push To Talk” button mounted on the plane’s wall. She announced a message to military and commercial ships in the area. The set up inside the plane allowed her to record data and communicate with vessels. This system is known as the Early Warning System (EWS) network. Every aerial survey’s goal is to alert ships of whales like Catspaw and her calf as they swim through the Atlantic Ocean surrounding Northern Florida and Georgia.¹⁵

The “right whale”

North Atlantic right whales are baleen whales or whales without teeth.¹⁶ They are slow moving and mainly seen in the North Atlantic Ocean. They eat zooplankton that sifts through their baleen bristles.¹⁷ Currently, there are only an estimated four hundred North Atlantic right whales alive. This isn’t a lot. In fact, North Atlantic right whales are the most endangered whales in the world.¹⁸ According to Monica, “Their numbers are low due to massive whaling that took the 1700 and 1800s.”¹⁹ They were called “the right whale” to hunt because they spent a lot of time near the surface.²⁰ Since 1935, right whales have been watched and protected by scientists like

¹³ www.neaq.org/conservation, 3.

¹⁴ www.neaq.org/conservation, 1.

¹⁵ Zani, “RE: Valice questions,” 4, 5; Neaq.org/conservation, 1.

¹⁶ www.research.myfwc.com; www.neaq.org/animals.

¹⁷ www.nmfs.noaa.gov; www.neaq.org

¹⁸ Zani, “RE: Valice questions,” 8;

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Davis, “Trying to do the right thing,” 2.

Valice/New Year's Resolution

Monica.²¹ To Monica, "The more we can learn about right whales, the more we can help protect them."²²

New Adventures

The next day in her office, Monica searched the digital whale database of photos. On one page, she matched up Catspaw's markings to those in her new photos. Sure enough, stamped on the left shoulder was the same imprint of a cat's paw.²³ Now that Catspaw was officially identified, it was time to name her calf. Because of the coincidence of this birth happening on New Year's Day, the team decided to name the calf Resolution.²⁴

If the weather cooperated, Monica would return to check on whales like Catspaw and her calf. She'd also gather more photos and alert ships of the whale's location while remaining open to anything new she may see. "Every day is truly different," she said.²⁵ What remains the same is Monica's mission to keep track of the North Atlantic right whales.

²¹Zani, "RE: Valice questions," 7.

²² www.neaq.org/conservation, 3.

²³ Zani, "RE: Valice questions," 7, 8.

²⁴ Zani, "RE: Valice questions," 8, 9.

²⁵ Zani, Monica. "RE: Valice questions," 3.