

## 'I am Tahlequah': Women share stories of stillbirth and miscarriage in tribute to tragic orca who is carrying her dead baby for the 17th day in heartbreaking display of grief

- Several women who have suffered pregnancy loss have been sharing their story
- This comes as an endangered orca is clinging to her dead calf for the 17th day
- The 20-year-old whale had been spotted in the water just off British Columbia
- It was the first calf born to this species of endangered orca in almost three years
- Researchers monitoring it say calf died about half an hour after it was born
- The heartbreaking sighting has struck an emotional chord across the globe

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Women who have suffered pregnancy loss are sharing their personal stories inspired by an endangered orca clinging onto her dead calf for the 17th day in the waters of British Columbia.

The calf passed away July 24 and the heartbreaking image of its 20-year-old mother, known as J35 – or Tahlequah, keeping hold of the dead baby has struck an emotional chord worldwide.

Some have found solace in sharing and exchanging their own stories with stillbirth, miscarriage and fertility issues. Indiana woman Cori McKenzie is still coping with the loss of her middle daughter, six years after the baby became stillbirth. 'I think every baby loss parent I have ever met relates to Tahlequah,' McKenzie said in a statement to [The Seattle Times](#). 'We all wish that our society and culture would recognize how deep this loss is felt and how it changes you down to your core. I wish I would have had a week or more to spend with my daughter instead of a few hours... her sadness breaks my heart.'



An endangered orca is still clinging to her dead calf more than two weeks after her newborn died. The calf died July 24 and the image of the mother whale clinging to the dead calf has struck an emotional chord worldwide



Women have found solace in sharing their own stories with stillbirth, miscarriage and fertility issues



Twitter user Kristen Schmitz wrote to her page Thursday: '#Tahlequah I love the ocean and these amazing animals and as a mother that lost a child I am so sad watching this momma carry her calf.'

University of Maine professor Jacquelyn Gill shared her experience with fertility issues on Twitter last week.

'Like many, I've been closely following the story of the grieving orca mother over the last ten days.

'It's been especially hard for me, as a daughter who recently lost her mother, and who has also struggled with fertility in the last year.'

Another woman, Katie McKeehan, told the Seattle Times she miscarried back in December when she was 16 weeks along.

'I never held my son or even got to see him... losing my son was by far the hardest thing I have gone through in my entire life, so I can relate to how this mother orca is feeling at losing her calf.'

Twitter user Kathleen Buchanan simply took to her page to share a crying face emoji next to the status: 'Tahlequah is every mother who's lost a child.'



Scientists say the animal has now fallen behind her pod and is at risk of becoming isolated.

Orcas are highly sociable and live in large groups, known as pods, often with dozens of other animals. They hunt in these groups, and animals that become isolated can suffer a potentially life-threatening food shortage, experts warn. Michael Milstein, a spokesman with NOAA Fisheries, said researchers on Wednesday spotted Tahlequah still carrying her dead young off the tip of Washington's Olympic Peninsula.

Experts at the Whale Museum on San Juan Island have been monitoring the whale since her calf died last month. While the pod has been staying by her side, concerned researchers told The Seattle Times the grieving mother is now starting to fall behind the group. According to the researchers, the orca and her pod are going through 'a deep grieving process'.

Mr Milstein said researchers with Fisheries and Ocean Canada also spotted another member of the same pod - the 3 ½-year old whale J50 that is emaciated. The ailing orca was swimming with her mom Wednesday. A team of experts led by NOAA Fisheries have been searching for the young whale to assess her health and potentially give her medication.

The Puget Sound calf was the first in three years to be born to the dwindling population of endangered southern resident killer whales.

There are only 75 of the mammals left.

After the devastating loss of her calf, the mother was seen propping the dead newborn on her forehead and trying to keep it bobbing near the surface in the waters off the coast of Victoria, British Columbia.

Earlier this year, a study by a non-profit organisation revealed whales and dolphins will hold 'vigils' for their dead. The animals will cling onto the lifeless bodies of their offspring for days and will try to keep them safe from predators. 'The baby was so newborn it didn't have blubber. It kept sinking, and the mother would raise it to the surface,' said Ken Balcomb, senior scientist with the Center for Whale Research on San Juan Island, which closely tracks individual whales. By the time the whale entered her third day of mourning, Dr Balcomb, said he had never observed a whale mourn for such a long time.

'It is horrible. This is an animal that is a sentient being,' Deborah Giles, science and research director for the nonprofit Wild Orc said. 'It understands the social bonds that it has with the rest of its family members.'

'(The mother) is bonded to (the calf) and she doesn't want to let it go. It is that simple. She is grieving,' she added. According to Dr Giles, the other members of the family knew J35 was pregnant because of their sonar, which the animals also use to communicate with one another. 'So, they must be grieving, too,' she said.

In June, researchers revealed that it was not uncommon for whales and dolphins to keep holding onto their dead offspring for days at a time. Experts from the Dolphin Biology and Conservation at Oceancare in Cordenons, Italy, analysed 78 records of aquatic mammals' treatment of their dead between 1970 and 2016. More than 90 per cent of the dolphins studied were attentive to their dead, with grieving females making up three quarters of these interactions. Seventy five per cent of the incidents were of adult females looking after their dead calf, with some of them carrying decomposing bodies for up to a week. The behaviour often involved one or more individuals attending to the deceased.



Researchers have been monitoring the activity of a grieving mother orca over the last week, as she tows her dead calf's body through the Puget Sound, off British Columbia. They attempted to keep the dead creature afloat if it sank or pushed it down if it was too buoyant, even performing 'resuscitation' attempts.

Researchers spotted mothers seeming to grieve for other females in the group. They also observed this touching behaviour in one pod of whales with the corpse of a male adult who may have died after a fight. Researchers wrote in their paper, published in *Zoology*, that an explanation of this behaviour could be 'strong attachment resulting in a difficulty of "letting go" —possibly related to grieving'. They said the practice of postmortem attentive behaviour (PAB) could be because individuals had failed 'to recognise or accept that an offspring or companion has died'.

This most recent orca death represents another reproductive failure for the salmon-eating southern resident killer whales that typically show up in Puget Sound waters from spring to fall.

This is the latest troubling sign for a population already at its lowest in more than three decades.