

**K**ILLER WHALES ARE 'EXTREMELY ferocious... and will attack human beings at every opportunity'. That's according to a 1973 US Navy manual. Sure enough, the recent spate of attacks on small boats in south-western Europe seems to justify such fears.

If you were to believe the press and social media, we're in the midst of a 'killer whale uprising'. But claims about their murderous intent are blatantly untrue. The evidence doesn't stand up. Killer whales do attack, and sometimes kill, trainers in captivity (not surprisingly) but, unlike polar bears, great white sharks and many other top predators, they have never killed a person in the wild.

So what's happening? Since May 2020, there have been more than 500 reported attacks on sailing boats, as well as some fishing boats, RIBs and motorboats. It began in the Strait of Gibraltar, but the number and range of incidents has rapidly increased in the years since. The 'attack zone' now extends up the Atlantic coasts of Portugal, Spain and France; and, in June, a yacht was ambushed off the coast of Shetland (the first incident recorded in northern waters). No-one has been harmed. The culprits are just a handful of whales, although others may be learning the behaviour.

Are the attacks triggered by a traumatic incident such as a collision with a boat or entanglement in fishing gear, as many claim? Or is it really an act of revenge for centuries of maltreatment and neglect? It's all pure speculation, of course, while theories in the press reveal a rather distorted view of the natural world, as we project our own prejudices onto wild animals.

Whales have been known to attack boats, under exceptional and life-threatening circumstances. The inspiration for *Moby Dick* was a real-life sperm whale that attacked, and sank, the whaling vessel *Essex*, in 1820. Several decades later, grey whales were dubbed 'devilfish' by Yankee whalers, for fighting back and smashing their boats to smithereens. But why would killer whales attack yachts in 21st-century Europe?

A key piece of evidence is that they usually attack the boat rudders. Research

**Want to comment?**  
Share your thoughts on Mark's column by sending an email to [wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk](mailto:wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk)

A killer whale moves along the rudder of a yacht near the Strait of Gibraltar in June 2023



"Why would killer whales attack yachts in 21st-century Europe?"

## MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

with dummy rudders suggests that they are pushing them, rather than biting. Once a rudder breaks, the whales usually swim away. That doesn't sound like aggression to me. If they really wanted to, they could sink a small yacht in minutes. (Breaking a rudder could open a hole in the hull, of course, which might explain why three of the 500-plus boats sank.)

Equally, it's a big stretch to argue that these killer whales are holding a grudge. I wouldn't blame them, but it's highly unlikely they have malevolent intentions towards humans. Consider this: every single killer whale living off the coasts of Washington and Oregon in the 1960s and 1970s was captured at least once (most multiple times). 'Preferred' individuals – calves and adult males – were taken away by the captive

industry for display in concrete tanks; other family members were set free. Yet it didn't spark an aggressive reaction. Not a single boat was attacked. Surely, if anything gave them reason to hate humans, it would be the

trauma of being captured – not to mention the sight of their family members being driven away?

Whatever the reason, if the killer whales in this critically endangered sub-population continue to attack boats, it will make protecting them even harder (it won't be long before uninformed politicians start mumbling about something needing to be done).

Personally, I think it's nothing worse than play. Boisterous play, yes, by animals weighing up to six tonnes, but nothing more sinister than that.

People do revenge, animals do not. **W**

**"Theories in the press reveal a rather distorted view of the natural world, as we project our own prejudices onto wild animals"**

