

Stø Community Visit by Free Morgan Foundation

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Free Morgan Foundation

www.freemorgan.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the Free Morgan Foundation's Rehabilitation and Release Plan, an appropriate location must be decided upon which encompasses all the requirements for the Plan to succeed. This is, *inter alia*; logistical, environmental, personnel, community and habitat criteria. Furthermore, it must be a location that has historical and recent sightings and encounters with the local population of orca.

The location of Stø, in northern Norway, is an ideal location for the implementation of the Rehabilitation and Release Plan. The area provides not only all the logistical requirements but is also a prime habitat for orca, with sightings regularly reported within a 10 km range of the harbour and site for the rehabilitation sea-pen. In addition, the local community of Stø sees Morgan's return to these waters, as not only a benefit to the Stø Community in terms of possible economic benefit, but also it is clear that they genuinely care about the marine environment, its inhabitants.

The community commitment ranges from the Mayor to the fishermen and also includes residents. This also includes local businesses who have offered to provide liaison cooperation and to assist with the project throughout its duration.



Figure 1. Stø Harbour and surrounds. Arrow indicates approximate location of barrier net for Morgan's sea-pen. Photo courtesy and © Per S. Nielsen (2007).

DETAILS

Background.

As part of the implementation of the Free Morgan Foundation's (FMF) Rehabilitation and Release Plan a number of sites were nominated in northern Norway as potential locations for the placing of the sea-pen and conducting the subsequent multi-phase Plan.

These potential locations were eventually narrowed down to three locations, using local knowledge and refinement of the criteria required to maximize the chances of the success of the Plan.

Between 17-20 November 2011 two of the board members of the Free Morgan Foundation (Jan van Twillert & Dr Ingrid N. Visser) visited the region of Stø, to investigate its potential for hosting Morgan the FMF's Plan. These two board members were selected to visit the region based on their experience with the formulation of the Plan, their field experience in rehabilitation of cetaceans as well as extreme environments, field work with wild orca, security and project management, knowledge of the budget and risk assessment, public relations work and their understanding of the intricate inter-related nature of all of these facets in terms of the implementation of the Plan.

The fishing village Stø is situated at 68° north, approximately 200 km north of the Arctic Circle. It is a small active fishing community with approximately 200 inhabitants. It is situated in Øksnes Municipality, (Nordland County). The Municipality has a population of approximately 4,500 people, of which roughly 2,800 live in Myre, the administration centre. The closest large town is Sortland, which is situated 50 km south of Stø. From May to August the yearly coalfish and Greenland halibut fisheries are active in the Stø region. "Anda" Lighthouse (5 km northwest of Stø), is the home of one of Northern Norway's largest puffin colonies and the island also houses the largest harbour seal colony of the region.

Information Dissemination.

To ensure that the community would be aware of our visit and be able to dialogue with the FMF board members, the FMF liaised with a local whale watching company, Arctic Whale Tours (AWT). Through this contact, a lecture room was provided at the office of AWT, at the wharf at Stø. During the evening of the 18th of November 2011, a power-point presentation was given to 20 members of the Stø Community. They represented the fishermen, the local residents, local businesses, community groups (such as the fishermen's wives Co-op) and long-term immigrants residing in the region of Stø. This hour-long presentation was followed by a two hour discussion where aspects such as economic benefits, potential site locations, risks to the community, long-term detrimental and positive impacts, fisheries impacts (e.g., would Morgan's presence potentially increase the number of orca in the region and selling of fish to

the FMF for Morgan), whale watching impacts (increase in number of tourists), educational and research benefits, various scenarios with regards to Morgan (including duration and equipment requirements) and costs. Stø resident, Unni K. Berglund, stated that *“This is a very interesting project for Stø and I do hope that we can get Morgan to us. She really deserves to be set free and we all wish to her welcome back home.”* One of the fisherman’s wives, Ellinor Ulriksen, who has been living in Stø for almost 40 years stated *“I hope Morgan can come back to us and be set free. The Free Morgan Foundation has done a fantastic job in helping her.”*

Over the duration of the FMF visit, three formal and three informal meetings were conducted with various members and factions of the Stø Community. Of the former, the first is described above. The second was a meeting between AWT, FMF and the Øksnes Municipality Mayor, Mr Jørn Martinussen, who made time on the weekend to meet with the FMF. He had previously been alerted to the visit of the FMF board members by AWT and based on their potential visit had presented the outline of the concept to the Municipality Council earlier that week. He had received positive comments during that meeting and would be presenting more details following our meeting.

Mr Martinussen was enthusiastic and proactive in his approach to the potential of Morgan’s rehabilitation and release in the Stø region. He offered his support in the form of facilitating administrative negotiations for permits and introductions to the necessary infrastructure such as Coastguard, Department of Fisheries etc. He could also see the long-term benefits for the community, as well as Morgan and stated *“As the Mayor, I am very positive about Morgan coming to our community. I will personally look forward to helping on her road to freedom.”*

The Mayor complimented the FMF on their thorough research and planning for the Rehabilitation and Release Plan and welcomed the opportunity to work together for Morgan. He also encouraged the promotion of Morgan’s return in terms of media profile and along with the Manager of AWT’s and the FMF board members, posed in front of a life-size model of a Minke whale in the township of Myre (Figure 2).

The third formal meeting of approximately included fishermen, local community representatives and AWT’s. It involved scouting potential sites and facilities as well as possible equipment and placement of items such as security cameras. Suitable habitat and water quality issues were discussed (Figure 3). Additionally, items such as security risks and access were discussed, the sites documented and measured as well as discussion for further investigations such as diving on the location to confirm the depths and suitability of the underwater habitat. Furthermore, issues such as power, accommodation inspections, storage facilities, locations for hosting large-walk-in freezers, boat moorings, live-fish holding tanks and sea-pens, barrier net placements and securing were all discussed within the framework of the locations and the Stø Community’s requirements. The reaction from all those the FMF met

during the three days on location was extremely positive. Mr Lauri Heiskanen stated that *“For the last four years I have worked for Arctic Whale Tours and observed orca in the wild. It will be an exciting moment for Morgan and the Stø community when she arrives here to return to her family.”*



Figure 2. Standing in front of a life-size Minke whale model at the township of Myre are Camilla Ilmoni (Arctic Whale Tours, Manager), Jan van Twillert (FMF), Dr Ingrid N. Visser (FMF) and the Øksnes Municipality Mayor, Mr Jørn Martinussen. Photo © FMF, by Lauri Heiskanen (Arctic Whale Tours) (2011).



Figure 3. Left to right; Lauri Heiskanen (AWT), Dr Ingrid N. Visser (FMF), Lauri Pietikäinen (Fisherman), Kyrre Brun (Fisherman) and Dieter Schwab (Stø resident) discuss possible sea-pen locations and habitat topography at Stø Harbour. Photo © FMF, by L Jan van Twillert (FMF) (2011).

The three informal meetings eventuated as a result of the Stø Community's enthusiastic welcome for the FMF board and their desire to help Morgan. Two of the informal meetings lasted at least two hours each with the third being approximately one hour in duration and only terminating due to other commitments. There were multiple requests for further formal presentations and informal meetings, however due to time constraints these were not possible. Furthermore, the FMF has been invited to return to Stø, before Morgan is shipped in order to help facilitate any requirements of the FMF and to ensure full integration into the community as well as maximizing the benefits for Morgan. Sabine Schwab, a Stø resident stated *"I have always liked orcas but looking at the pictures of Morgan in that tiny barren tank, I so desperately want to see her out of there and swimming free in the open ocean, here at Stø."*

Additionally, there was a lot of interest in feedback from Dr Visser, regarding local orca sighting and encounters. AWT has provided sighting information for the FMF, details of which have appeared within various documents which have previously been presented to the Netherlands Ministry of Agriculture and Foreign Trade as well as those used in the Court proceedings in the fight for Morgan's freedom. Taking into account the encounters that AWT tours observes as well as sighting records from fishermen in the region, orca are sighted, on average, once a week in the greater- Stø region (see Appendix One, letter from Camillia Ilmoni, Manager AWT). Ms Ilmoni stated that *"It has been very exciting to help Morgan so far and we look forward to her 'coming home'. We want to help her as best we can to ensure that Stø will be a good and safe place for her to reconnect with her family."*

Photographic identification of individuals has been possible from this data and the information has been collated by one of the FMF scientists. Furthermore, the FMF was able to establish from details provided by the AWT, fishermen and residents, that the orca in the Stø region have been observed feeding on herring (*Clupea harengus*), mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*), halibut (*Hippoglossus hippoglossus*) and harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina*). Photographic documentation was presented to the FMF of some of these events, including images showing a hunt in progress of a harbour seal. Mr Dieter Schwab, a Stø resident, was recently kayaking with a group of six orca, within an archipelago only one km offshore of Langenes. This is less than three km from Stø harbour and the proposed site for Morgan's sea-pen. During this encounter he photographed a harbour seal hunt in progress (Figure 4). He states *"I was astonished to see the orca in so close to the shore and to watch them feeding on seals. I have kayaked with orca right outside Stø Harbour and I am sure that Morgan will thrive upon her return here, to her home waters."* Later that day these same orca were observed by a local fisherman, Lauri Pietikäinen, as he observed them feeding on mackerel. He also stated that *"I have been living in Stø for 12 years and I have been a professional fisherman for seven years. During that time I have repeatedly seen two orca families right here in the Stø region. I love nature and the whales, as they represent a healthy ecosystem. Stø is a perfect gateway for Morgan to return to the ocean and join the orca who live here."* Another Stø fisherman and resident, Mr Kyrre Brun, stated

that "I have been fishing in our area since 1973 and I often see orcas close to Stø. Bringing Morgan back here is a very positive thing for us. She belongs to these waters."



Figure 4. A harbour seal airborne, after being hit by the tail of an orca near Stø Harbour. Photo courtesy and © Deiter Schwab (2010).

Site Location.

A suitable location for Morgan's sea-pen has been designated within the protection of the Stø Harbour. Based on the advice of the fishermen and the residents it was deemed most appropriate to use a 'barrier net' to encompass an area which is approximately 150 m long and at its widest approximately 50 m offshore (see Figure 1). Given the tank Morgan has been held in for more than 16 months is approximately 7 x 21 m and is a featureless concrete tank, the proposed site not only has a significant increase in size, but its high topographic variability will provide mental stimulation for Morgan. The benthos includes rock and pebble bottoms, with seaweeds of various types. There is a range of invertebrates such as mollusks and crustaceans and various types of fish are also seen in the harbour, including occasionally the schooling fish herring and mackerel. During the FMF visit a grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) was sighted inside the inner harbour area and there are frequent sightings of harbour seals in the harbour. The water visibility is at least 15 m and the water quality is excellent with abundant marine and bird life prolific inside the harbour.

Should it be necessary to hold Morgan in the Stø Harbour during a winter season, of note is that it (and the surrounding region) is bathed by the North Atlantic Current and Gyre's which results in the area being ice-free year round.

This site provides safe road access for delivery of Morgan directly into the sea-pen. The road access will also facilitate delivery of fish and supplies. A large storage shed is situated alongside the sea-pen location with a level area of approximately 70x70m alongside the building allowing for parking etc. It is feasible to erect a fence as a barrier to prevent unwanted approaches to Morgan and on the opposite side of the road, within meters of the sea-pen's proposed location are resident's houses which afford clear views of the location, enhancing security. These houses have been offered as locations to mount web and security cameras to facilitate Morgan's security as well as public viewing and educational opportunities.

Implementation.

Given the diverse diet of the local orca in the Stø region, it is desirable to feed Morgan a selection of fish species. The fishermen of the community have offered to facilitate this and have stated that they will endeavour to capture and provide a variety of live fish which Morgan would be likely to encounter in the vicinity.

Educational information for the locals as well as for visitors will be a key component of the hosting of Morgan's rehabilitation and release. Not only will school talks and school visits be encouraged, but a variety of educational programs, information boards and signs and online information packages will be developed as time and funding permit. It has been proposed that a network of both local and FMF volunteers (Morgan's Minders) be trained in the details of her life to facilitate education of the visitors who will likely come to visit Morgan during her rehabilitation and release. To ensure that the benefits of hosting Morgan will not only be felt in the village of Stø, nearby villages and townships such as Myre will be encouraged to participate in these educational programs and to assist visitors to the region who come to visit Morgan.

In order to facilitate locating Morgan's extended orca family a series of actions will be implemented, including establishing a free-phone ORCA HOTLINE number, a sighting network and the ability to upload photographs of orca to the www.freemorgan.org website. Permanent hydrophones will be placed in Morgan's sea-pen and funding permitting a number will also be installed at key locations around the Stø area where wild orca are known to frequent. On-going research into the wild orca population was discussed with the fishermen and residents as well as the possibility of using the fishing boats as 'platforms of opportunity' to enable researchers to travel further offshore than the small (6 m) research vessels they will be using.

During the entire visit by the FMF the Stø Community were remarkably positive and excited about the potential of helping Morgan on her quest for freedom and her ultimate return to the wild. Offers of support, logistical assistance, equipment provision, accommodation hire, donation of time and expertise were free-flowing and constant. Any challenges that the FMF presented, such as the placement location of the sea-pen were met with interest and dialogue with all such challenges having solutions presented and/or alternatives offered. Given the relative isolation of the Stø Community, the locals are often faced with challenges and have an almost inborn and certainly well developed ability to pragmatically deal with such scenarios. The impression that the FMF board members had was one of a positive and forward thinking group of dedicated people who clearly care about their environment and the people who live and work within it.

Timeline.

The residents of Stø are aware that Morgan's rehabilitation and release may be a short-term project or extend to a multi-year mission. They are also aware that Morgan may not fully integrate with the local population of orca and may require long-term care and management. They are committed to her welfare and her return to their waters.

CITATION:

This report may be cited as follows

van Twillert, Jan & Visser, Ingrid N.

Stø Community Visit by Free Morgan Foundation

Unpublished Report, Prepared by Free Morgan Foundation, 19 November 2011. Available from www.freemorgan.org.

APPENDIX ONE

Dear Ingrid and Jan,

It has been a pleasure to have you here in Stø! As promised, I send you a summary of the preparations done so far in Stø and Øksnes municipality and a short description of the sightings.

14 nov. Arctic Whale Tours wrote a letter to the Mayor of Øksnes, Jørn Martinussen, about Morgan and the plans for her release. The Mayor presented the letter to the rest of the politicians in a meeting on Thursday 17 Nov. Everybody was positive to the release program and they were also aware about the community meeting that was going to take place on Friday 18 Nov in Stø. The rest of the story you know... Everybody seems positive and welcomes Morgan to Stø and Øksnes. If the verdict is positive on Monday, I can see many positive outcomes for the Stø-community, Øksnes, Vesterålen and Norway: In addition to all the positive effects on the tourism industry, there will finally be possibilities to get financial support to other local projects, e.g. cleaning Stø harbour (bottom and shores), improve the harbour and repair the quay. We can get support to create programs for local schools and expand this to other regions in Norway. As the Mayor said, Norway needs to improve its image, and Morgan will do that. Stø and Øksnes will be put on the world map and this has positive long term effects for the development of this region and the industries here.

I think that one of the most exciting things for Arctic Whale Tours will be to cooperate with scientists and get students here and learn from their knowledge and expertise. This gives us a unique opportunity to improve the quality of our message to our guests and thus also our safari product. So far our company has mostly focused on raising awareness about whales but with Morgan we get the opportunity to be involved and support high quality research.

I have looked through our orca sighting records based on the AWT safari blogs and the tips from fishermen and locals. There is in average one sighting per week in Øksnes or close to Øksnes. Several of the sightings are from the very vicinity of Stø (less than 5 km from the harbour). Groups of orcas are often seen outside Stø (< 1km from Stø harbour), between Stø and Nyksund (< 5 km from Stø harbour), and between Stø and Anda Nature reserve (5-10 km from Stø harbour). For example, here is a citation from our blog in September 2011:

“Orcas have been around Stø the whole September and there is a lot of herring in the water: 11.09 a group of five between Anda and Stø; 12.09 same group in the same area; 18.09 five orcas still between Anda and Stø, probably the same group again; 24.09 two groups between Anda and Stø, one with six individuals and one with three individuals. They were feeding on herring, moving towards Nyksund.”



10 September 2011: A group of orcas seen close to Anda Nature Reserve (an island ca 5 km from Stø).

Here is a table with rough overview of the sightings from our whale safaris from 2010 and 2011:

2010			N	Ø	
1	20100615	15:00	69 14,723	15 31,000	
1	20100620	11:54	63 20,533	15 37,664	Group of 8-12
2	20100620	Na	Na	Na	1
1	20100625	12:30	69 23,250	15 42,163	
2	20100625	13:31	69 20,767	15 45,309	
1	20100708	13:17	69 20,8	15 40,7	
1	20100715	10:43	69 11,69	15 25,79	
1	20100717	12:24	69 20,43	15 41,38	
2	20100717	12:46	69 20,67	15 33,39	
3	20100717	13:52	69 09,44	15 22,32	
1	20100719	19:00	69 20,51	15 46,79	
1	20100804	14:01	69 32,08	15 39,24	
2011					
1	20110531	Na	Na	Na	
1	20110619	Na	Na	Na	Group of 4-6
1	20110622	Na	Na	Na	25-30
1	20110626	12:33	69 22,613	15 42,522	Group of ~6
1	20110701	10:24	69 5,751	15 15,388	One group
2	20110701	13:37	69 23,086	15 43,504	More groups
1	20110702	16:20	Na	Na	
1	20110709	12:42	69 19,037	15 49,329	
1	20110715	11:29	69 23,452	15 44,831	
1	20110717	15:03	69 22,797	15 33,026	
	20110731	Na	Na	Na	
1	20110802	11:25	69 21,886	15 47,931	
	20110910	Na	Na	Na	

The orcas are here all year round and we get tips from fishermen and locals both in summer and winter. We received the latest tip 10 days ago (beginning of November). Two family groups were seen in Andfjorden (c 12 -15 km by boat from Stø).

We keep our fingers crossed that things go the right way on Monday!

All the best,

Camilla

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