

# In the Eye of the Beluga

# Maryse Goudreau

An exhibition produced and circulated  
by the Foreman Art Gallery of Bishop's  
University

Curator:  
Noémie Fortin



*In the Eye of the Beluga*  
Exhibition view at Kamouraska  
Art Center, photo: Caroline Bolieu  
2025

“I’ll explain it to  
you once you’re  
young enough  
to understand.”

Daphné,  
*Tadpole and the Whale*  
1988

*La permission*  
2016

# Their Future Is *Also* Our Future

As a child, Maryse Goudreau fell in love with belugas. She didn't just find them beautiful: she saw herself in them. As she blew out her birthday candles, she'd wish she could join the white whales in their river. And at night, drifting off to sleep, she would gaze at a poster on her bedroom wall that showed a smiling beluga together with a powerful message: "Their future... is above all our future."

She often dreamt of becoming a beluga.

During her childhood in the 1980s, the St. Lawrence beluga was added to the list of "threatened" species. In 2014, this was changed to the even more serious status of "endangered." Today, the Gaspesian artist draws on a lifetime of love for these animals to create a body of work dedicated to the beluga, pledging to accompany the species as it slowly vanishes.

## Reenchanting the World to Come

For over a decade, Maryse has plunged back into her childhood passion, immersing herself in creating an archive-artwork devoted to belugas. This long-term project reveals the social, political and emotional dimensions of the species, an enduring symbol of the St. Lawrence whose history — intimately linked to our own — has long captured the popular imagination. An open-ended artwork, the *Beluga Archives* is a project in constant growth, forever developing new forms that share an overarching goal: to inspire greater compassion in us for the natural world. Diving into this ever-changing corpus puts us in the position of having to listen to what the belugas have to tell us.

For her exhibition *In the Eye of the Beluga*, Maryse revisits the Beluga Archives through the eyes of a child, creating immersive works within which birth and extinction coexist. Adding new

elements to her collection while reworking others, she offers up different ways to navigate an emotional landscape in which hope and mourning are inextricably intertwined.

Though the films of Pierre Perrault — that seminal figure of Québécois cinéma direct who both orchestrated and documented the last beluga hunt in Quebec — remain an influence, the artist drew inspiration for the present exhibit from a favourite childhood film. *La grenouille et la baleine* (English title: *Tadpole and the Whale*) tells of a very special friendship between Daphné, a young girl with exceptional hearing, and cetaceans in the St. Lawrence. Set to a backdrop of environmental concerns in a North Coast filled with tape decks and seashell wind chimes, the story unfolds in an acoustic landscape of whale songs interlaced with melodic flute. While her empathetic connection to the living creatures around her made Daphné a role model for the younger Maryse, it's the film's audio installations that echo through the present-day exhibit. The use of overturned boats to create cabin structures, the incorporation of marine sounds recorded using a hydrophone: these are among the gestures repeated throughout Jean-Claude Lord's magical and poetic film to which the artist pays homage.

Gazing with compassion upon this sentinel species<sup>1</sup> of northern climate change, Maryse presents the beluga as a symbol of the importance of taking care of living things. This exhibit for young audiences was designed as a reflective space punctuated with scenes of shipwrecks, maritime rescues, encounters and births, using sound, touch and gameplay to reconnect visitors with the animistic modes of relating experienced in childhood.

1. A sentinel species is one whose particular sensitivities make it an early indicator of environmental changes within a given ecosystem.

## Listening to the Living World

“Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion — until we teach them not to. We quickly retrain them and make them forget. When we tell them that the tree is not a *who*, but an *it*, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation.”<sup>2</sup>

Biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer draws on her Indigenous heritage when inviting her readers to revisit alternate ways of existing within the world. She invites us to enter into relation with all that surrounds us by rooting ourselves in interspecies connectedness, embracing a mode of relation that considers all living things as members of our extended family. In Western thought, the notion of “family” extends only to other humans, whereas in many Indigenous epistemologies, such linkages also incorporate plants and animals. Like the children described as naturally assigning a form of agency to a maple tree, Indigenous ways of knowing treat all living things as of equal value: not as a hierarchical tree of life, but rather as a circle. The author's wish is that young adults not forget — or perhaps better, that they *re-remember* — the connections to the living world they naturally felt as children, which have since been lost in the tumult of the day-to-day or subsumed in a mercantilist vision of the natural world<sup>3</sup>. It is precisely this inherent connection to nature that Maryse seeks to revive.

2. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 57.

3. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, (Minneapolis: Zest Books, 2022), 10-15.

Taking particular care to incorporate voices from the plant and animal worlds so as to envision other ways of seeing, hearing and feeling, Maryse began her archive-artwork by asking the belugas for their permission to work on a project that would focus on them. The first animal she met with, in a Connecticut aquarium, answered in their own way by gazing intently into the artist's eyes and staying alongside her for a full two hours. This life-changing experience has been rendered as a photographic image in *La permission*, where the animal's eye looks back at us — an image reminding us that nature is also watching, that the natural world witnesses our actions and demands our attention.

## In the Nursery

In her practice that combines fieldwork with documentary research, Maryse probes different manifestations of our collective memory. Her process comes to life through the archives, which are reinterpreted, and through the stories and histories of encounters between humans and belugas. Through processes that are dynamic, never static, the artist unearths, unveils, structures and constantly reworks images — both those she finds and those she produces. She befriends cetaceans living in captivity, scans meeting minutes from the Chamber of Commons, organizes listening circles to observe Arctic Ocean whales, manipulates sperm whale bones on the Îles-de-la-Madeleine and dives beneath the waves to witness a beluga birthing site in Manitoba. These many different perspectives are used to revisit the long history of beluga/ human relations, providing a better understanding of the present situation while also affording the chance to scan the horizon and see what lies ahead.



*Portrait no.2*  
2023



*Le lait du béluga (no. 1)*  
2017

Seeking to reveal images buried in the past and create images where they are clearly lacking, Maryse strives to fill in the voids in the historical record. Struck by the term “beluga nursery,” which emerged in 2014 as citizens banded together to protect a calving area at Cacouna, in the Bas-Saint-Laurent region, Quebec — she set out to evoke a place we cannot see. Inspired by the political resonance of a “feminine” vocabulary linked to ecological activism, Maryse brings together various traces, images, and objects to bring the underwater birthplace to the surface. Ultrasound imagery, a nursing scene, and maternal songs coexist with a small beluga nursery.

I came into contact with the *Beluga Archives* for the first time when I experienced her *Beluga Nursery*. At the time, my ten-month-old daughter was asleep in my arms. Arriving by chance in the Baie-Saint-Paul studio Maryse was occupying for that city’s International Symposium of Contemporary Art, I watched, deeply moved, as visitors young and old stroked and held reduced-scale models of beluga dorsal ridges. Intuitively, they knew these baby-sized marble sculptures needed to be handled with great care. Treating them with a tenderness that echoed my own feelings of motherhood, they gently rocked and caressed the crests. Still, over time, this repeated handling eventually causes the marble to wear. The participatory performance expands the concept of mothering to encompass all living things, stirring up a sense of almost parental responsibility.

## On the Shore

Maryse’s fieldwork includes participation in the Quebec Marine Mammal Emergency Response Network (RQUMM): tending to wounded animals, securing locations where they have beached and dispatching tissue samples for laboratory analysis. Cutting stone provides an outlet for the emotional turmoil she faces when encountering dead whales, a way of transmuting the gesture of cutting flesh into an act of ritual creation. In parallel, her archival forays allow her to revisit the past and find a space for mourning the interplay of humans and belugas — a relationship that, like the species, will one day vanish.

Canadian cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis addresses this phenomenon of double death: the demise, not just of a single cetacean on the shore, but also of an entire species on the brink of extinction. As she reminds us, “Even though death must be an important part of life, death is sometimes not only death but *double death*. In this sixth great extinction [...] not only do individuals die, but their entanglements in other beings’ ways of life dies too. Patterns of embodied connections wither and shrink.”<sup>4</sup> Faced with the imminent loss of these interspecies relationships, Maryse takes a palliative position, as if she were accompanying a loved one approaching the end of their days. The St. Lawrence beluga will one day disappear, as will many other species, but there remains time to hear what these luminous beings have to say before they are forever gone.

*In the Eye of the Beluga* approaches death as part of a cycle, reminding us that it also brings life and providing a long-term perspective that offers the hope we need to envision a future for the planet. This cycle is well documented by Melissa Stewart,

4. From the 2021 conference *Care for the Stranded: Astrida Neimanis*, organized by the Critical Poetics Research Group at Nottingham Trent University, 12:15-12:43.

renowned author of science books for kids, in her illustrated work that details the phenomenon of *whale fall*. As she describes it, "When a whale dies, its massive body silently sinks down, down, through the inky darkness, finally coming to rest on the soft, silty seafloor. For the whale, it's the end of a seventy-year life. But for a little-known community of deep-sea denizens, it's a new beginning. The whale fall is a bountiful gift that can sustain life for another fifty years."<sup>5</sup>

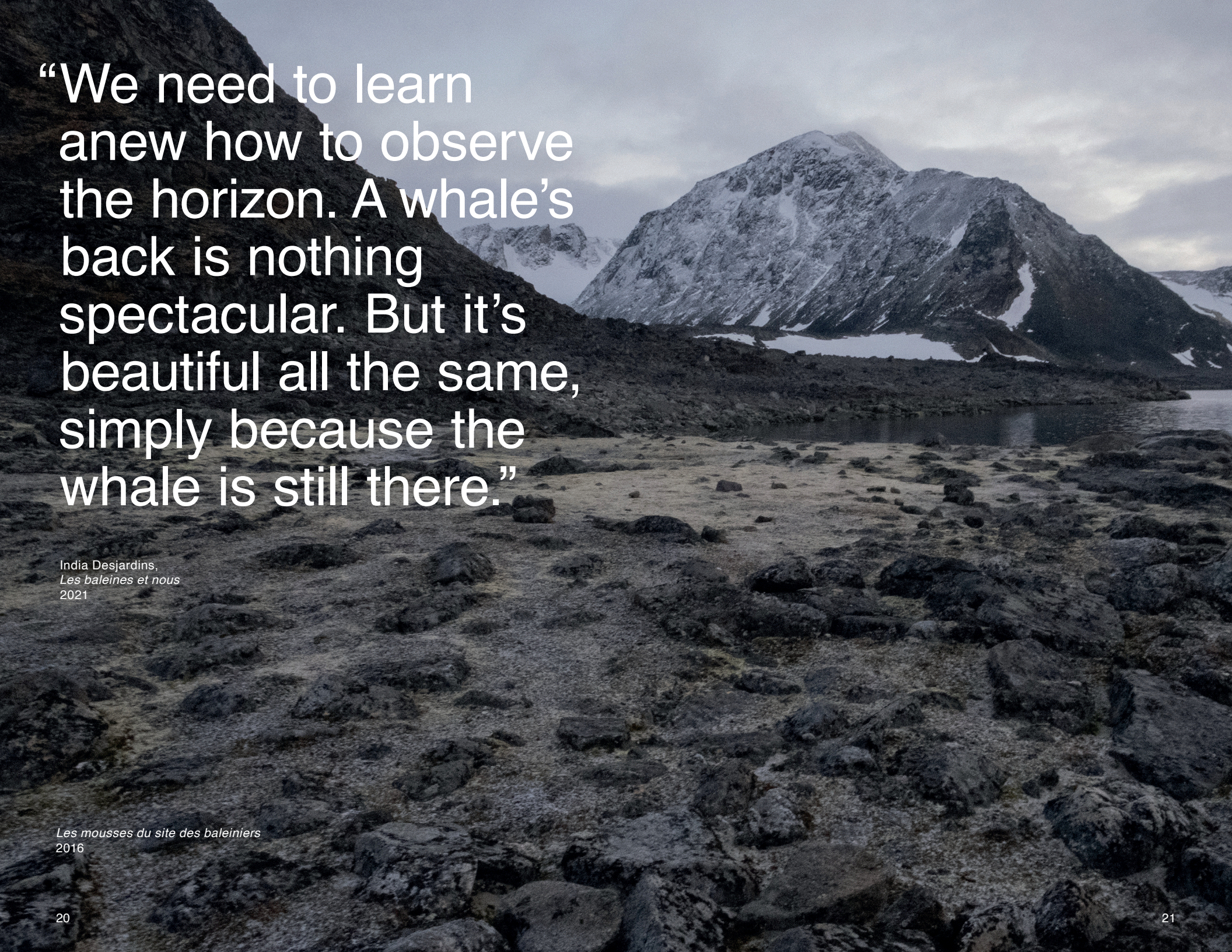
This sea-floor ecosystem is echoed in one of Maryse's photographs, a mossy landscape at the tip of the Svalbard archipelago, a rocky outcropping in the Arctic Ocean midway between Norway and the North Pole. The site, incongruously verdant, attests to an intensive episode of commercial whaling — a period referred to as the "oil rush" that leaves in its wake a few haunting reminders: the vestiges of the ovens used to melt tons of blubber, and the bones of thousands of dead animals. Like sacrificial victims, the whales' flesh and blood brought life to this lunar landscape, as witnessed by the bright green moss that flourishes on the spot centuries later. In its unexpected vitality, the image *Les mousses du site des baleiniers* serves to inspire: we see in it hope for a kind of regeneration, a life beyond extinction, like a carcass that feeds the ocean floor.

## Eyes Fixed on the Horizon

Motivated both by mourning a population on its way to extinction and by the hope that we can forge new bonds of compassion, Maryse calls us to listen closely and open our eyes wide, to scan the horizon in search of the white backs that appear in the distance when the belugas surface to breathe.

In an ecofeminist approach, the artist leaves to one side any virile representational logic associated with beluga encounters. We move far from the world of capture and domination, focusing on marginal epistemologies like those of women, children and Indigenous communities. Rejecting forms of discourse *about* the beluga to instead construct a dialogue *with* the animal, Maryse conceptualizes knowledge creation as a co-presence that traverses species, disciplines, epochs and sensibilities. Striving to expand the circle of ecological compassion beyond the bounds of human existence, she incorporates examples of interspecies care into the exhibition. To this end, Maryse uses skins from the animals that are part of the beluga's world and, more broadly, of maritime culture. Installation *Se laisser porter*, assembles seal hides to form a whale stretcher and suggest a form of interspecies collaboration, with different animals joining forces to carry another. Further in the exhibition, other skins are made available to visitors wishing to momentarily pause and reflect. This direct contact offered with the participatory installation *Se poser* reflects Maryse's relationship with day-to-day realities of birth and death in the animal world.

5. Melissa Stewart, *Whale Fall: Exploring an Ocean-Floor Ecosystem* (New York: Random House Studio, 2023), 5-8.



“We need to learn  
anew how to observe  
the horizon. A whale’s  
back is nothing  
spectacular. But it’s  
beautiful all the same,  
simply because the  
whale is still there.”

India Desjardins,  
*Les baleines et nous*  
2021

*Les mousses du site des baleiniers*  
2016

*In the Eye of the Beluga* lets us encounter an animal and those who care for them. We witness a whale rescue and a beaching; we dive deep into the heart of a calving site. The immersive nature of the works brings these scenes to life and gives us space to unpick the twine of feeling, navigate our emotions to come to a peaceful place conducive to contemplation. Though we often flee from the weight and density of mourning, Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us that this is precisely the role of art: to help us through our mourning so that we may negotiate it collectively, hand in hand. Mourning can also be taken as a measure of our attachment, while the associated sorrow can bring us closer together and encourage us to love even more.<sup>6</sup>

Surrounding us with images of care, with photos of nursing and ultrasound prints, to a soundtrack of birth cries and dying breaths amidst whale bones and seal skins, the artist invites us into the very heart of the archive-artwork within which she dwells and that continues to expand around her. Guiding us deep into the world of marine mammals so that we may grasp the full meaning of their imminent extinction, Maryse Goudreau urges us to change our points of view — to see the world through the eye of the beluga.

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Noémie Fortin  
Curator

6. James Yeh, "Robin Wall Kimmerer: 'People can't understand the world as a gift unless someone shows them how.'" *The Guardian*, May 23, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/23/robin-wall-kimmerer-people-cant-understand-the-world-as-a-gift-unless-someone-shows-them-how>



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# Biographies

**Maryse Goudreau** creates environments that guide us as we grapple with unprecedented ecological challenges. Her work unfolds in the form of books, dramaturgy, cinematic narratives, and visual art exhibitions that emerge from conversations, shared experiences with various scientific actors, and artistic collaborations. Since 2012, she has been creating an artwork-archive dedicated to beluga whales. Her most recent exhibitions have been presented at the Galerie d'art Louise-et-Reuben-Cohen, the Biosphere, the Galerie de l'UQAM, MOMENTA Biennale de l'image and the Venice Biennale. She lives and works in Escuminac, along the Baie-des-Chaleurs where she grew up.

**Noémie Fortin** is an independent curator and author based in the Eastern Townships. Attuned to practices rooted in ecofeminist thinking, she accompanies artistic, agricultural and community practices focused on caring for the living. Her research focuses on ecological art that moves outside of institutions to engage with territories and communities. Her projects have been presented at the Centre d'art de Kamouraska, Adélard, the Rozynski Art Centre, the Biosphere, Manif d'art 11 and the Foreman Art Gallery. Her writings have been published in specialised magazines such as *Esse arts + opinion*, *Espace art actuel* and *Le Sabord*.

# Lexicon

## Animal rescue

Sometimes, cetaceans can wash up on shore, but still be alive. Other times, they may be stranded far from their usual waterways. In situations like these, the Quebec Marine Mammal Emergency Response Network (RQUMM) helps assess whether a successful animal rescue can be carried out and what risks would be involved in providing aid. Unfortunately, it's not always possible or desirable to move belugas back to their home waters, since they may have contracted diseases that could be spread to other members of their pod.

## Animism

Animism describes systems of belief that consider all elements of nature to be alive — or in other words, animated. Such belief systems attribute human traits to non-human entities, extending notions of intention, emotion and compassion to inanimate materials, plants, animals and the very Earth itself.

## Beaching

When a ship or boat is laid ashore or grounded deliberately in shallow water, we say it has been beached. The same term is used to refer to large fish and cetaceans that have been stranded on the shore. In Quebec, volunteers with the Quebec Marine Mammal Emergency Response Network (RQUMM) help recover beached carcasses, which are then delivered to scientific researchers for analysis. Determining the causes of death helps to improve future living conditions for marine wildlife.

## Belugas, Whales or Cetaceans?

Cetaceans are a family of marine mammals — not to be confused with 'fish'! The large family of cetaceans includes whales, dolphins and porpoises. Belugas, sometimes referred to as “white whales” or “canaries of the sea,” are a species of toothed whale.

## Biodiversity

Biodiversity refers to every living creature on the planet — which is to say, to the totality of all species and ecosystems here on Earth, together with the ecological processes of which they are integral parts. This diversity is essential for our daily lives. Without plants, there would be no oxygen to breathe, and without bees, there would be no fruit or nuts to eat.

## Blowhole

Whales are mammals, which means they breathe air just like we do. Belugas breathe through what's known as a blowhole: a half-moon-shaped nostril located on the top of their heads that can open and close. Belugas are able to stay underwater without breathing for 20 minutes at a time. After that, they must return to the surface to get some air, or else they will drown.

## Captivity

Animals in captivity are kept in cages or aquariums so that humans can observe them outside of their natural habitats. Although this allows us to witness animals we would not normally come into contact with, there is a worldwide movement to protest against holding animals in captivity. The St. Lawrence belugas were first captured for display in aquariums in 1860. Today, it is illegal to capture these cetaceans in Canadian territorial waters.

## Decline

We refer to a species as being “in decline” when it is on a path toward extinction — meaning that it has fewer and fewer living individuals and may soon disappear completely. One of the main causes of decline is habitat destruction resulting from human activity. The St. Lawrence beluga population changed status in 2014, passing from “threatened” to the more serious “endangered,” reflecting the species’ decline.

## Dorsal Ridge

Unlike other cetaceans, belugas don't have dorsal fins. Instead, they have a thick ridge along their backs. Normally pale grey in color, a beluga's dorsal ridge is often notched, dented and cut as a result of collisions with ice and other hard surfaces. Unique dorsal ridge markings are one of the ways we can identify belugas and recognize different individuals who live in the river.

## Echolocation

Toothed whales emit a wide range of sounds. Some of these sounds are used for communication, but others work like a sort of radar, helping the animals locate objects they can't see, like obstacles or even food. Of all cetaceans, belugas and narwhals are the echolocation champions! However, in the St. Lawrence River, sound pollution from maritime traffic makes it difficult to navigate using echolocation, which can sometimes cause collisions.

## Empathy

To show empathy is to demonstrate an awareness of what another person or living creature is feeling. It means being sensitive to their emotions and able to put yourself in their position so as to better understand their experience. Empathy allows us to see the world through the eyes of the belugas and other endangered species, the better to understand how ecosystem change is affecting their lives.

## Entanglement

Cetaceans and other marine creatures sometimes get accidentally tangled up in fishing gear — the nets, cords and cables, often attached to traps, used to catch fish or crustaceans. Fishing gear can get stuck in an animal's throat or wrap around their bodies and fins. Entanglement can directly cause injury, but it also can prevent the animal from returning to the surface to breathe or from diving to search for food.

## Filiation

Filiation describes the link between children and their parents — the ties that bind together the members of a family group. In Western thought, filiation is exclusively human, but in many Indigenous worldviews, relationships of this kind also exist between humans, animals and plants. This kind of outlook sees all living creatures as members of our extended family.

## Meditation

To meditate is to abstract ourselves from the outside world, to observe ourselves and to focus our thoughts on our inner lives. When facing difficult emotional situations — for example, when feeling sad or mourning a loss — a meditation space can help us take the time to listen to how we feel and pay tribute to those for whom we grieve. This is an important step toward living with loss and accepting that we need to mourn, which in fact is one way of showing our love and affection for whoever has gone from our lives.

## Mothering

Mothering is the act of taking care of a child, or more broadly of any living creature, as a mother would — which is to say, tenderly, empathetically and with great kindness. In the very broadest sense, mothering means caring for, and feeling responsible for, all of nature: not just our fellow humans, but also the Earth and the plants and animals who live here.

## Nursery

We usually use the term nursery to refer to a place dedicated to caring for and looking after very young children (babies and toddlers up to age three). In Quebec, the term “beluga nursery” came into use in 2014, when a group of citizens mobilized in Cacouna to protect an area of the river where belugas give birth to and nurture their calves.

## Reciprocity

An exchange or a form of dependency that is beneficial for all parties involved and entails mutual responsibility. The concept of reciprocity suggests that we should explore our relationship to the Earth, which is often based on consumption or extraction, and consider instead how we might start giving back.

## Sanctuary

In religion, sanctuary can refer to a sacred place, but the term is also used in ecology to describe a protected site that serves as a refuge for biodiversity. For example, a whale sanctuary exists in Iceland and another is planned for Nova Scotia. These provide safe havens for whales that were born into captivity. Certain historical monuments are also called shrines or sanctuaries — terms that, by extension, can be used to describe a place that is wholly dedicated to an individual, or (as in Maryse Goudreau’s case) a species.

## Sentinel Species

A sentinel species, also called ecosystem sentinel, is one whose particular sensitivities make it an early indicator of environmental disturbance to its ecosystem. Belugas are one such species, being particularly sensitive to the changes occurring in the northern marine ecosystem. Other such species include the deer, a sentinel for the spread of tick-borne diseases.



Rejouer la pouponnière  
2018

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