

Sniffing for Scat



Meet Eba the Conservation Canine

by Tracy Vonder Brink

Today my friend Eba is going to tell me about her work as a conservation canine.



Click: Hi, Eba! Conservation canine sure is hard to say. What does it mean?

Eba: We're dogs who work with scientists to help rare animals. My job is to sniff out orca whale scat. Other dogs find different scat smells.

Click: Scat? What's that?

Eba: It's a polite word for poop.

Click: Ew! Why would you want to find that?

Eba: The scientists I work with study the scat. You can tell a lot about animals from their scat.

Click: Like what?

Eba: How healthy they are, what they're eating, if a female is going to have a baby, and more.

Click: Why don't the scientists just study the whales? Wouldn't that be less, well . . . yucky?

Eba: They'd have to catch a whale first, which wouldn't be easy! Plus it would upset the whale. Finding scat lets us stay far away from the whales, so we don't bother them. We never want to do anything that might hurt the whales.

Click: Makes sense! How did you learn how to find scat?

Eba: My human taught me. She's a scientist named Dr. Deborah Giles. Everyone calls her Giles.



Eba helps scientists study the orcas in the waters near Washington, where she lives.



Eba and her human, Giles, make a great team.



When Eba leads the team to orca scat . . .

Click: She must be good at finding scat herself if she taught you.

Eba: Nope. Dogs can find scat much easier than people can and from much farther away. People can't breathe out and smell at the same time. Or sniff separately with each nostril to tell where a smell comes from. Dogs can. That's why the scientists need us!

Click: So how did Giles teach you?



. . . she gets to play tug!

Eba: First she let me smell some orca scat. Then right away she played tug with me. I LOVE to play tug! She did that until I got the idea that the scat smell meant TUG! Then she hid the scat in her yard. I was really good at finding it, and every time I did, we played tug!



Click: But orcas don't poop in backyards. They poop in the ocean.

Eba: Right! So next Giles took me on a boat and hid the scat in a bowl floating on the water. I couldn't run right up to the scat, but I could run to the side of the boat the smell was coming from.

Click: And when you did, I bet she played tug with you.

Eba: Exactly! I learned fast that on the boat it's my job to sniff for orca scat.

Click: Hmm, Giles knew where to find the bowl of scat because she hid it. How do you tell her where to find new scat you smell?

Eba: I go to the side of the boat where the smell is coming from and wag my tail and lick my lips. That's my way of saying, "Go this way! It's over here." Giles steers the boat that way, and I keep moving to tell her which way to go until we get right to the scat.

Come on. This way! Eba's tail is wagging. She smells orca scat!





Click: Then what happens?

Eba and the scientists work quickly to find and scoop the poop. If they take too long, the scat can sink.

Eba: A scientist on the boat uses a bucket on a long pole to scoop the poop out of the water. It gets put into tubes and stored in a freezer until we get back to land. And we play tug!

Click: How much scat can you find in a day?

Eba: The most we've found is 11 samples, but more often we find 3. Some days I don't find any. It just depends on whether the whales come around that day.



What a whale eats colors its poop. The scat in the tube Giles is holding came from a humpback whale that ate little shrimp-like animals.



Click: Do you ever bark at the whales? Or jump in and swim with them?

Eba: Never! I have an important job to do. I do love to swim, just not when I'm working.

Click: Where do you live when you're not working?

Eba: With Giles and her husband. They're my family.

Click: Does whale scat smell bad?

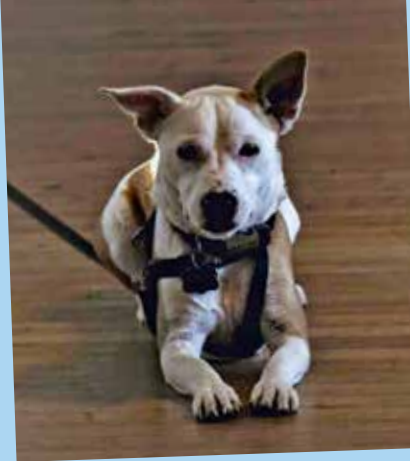
Eba: The orcas around here mostly eat fish. Their scat just smells fishy. Humpback whales eat more stuff. Their poop is really stinky!

Click: You can find humpback whale scat too?

Eba: I'm learning to. I'm also learning the smell of gray whale poop.

Click: You must really love your job!

Eba: I do. And helping animals. And Giles. And playing tug!



When she's not working, Eba likes to run and play in her yard.



Eba, thanks for talking to me.

