



# The Beluga: Snow White of the Arctic

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Last month, I wrote about a whale that, through a rare case of genetic mutation, had a white body. There is, however, a type of cetacean that naturally turns white when it reaches adulthood. This is the beluga, or the white whale.

The first time I became interested in belugas was many years ago, when I saw one at an aquarium. As I stood in front of a tank, one beluga headed toward me. It raised its body up straight and faced me directly. As I wondered whether it might be observing me, it started moving its head up and down, as if making little bows in my direction, and pursing its mouth. The sweet expression on its face instantly made me a beluga fan, and right then and there I wanted to see a beluga in the wild.

In June 2002, I traveled to Baffin Island in Canada to see the belugas that inhabit the cold waters of the Arctic. From fall to spring, the surface of the Lancaster Sound, in the northwestern part of the island, is covered with ice floes. When summer begins, cracks called leads form in this vast sheet of ice, and the belugas swim along these water channels.

Belugas spend the summer in the shallow bays and river mouths of Baffin Island. So until the ice starts to crack, they stop and wait at the edge of the floe, where the ice meets the sea. This is a perfect opportunity for seeing belugas.

What was particularly memorable was seeing the belugas in the water. The temperature of the water was minus 1 degree Celsius so that when I put on a dry suit and got into the freezing water, I could feel cold filtering through my skull. As I was floating on the surface of the water, trying to get my body used to the cold, one beluga swam directly below me and looked up at me. It swam away, and soon more than 30 belugas had come and gone, taking turns to look at me with great interest just like that beluga in the aquarium. I was so excited that my hands began to sweat.

On a different day, one beluga swam up right next to me, only to dart away. Again and again, it would come back, then dart away. From its size, I could tell that it was still young. One time I watched it, and waited for it to come back. Perhaps it felt a little wary, but it did not come near. So I feigned indifference and began swimming off in a different direction. A few seconds later, I

turned around quickly, and just as I had expected, the beluga was right behind me. When it saw me turn around suddenly, it swam off. We played "tag" in this way or a while.

I often wonder how I appreciated to the belugas. Unfortunately, I do not know what belugas think, but for me, there's nothing more enjoyable than trying to guess their thoughts from their expressions and their actions.

