



**CHAMPIONS  
OF THE  
WILD**

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# ST. LAWRENCE RIVER BELUGAS

ST. LAWRENCE RIVER  
BELUGAS

AS SEEN ON  
**DISCOVERY**  
AND  
**ANIMAL  
PLANET**



VHS

C9198 144

A NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA RELEASE

# ST. LAWRENCE RIVER BELUGAS



Most of beluga life remains a mystery to us. These small whales are at the surface only 15% of the time, spending the rest of their lives 10 to 300 metres (33 to 984 feet) underwater. They can stay down half an hour at a time, travel up to four kilometres (2.5 miles) on one breath, and, thanks to their incredibly developed sonar, surface at exactly the same spot – an essential skill for diving under ice floes. We don't know exactly how that sonar works, and neither do we understand beluga social structure very well.

Sailors used to call the beautiful white beluga whales of the Gulf of St. Lawrence “sea canaries” because of the high-pitched whistling sounds they make. Today, there's irony in the name. Like the canaries coal miners used to take down mine shafts, the belugas are warning us about the dangerous level of toxins in the environment we share with them.

Belugas have the misfortune of living in one of the world's most heavily polluted waterways. Despite some clean-up efforts in the St. Lawrence, Canada's heaviest industries still dump chemicals into the mouth of the waterway. Belugas suffer from pollutants such as mercury. In the womb, babies receive such contaminants from the placenta, and as newborns, toxins travel into their systems through their mothers' milk.

Activist and biologist Robert Michaud says the belugas offer us a precise picture of what our careless behaviour is doing to the environment: “Belugas live in the St. Lawrence 365 days a year. Their problems of contamination come from this one place.” Like the belugas, we can't simply pick up and leave our poisoned world.



Champion:  
**Robert Michaud**

## Pre-Viewing Questions

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1. Both the US and the Soviet navies studied belugas intensively during the Cold War. What might they have hoped to learn?
2. Locate the Gulf of St. Lawrence on a map. Why do you think this particular environment is so polluted? Why are belugas especially susceptible? What contaminants do you think might be harming them?

## Post-Viewing Questions

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1. The Canadian government's policy towards belugas through most of this century (using them as bombing practice; paying a bounty for their tails) seems incredibly misguided to us now. Are there other species we are currently treating as we once treated the beluga?
2. Biologists can obtain valuable data from belugas held in captivity. Does this justify capturing sociable marine mammals used to migrating over vast distances and isolating them?
3. Robert Michaud is a fan of whale-watching. Why? What are some of the positive and negative effects of this increasingly popular activity?

**Champions of the Wild** takes you around the globe with stories of remarkable endangered species and the dedicated champions determined to save them. Buy the whole collection!

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## **World Wide Web Sites**

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*Please note that addresses on the Web can change unexpectedly.*

A good beluga whale fact site from Sea World, Busch Gardens:

**[www.seaworld.org/beluga\\_whales/befirst.html](http://www.seaworld.org/beluga_whales/befirst.html)**

WhaleNet, a super resource for teachers and students sponsored by Wheelock College in Boston. Search under "beluga" for info on these mammals; you can also e-mail questions to a marine scientist:

**[whale.wheelock.edu](http://whale.wheelock.edu)**

## **Related National Film Board Productions**

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**Beluga Baby** (C0178 138): The birth and inexplicable death of a beluga in the Vancouver Aquarium.

**Beluga Days** (C0168 152): A film made in the days when beluga hunting was widespread and popular. Good as a discussion starter on the way things were and why they've changed.

**Cries from the Deep** (C0181 616): Jacques Cousteau explores the Grand Banks and observes its many endangered species, including belugas.

## **CHAMPIONS OF THE WILD COLLECTION**

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**SHARKS** (C9197 096): Champions Tim Calver & Dr. Sam Gruber.

**GORILLAS** (C9197 104): Champion Dr. Pascale Sicotte.

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**ST. LAWRENCE RIVER BELUGAS** (C9198 144): Champion Robert Michaud.

**NAZINGA GAME RESERVE** (C9198 145): Champion Clark Lungren.

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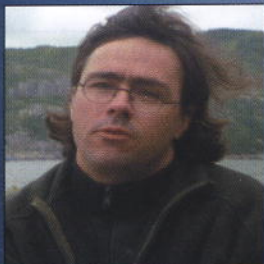
**CHIMPANZEES OF UGANDA** (C9198 149): Champion Colin Chapman.

**KENYAN WILDLIFE VET** (C9198 150): Champion Dr. Tom deMaar.





## ST. LAWRENCE RIVER BELUGAS



Their faces may look like they wear a permanent grin, but the snow-white beluga whales of the Gulf of St. Lawrence aren't smiling. They were 10,000 strong when the first Europeans arrived on the shores of North America, but a century of hunting and environmental poisoning has brought them to the brink of extinction.

Robert Michaud became passionate about belugas in 1991 after he fought hard to save the life of an orphaned newborn. The baby died, and Michaud's autopsy showed a startling level of toxins in its 10-day-old body.

Through his small, non-profit Group for Research and Education on Marine Mammals, Michaud identifies individual belugas, tries to learn more about their mysterious social structure and sonar abilities, and lobbies polluters to reduce emissions.

**St. Lawrence River Belugas** takes us out on the waters with Michaud, showing us rare footage of a live beluga birth and providing a sobering lesson on the dangers of over-pollution.

Endangered animals – and the champions who have dedicated their lives to saving them – feature in this spectacular series of half-hour videos! Filmed around the world, from the frozen fields of Canada's North to the jungles of Borneo, **Champions of the Wild** combines natural history with personal drama.

Director: **Christian Bruyère**

Producer: **Christian Bruyère**

Executive Producer: **Michael Chechik**

**25 minutes, 30 seconds**

Order number: **C9198 144**

**The Champions of the Wild Collection:** Series order number: **193C 9199 098**

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