

Green living

CONSERVATION

Humans' best friend also a conservation hero

Salt Spring author writes book about special canines

BY EMELIE PEACOCK
DRIFTWOOD STAFF

Isabelle Groc, a Salt Spring Island conservation writer, photographer and filmmaker, first met Alli when she was on assignment looking for the elusive animal known in Latin as *Rana pretiosa* — the precious frog.

One of Canada's most endangered amphibians, the Oregon spotted frog is very shy and good at hiding from humans. As Groc and a wildlife biologist trudged through the difficult terrain of a Fraser Valley wetland, the only place *Rana pretiosa* remains, she became intrigued and a bit concerned that an Australian cattle dog had joined their search.

"To my great surprise, Alli very quickly found a frog hiding in one of those wetland tunnels. I was amazed by her ability to move, her agility and her confidence and her enthusiasm," Groc said.

What would have taken humans countless hours was accomplished very quickly by a dog trained on the scent of a tiny frog.

Meeting Alli led Groc on an adventure across the world, to meet the dogs and their human partners who are actively involved in the conservation of species at risk. The result is her book *Conservation Canines*, published by Orca Wild and available at Salt Spring Books.

Their unique olfactory abilities allow dogs to work alongside scientists to detect rare endangered species and plants, the traces of these animals in their scat or caterpillar larvae as well as track down invasive species. With human-caused climate change speeding up the extinction of species, conservation canines save scientists and volunteers precious time and may be the only way



PHOTO BY ISABELLE GROC

Through the work of conservation canine Dio, researchers of the southern resident orca population were able to find out that female orcas were nutritionally stressed and not carrying their calves to term.

to even find some species.

"We need science, we need understanding of how the species live with their habitat they utilize, where they are, the threats they're facing, so we can protect their habitat," said Groc. "Habitat loss and destruction is the primary reason why all these species are on the brink of extinction, really, with climate change adding to . . . the pressures of habitat destruction."

Closer to home and in a most unusual task, Colette Yee and con-

servation canine Dio have helped discover why females of the endangered southern resident killer whale population are not giving birth. Standing on the bow of a boat, Dio is able to detect up to one nautical mile away and point out where the small and quick-sinking orca scat, or poop, is. Analyzing this scat, researchers have found that female orcas were becoming pregnant yet due to being stressed nutritionally they were not carrying their pregnancies to term. These

findings showed that survival for the 79 remaining orcas rests on the survival of Chinook salmon.

Conservation canines also play a role in complex issues such as wildlife trafficking. In port environments where rows and rows of shipping containers are stacked high, it would be impossible for humans to detect items like shark fins, elephant ivory or rhino horns.

"The dogs, if they train on these scents, they have this power of the nose to help make a difference," Groc said. "It's quite extraordinary."

Dogs also help humans better coexist with wild animals. When canines guard livestock, like the Kangal shepherd dog Spots guarding against cheetahs in Namibia, their success reduces humans' perceived need to kill wildlife that threaten their livelihood.

With her exploration of these unique canines, Groc wants to instill hope, especially among young people to take action where they can. She quoted Dr. Jane Goodall, legendary conservationist and primatologist, who said "Each one of us makes a difference every day. We have a choice as to what that difference will be."

It's not too late, Groc added, as nature has an amazing capacity to regenerate. In her book *Sea Otters: A Survival Story*, she tells the story of a species 99 per cent decimated due to hunting. Yet with the help of humans, sea otters are recovering and in turn are making a positive impact on their ecosystem.

"It's important to have these species around because nature helps us as well with combatting climate change, so if we can help nature . . . we're in good shape," she said.

The conservation canines' own stories of salvation are also incredibly hopeful. What makes a dog perfect for this work, including "unlimited energy, [needing] lots of exercise and [being] obsessed with playing ball," Groc writes, is



PHOTO BY ISABELLE GROC

Conservation canine Alli sniffing out the Oregon spotted frog with her human partner Heath Smith, in the knee-deep mud of a Fraser Valley wetland.

also what often leads them to be surrendered to shelters by previous owners. They are adopted by organizations who train them and put them to work.

It didn't take Groc long to fall in love with Alli and all the conservation canines she met on her travels as she watched them work with their human counterparts, witnessing their bonds and communication. She hopes the book can inspire people to look at their own pets with renewed "curiosity and compassion," inviting them to see the world through the dog's point of view.

Groc has focused her life and career on endangered species, wildlife conservation, and how humans and the natural world interact. She won the 2019 Wildscreen Panda Impact award, the equivalent of an Academy Award for wildlife films, for *Toad People*, which charts the yearly and ever more dangerous migration path of the western toad.

Her next project is a documentary about coastal wolves and their interaction with humans.

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