

Kaikōura sea tragedy: How a perfect day became a terrible nightmare (Leask, A., 2022)



By Anna Leask

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NZ Herald reporter Katie Harris provides the latest in Kaikōura boating tragedy from Goose Bay. Video / NZ Herald ...

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As the sun rose, streaking the dawn sky in dramatic pinks and purples, Saturday morning in Kaikōura was perfect.

Within hours that early morning perfection had become the scene of a nightmare.

P. Peter Hockley, Susan Cade, Cathye Haddock, Diana Stewart and Maureen Pierre were dead and six others were desperately trying to stay alive after a whale flipped a boat chartered for a photography expedition off the Kaikōura coast.

It should have been an idyllic day on the water for the keen photographers - all members of the Nature Photography Society of New Zealand.

Between the bird life, sea creatures and the expanse of views from the snow-capped alps to the rolling coastal landscape they would have been spoiled with views.

But by 10am one of New Zealand's worst modern maritime tragedies was unfolding.

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A source told the Herald that a sperm whale breached directly underneath the Fish Kaikoura boat, capsizing the vessel at Goose Bay.

P. Five of the photographers and the skipper were hurled overboard into the cold sea. The others were trapped under the upturned hull.

Somehow those in the water managed to scramble on top of the stricken vessel, which began to drift slowly towards the shore on the incoming tide, helped by gentle swells.

5th ... made a mayday call and help soon converged.

Kaikōura helicopter pilot Daniel Stevenson was above the scene in just four minutes.

A nearby boat took the five survivors onboard and whisked them to South Bay less than 20 minutes away.

The Kaikōura Coastguard arrived soon after and attempts were made to get under the vessel and try to save those still in the water.

Stevenson dashed north to Kaikōura and collected a diver to help.

When they got back to Goose Bay the diver jumped straight from the hovering chopper into the ocean and managed to get under the upturned boat - but it was too late to save those trapped below.

Before

The 10 photographers had travelled from Christchurch and Wellington for a three-day jaunt in and around Kaikōura.

The trip had been planned for months and coincided with a local 48-hour photography exhibition.

Among the photographic missions planned for the weekend - and undoubtedly a highlight for the group - was a "birding trip" with Fish Kaikōura Charters.

The three-hour trip cost \$80 per person and kicked off at South Bay, the town's main marina.

The skipper ran through the usual safety briefing with the group and a source said each person was issued a lifejacket.

About 9am, armed with cameras and keen eyes, they set off on the 8.5m aluminium boat.

During

The skipper navigated from South Bay down the coastline to Goose Bay near the well-known twin road tunnels on State Highway 1.

On a normal day, the sea is rough here but on Saturday the water was said to be unusually flat and calm - almost glassy, with no real swell and not a breath of wind.

After an hour at Goose Bay the skipper steered the boat for the popular tourist spot Barneys Rock.

Less than 100m from the shore, the rock is often covered with birds and is known for seals.

The Herald has learned that as the charter boat motored slowly north it was likely on the edge of a deep trench - a place well known for whales because of its 3km drop.

Suddenly, a sperm whale came up directly beneath the boat.

All hell broke loose.

The whale

Kevin Anderson, a retiree who lives at Goose Bay, later spoke of seeing the offending whale within "two or three hundred yards" of the boat.

As the dramatic rescue began to unfold, the Anderson spotted the mammal heading north, diving under the water near the vessel.

He could see it all clearly, he said, because the ocean was dead calm.

"We were watching the television and because we had the glare, I had the blinds down," he explained.

"And when we'd finished watching we put the blinds up and there's this boat upside down - there were five or six people clinging to the top of it."

Anderson recounted seeing a white boat heading towards the upturned vessel and picking up all but one of the people.

Then the Coastguard arrived and the remaining man on the boat indicated to them with his hands that four or five people were still under the boat.

"We could see that clearly from here we had the telescope clearly on it," he said.

"We were just in shock, we just sat here and just watched the whole thing. [There was] nothing we could do, we had all the emergency services down there."

Anderson and his wife have lived at Goose Bay for two decades.

He said they only see whales near their home "once or twice" a year, and they normally do not go close to boats.

"[It's a] terrible, terrible, terrible tragedy that's just out of the blue," he said.

"There's nothing you can do."

The Department of Conservation would later confirm it had not received any reports of injured whales near Kaikōura or the surrounding area.

It said there had been no other incidents or encounters reported between boats and whales.

After

News of the fatalities began to filter through and the families of those on board were desperate for news.

Had their mother, father, sister, brother, friend, colleague made it to shore?

It must have been agonising.

Nature Photography Society of New Zealand vice president Richard Hensby issued a statement on the group's Facebook page within hours, confirming its members were involved.

He said the society was "saddened by the tragic loss at sea" but would not comment further.

"Investigations are continuing by Maritime NZ as to what caused the vessel to capsize and it is not appropriate for the society to comment further," he said.

"In the meantime, our thoughts are with the families of those members of the society who have lost their lives."

The sad list of names began to emerge, and those who knew and loved the victims paid tribute.

Peter Simpson was "obviously very upset" when he spoke to the AM Show about his wife Cathye Haddock on Monday morning.

"I feel like I've been run over by a truck but there are lots of people around, family, Cathye's family, my family, lots and lots of friends," he said.

"I was away on a motorcycle trip with another friend... and I found out later in the afternoon when I turned on my phone.

"That's when I put two and two together, when I saw the news report that something was wrong.

"So I made efforts to contact the police and was able to get more information that way."

Simpson said Haddock loved the outdoors and had only recently joined the society.

She also loved people.

"She was very much a people person. I could accuse her of having too many friends if there is such a thing to have," he said.

"She just had time for everybody and managed to fit everybody into her world. I just don't know how she did it."

Haddock was on the trip with her long-time friend Susan Cade, who was remembered as a keen kayaker, photographer and dancer.

"I am still in shock. I can't believe it," said Cade's dance teacher Jo Matsis.

"She went so soon.

"Just last week, she was here at the lesson and she told us next week she's going on her bird-watching trip with the photography club."

Matsis said Cade was a "much loved" community member in Lower Hutt and was also the president of Hutt Valley Community Dance.

Cade often combined her love of photography with kayaking expeditions.

Wellington Sea Kayak Network (WSKN) co-chairwoman Celia Wade-Brown said Cade was experienced and safety-conscious.

"She was a calm person with a good sense of humour and a great deal of knowledge she was very willing to share," she said.

Incredible, amazing parents lost

Christchurch man Peter Hockley was also named on Monday, his daughter speaking to Stuff.

She said her "amazing" father was an "incredible" photographer.

"It was his life," she said of his passion for taking images.

Hockley was in the cabin when the boat capsized.

"He was not a risk-taker at all," she said.

He was also described as a "lovely kind" man by a residents' association he had donated photographs to for a fundraiser.

"He was a very quiet man...very humble," said the spokesman.

"It's so sad for us."

A funeral notice said he died "tragically, doing what he loved".

It said he was a devoted, and loving husband and soulmate; a cherished dad, father-in-law and special Grandpop.

He was also a loved brother, brother-in-law and son.

"Peter was a much-loved uncle, extended family member, and friend of many," the family said.

"A true lover of nature."

Diana Stewart was the fourth of the victims to be named publicly.

Her son Fletcher posted a photo on Facebook revealing that she had sent it to him just hours before she died.

The dramatic skyscape was taken in the early morning, depicting the beauty and promise of the day ahead.

Little did anyone know when Stewart sent it that it would be one of her last photographs.

Fletcher Stewart later shared his memories of his mother with the Herald.

"My mum is the most wonderful mum, grandma, daughter, sister, aunty and friend," he said.

"Diana was a very talented photographer and enjoyed travelling to remote parts of New Zealand to photograph what would always turn out to be unique pictures of landscapes and wildlife.

"Mum made many close friends through their shared passion; they remember her kindness and generosity.

"She always helped new photographers who were just starting out, and was always there with guidance and advice."

Fletcher Stewart said the Kaikoura trip was one of the many his mother had made with the society "all over the country".

On the trip she hoped to capture albatrosses which was "something she had wanted to do for years".

"She wasn't just a talented photographer, her talents spread to painting, handicraft and fashion," her only son said.

"There are a lot of small children - including her precious granddaughter and friends - who have benefited from these talents; she has designed and knitted entire wardrobes for them."

Stewart would be remembered most for "her kindness, her caring and generosity", said her son.

"She would go out of her way to help anyone in any way they needed.

"Her number one priority was family and was always there when we needed her."

Fletcher Stewart said he and his family would "take comfort" from the fact his mother "was doing something she loved, with good friends" when she died.

"Our thoughts and love are also with the families of the other victims and, of course, to those who survived," he said.

"We also want to thank all those involved in the recovery and rescue."

Stewart would also be remembered as a champion swimmer.

Her family told the Herald that "in her youth" Stewart swam butterfly to national level under coach Duncan Laing.

She then competed nationally and internationally up to masters level as a surf lifesaver.

Fletcher Stewart, like the others who paid tribute, did not want to speculate on the cause of the capsizing.

"We'll leave that to the maritime authority in charge of the investigation," he said.

The last victim to be named was Maureen Pierre, of Christchurch.

Pierre was a founding member of the society and had worked for many years as a teacher at Isleworth School in Bishopdale.

The investigation

Multiple investigations are under way into the tragedy and answers could be months if not years away.

The police and Coroner will finalise reports on what happened as well as the Transport Accident Investigation Commission.

TAIC opens an inquiry when it believes the circumstances of an accident or incident have - or are likely to have - significant implications for transport safety, or when the inquiry may allow it to make findings or recommendations to improve transport safety.

TAIC chief investigator Naveen Kozhuppalalam said two investigators had been assigned to "secure evidence, talk to witnesses, examine any electronic evidence available and look at the circumstances" of the tragedy.

Because of the investigations, the owners of the charter boat were reluctant to speak in depth about what had happened.

Mark and Sharlene Ealam own Fish Kaikoura and are well known in the local charter and tourism realm.

He has more than 12 years' experience fishing in the Kaikoura area, along with a further five years of commercial fishing off the Canterbury coast.

A spokesperson for the pair said they were not yet ready to open up about the "terrible tragedy".

They issued a brief statement to the Herald this week.

"We're devastated," wrote Sharlene Ealam.

"We're beyond words.

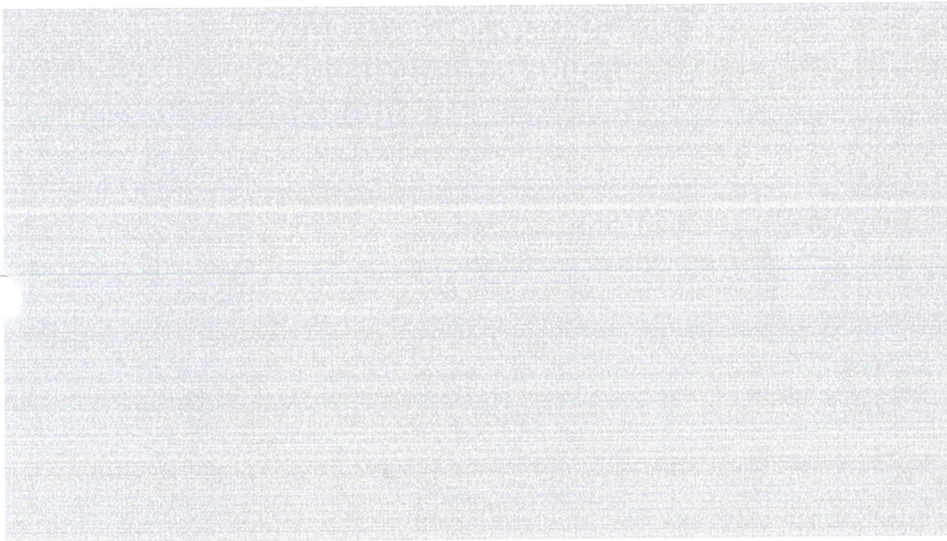
"What has happened is an unprecedented tragedy and our thoughts and our prayers and our love is with the families and friends of the deceased.

She thanked family, friends and the Kaikōura community for supporting her and her husband "so we can get through our grief with what's happened".

"All of us are just devastated and we are just thinking of the deceased family and friends and a number have reached out to us," she explained.

"We're just trying to get through this time."

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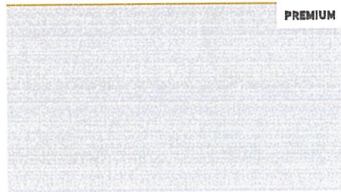
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