

## Scotland's Selkies: Bridging the Gap

By: Kathryn Lang

*"...all things are one thing and one thing is all things—plankton, a shimmering phosphorescence on the sea and the spinning planets and an expanding universe, all bound together by the elastic string of time. It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool again."*

- John Steinbeck. *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*

Lying just north of the Scottish mainland, the Orkney Islands endure some of the most powerful tides in the world, produced as two moody giants – the North Atlantic and the North Sea – converge. Harsh as they may be, these waves create fruitful homes for the marine species that have come to define these remote Northern Isles. One such creature is the seal, whose lounging form covers these shores. With their soulful eyes and gregarious nature, these animals are easily anthropomorphized, revealing the ways in which “human” and “environmental” landscapes effortlessly merge. Scotland’s Highlands and Islands abound with tales of selkies, mystical sea creatures who on rare occasion can shed their usual sealskin and briefly enjoy a human form. Said to be irresistible, these marine visitors entice humans, though these relationships are ill-fated and a selkie ultimately longs to return to the ocean. The most well-known story is that of the Great Silkie of Sule Skerry, in which a human woman bears a son with a selkie. Called home to the waves, the creature then departs with the boy, despite foreseeing that the child’s mother will one day marry a hunter destined to kill selkie and son alike.



© Kathryn Lang

Yet, injury to a selkie has tragic consequences. It signifies the death of a creature that someone on land – a spouse, a mother, a child – has come to love. Those who hunt these seals are tormented by misfortune and feelings of regret, shame, and sorrow, while those who are fortuitous enough to right their wrong and heal the afflicted selkie swear to never harm another. If we acknowledge folk tales as capable of influencing perceptions of the natural world, then these legends may have inspired a sense of respect towards these marine mammals that acknowledges their capacity for pain, emotion, and social connections. A selkie’s ability to transform between bodies and to form relationships with people on land is the ultimate challenge to a human-nature dichotomy. Indeed, some tales even suggest that selkies are the physical manifestation of the souls of people drowned at sea. These legends can be viewed within the realm of ecosophical storytelling, designed to “change humans’ relational separation from other life forms.” While accepted today as fanciful stories, they nonetheless help bridge the persistent and equally fictional gap between humans and surrounding nature.

**Sources:**

- Barbara Ker Wilson. *Fairy Tales from Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Heli Aaltonen. “Selkie stories as an example of ecosophical storytelling,” in *Key Concepts in Theatre/Drama Education*, ed. Shifra Schonmann (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011).
- R. MacDonald Robertson. *Selected Highland Folk Tales*, ed. Jeremy Bruce-Watt (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1961).