

Putin Fires Darts at Gray Whale from Crossbow

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin leveling an arbalest as he rides on a rubber boat in Olga Harbor off the Kamchatka peninsula during a scientific expedition to study gray whales on Wednesday. **Alexei Druzhinin**

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin fired darts from a crossbow at a gray whale off the Pacific coast on Wednesday in the latest in a series of man-versus-nature stunts designed to cultivate the image of a macho leader.

Putin held his balance in a rubber boat that was being tossed around in choppy waters off the Kamchatka Peninsula, and eventually hit the whale with a special arrow designed to collect skin samples.

"I hit it on the fourth try!" a beaming Putin, kitted out in a black-and-orange waterproof suit and a black beanie, yelled to a camera crew from the boat.

A biologist with him displayed the skin sample and said it would allow experts to determine where the whale came from.

When the boat skidded onto the beach, a buoyant Putin hopped off and made a beeline for waiting reporters. Clearly in his element, Putin replied jovially to a question as to whether the endeavor was dangerous.

"Living in general is dangerous," he quipped. Asked why he got involved, he simply said: "Because I like it. I love the nature."

But nature may be under threat by a seismic survey being conducted nearby by Russia's top oil company, Rosneft. The International Fund for Animal Welfare released a statement on Wednesday condemning the two-month, pre-drilling survey as potentially damaging to the gray whales. In the course of exploration, oil companies use seismic air guns and other sources to produce pulses of acoustic energy through the water. Scientists say this is damaging to much marine life, and the timing is bad for the whales, which are currently in a narrow feeding window to store fat for the entire year.

During his eight years as president and during the past two as prime minister, Putin has learned to use television to cultivate the image of a rugged leader beloved by the Russian people.

His mastery of the medium has been on full display in recent weeks as he has taken command of efforts to extinguish wildfires that swept across much of western Russia and to help the thousands of people who lost their homes.

The message has been that it is Putin, rather than his junior co-leader President Dmitry Medvedev, who is equipped to look after Russia, its people and environment. Putin has been canny about his plans to run in the 2012 presidential election, but has excluded running against Medvedev, saying the two will come to an agreement. Whatever the decision, his action-man lifestyle shows that he is not about to recede from public view.

He has been photographed fishing bare-chested in the Altai republic, and was shown on television diving into an icy river and swimming the butterfly stroke.

In April, he attached a satellite-tracking collar onto a tranquilized polar bear. He also has shot a Siberian tiger with a tranquilizer gun and released leopards into a wildlife sanctuary.

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