

Oceanpunk: Neo-Cetaceans

They say the sea is cold, but the sea contains the hottest blood of all, and the wildest, the most urgent. - D. H. Lawrence

Prologue

The Great Dreamer was dying.

The ferals swam around him, nudging at the great bulk of his body floating on the surface of water. They were singing to him, but I only understood the upper theme. It was a dirge of praise and melancholy, with glyphs for the dark emptiness of the deep waters rising to the surface of the melody. The counterpoint was the flickering image of a mass of squid moving through the upper water, rays of sunlight silhouetting them against the surface.

There was some kind of religious undertone to the song, but I couldn't make it out. Not that praying to any kind of God was going to save the Dreamer. The rogue whaler we'd been searching for had lanced him with an explosive harpoon last night. They'd bolted when the foils appeared on the horizon, but it was just a matter of time till we chased them down. There would be a reckoning then.

I could taste the tang of the blood flowing from the crater in the flesh of his back.

The radio crackled to life. "Lander? Any luck?"

"Only the bad kind." A short burst from the suit's pulse jets took me to the surface for a closer look at the Dreamer's wound. "The harpoon went deep. It missed the major arteries, but he's leaking blood by the gallon. It's pooling around the lungs and he's starting to have trouble breathing."

"I can have a ship there in twenty minutes."

I sent a quick burst at the heart. The massive organ was pumping weakly now, fighting a losing battle to keep blood moving through the body.

"Don't bother. I'm heading in."

"Understood." I could sense the resignation in his voice.

The ferals swam around the head of the Great Dreamer, still singing their unfathomable song. The water was suddenly filled with a deep rumbling note, like an immense chorus of voices perfectly matched in tone and timbre. I could feel the water around me vibrating, could feel my own body pulsing with it's power. The Dreamer had added his voice to the song. I closed my eyes and drifted in the water, letting it wash over me. I could pick up the glyph of a great body gliding through the water surrounded by a theme of contentment and peace.

I floated there for close to an hour before the song came to an end. When it was done the ferals swirled into formation and swam away to the east, leaving a mountain of dead meat drifting with the currents. The scavengers would strip it clean before it had a chance to sink into the depths.

I triggered the jets and set a course for the chase foils. There was work to be done.

History

Neo-cetaceans are the product of research programs dating back to the late twentieth century. Both the old United States and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics recognized the usefulness of marine mammals for underwater operations and established covert training programs to exploit their potential. The results were encouraging, with exceptional successes in the fields of mine detection, subsurface reconnaissance, and marine salvage.

As time passed both countries moved away from using animals captured in the wild and established captive breeding programs, selectively mating animals that exhibited high intelligence and possessed a stable temperament. Outside the military labs academics endlessly debated the existence and nature of cetacean intelligence. Inside, scientists were slowly shaping whatever intelligence the animals had into something more to their liking.

Development rapidly accelerated when genetic engineering techniques became available. Selective modification of genes controlling brain structure, and the addition of human genetic material, became the accepted procedure for reaching the goal of full sentience. The results were impressive, but came at a price. The need to quickly produce successive generations of ever more "perfected" test subjects required the use of artificial wombs to raise hundreds of embryos for each round of testing. Juvenile animals that met the development targets contributed DNA to produce succeeding generations. The ones that didn't were killed and dissected to determine what went wrong.

The methods may have been brutal, but they did generate results. On June 11, 2024, after decades of breeding and research, a dolphin scored within human norms on an intelligence test for the first time.

Skill Usage

Neo-cetaceans make skill checks like human characters, but there may be modifiers or limitations applied to the use of certain skills. These limitations come from the unique nature of neo-cetaceans as creatures of the ocean with minds that are similar, but far from identical, to humans. In many cases language is a significant additional barrier. Skills affected by racial factors are described below in the order they appear in the main rulebook. Those not specifically mentioned can be assumed to operate normally.

Authority- Neo-cetaceans are most often found serving as law enforcement officers in the marine divisions of coastal city police forces and the Seabed Authority. The skill operates normally, but there may be negative modifiers when dealing with humans from cultures that view neo's as nothing more than trained animals.

Charismatic Leadership- When dealing with humans this skill operates at half level. Even the best translator programs have trouble with the nuances of cetacean speech. At the referee's discretion improvement points can be used to create a sub-skill specifically dealing with humans, reflecting a conscious effort to emulate their mindset.

Combat Sense- The neo-cetacean version of this skill focuses on being aware of the surroundings underwater. Negative modifiers apply for use on dry land.

Family- This skill and it's various incarnations can apply to the neo's pod or adopted groups.

Personal Grooming- Useless when dealing with neo's or humans.

Wardrobe and Style- Again, a useless skill. Both neo's and humans find the idea of clothing on a dolphin or orca ridiculous.

Swimming- All neo-cetaceans have level 10 in this skill.

Interrogation- Works normally on other neo-cetaceans, but referees have to make a judgment call when used on humans. The language barrier can make it extremely difficult for a neo to effectively interrogate a human. On the other hand, if they can use their sonar during the questioning they can notice physiological changes, like muscular contractions

and increased heart and breathing rates, that indicate dishonesty.

Oratory- Another species specific skill that operates at half level when used with humans. A human specific sub-skill can be developed separately as with Charismatic Leadership.

Streetwise- Used normally, but there may be negative modifiers when working with humans unfamiliar with neos.

Human Perception- Can be used normally, but keep in mind the X2 Improvement Point multiplier.

Seduction- Yeah, we've all heard the stories, but it just doesn't work like that. This skill only works on members of the same species. Both the humans and neos in those videos were being paid a pretty penny for their "work". You pervert.

Persuasion & Fast Talk- Negative modifiers may apply when dealing with humans.

Hide/Evade- Applies specifically to the underwater environment. Includes losing tails using sight or sonar.

Know Language- Neos can learn to understand both written and spoken forms of human languages, but it isn't easy. Speaking any human language requires the use of a translator program.

Shadow/Track- Not very useful.

Wilderness Survival- Operates normally, but applies only to marine conditions.

Archery- Referees may interpret this to apply to spearguns mounted on glovesets.

Athletics- For neo-cetaceans this skill applies to feats in the water like leaping and acrobatics.

Brawling- Functions normally, but applies to underwater combat using snout rams, tail slaps, and biting.

Dodge and Escape- Underwater use only.

Driving- Requires a neural processor and Vehicle link.

Fencing- May be usable by neos using exoskeletons on dry land, but useless underwater.

Handgun- Same as Fencing.

Heavy Weapons- Used to control weaponry mounted on glovesets or body armor like torp guns, torpedoes, and grenades. Applies to weapons mounted on surface exoskeletons as well.

Martial Arts- Only used by neos in exoskeletons, but several techniques using the principles of human martial arts in underwater combat are in development.

Melee- Used with body mounted blades underwater.

Motorcycle- A lot of people would pay good money to see a neo riding a motorcycle, but it ain't gonna happen anytime soon.

Operate Heavy Machinery- Requires the use of a neural processor and Machine/Tech link.

Piloting-Requires a neural processor and Vehicle link.

Rifle- May be used by neos in exoskeletons.

Stealth- Again, a skill specifically for use underwater that involves using terrain features and environmental conditions to move while hidden.

Submachinegun-

May be used by neos in exoskeletons.

Disguise-It's pretty tough to fool creatures that can "see" through flesh. Assuming the identity of another neo-cetacean is possible when dealing with humans, since most of them can't tell neos apart.

Character Generation

Neo-cetacean characters are generated using a modified version of the standard rules. Some statistics are adjusted upwards or downwards while others, primarily Attractiveness and Empathy, are interpreted differently when used between races.

Statistics

Character points are assigned to statistics as normal, then modified based on the race of the character. All neo-cetaceans derived primarily from dolphin stock are treated as neo-dolphins.

Neo-cetaceans derived from the larger toothed whales, orcas, belugas, and pilots, are treated as neo-orcas. Neo-dolphin characters receive + 1 to Body, -1 to Cool, and -1 to Technical Ability. Their large size and muscle mass makes them tougher and stronger than humans, but their minds have difficulty dealing with stress and the technical details of human devices.

Neo-orcas get +3 to Body, -2 to Cool, -1 to Technical Ability, and -1 to Empathy. Physically they're some of the most powerful creatures on the planet, capable of incredible feats of strength and endurance. Mentally, some work still needs to be done. Orcas have the same difficulties with stress and technology as dolphins, but stress induced reactions are more common. They also have problems viewing other creatures as anything but prey, leading to the lowered Empathy rating.

Skills

Neo-cetaceans automatically receive Swimming 10 and Wilderness Survival (Marine) 2 for free. Other skills can be purchased normally, but several have increased Improvement Point multipliers. These include:

Human Perception-

IP multiplier of X2. Interpreting the body language and moods of another species is difficult, but it can be done.

Know Language-

Languages without an Improvement Point multiplier have a multiplier of X2. Languages with an existing multiplier have it increased by +1 (i.e. X2 becomes X3).