



CALIFORNIA GRAY WHALE COALITION

PROTECTING THE MOST ANCIENT BALEEN WHALE ALIVE TODAY

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THIS YEAR'S MIGRATION SEASON PICKS UP BUT...

The good news is that Gray Whale numbers are up this season, although it does appear to be something of an unusual migration.

It started late and although there's been an increase in numbers, the increase is not in the order of the peak population figures, nor can we draw any significant conclusions.

Latest news from Baja Lagunas also indicates a higher number of cows and calves which is good news but until such time as we have at least four or five seasons of increasing numbers both population wise and cow/calf wise, the current status of the Gray Whales remains an issue of concern.

Gray Whales have sustained amazing fluctuations of their population over time. One of our key scientists was commissioned to do an heuristic model some years ago, a model which would give us some idea of the major issues impacting the population.

What the model did indicate was a population which moved in synchronicity with the weather patterns. In El Nino years, the population contracted, in La Nina years, the population moved upwards. These movements should, of course, be reflected in the management of the species.

In the years when the population is decreasing, there should be no killing. Given the increasing number of major threats to the whales, it's vital that management reflects the threats and the changes in climate, ensuring that in bad years, the whales are completely protected from any slaughter.

These fluctuations are part and parcel of managing any wildlife species. There's no constant in nature and one of the major problems we face in protecting cetaceans and terrestrial species is the fact that agency management does not take into account these natural fluctuations. If they did, then a lot more research, time and effort would need to be allocated.



Photos courtesy of James Dorsey

But .. and this is the big but, until we have better long term data indicating a population that's continuing to grow, the Coalition views this season objectively. We're grateful that our whale watching member organizations are having a good economic season as last year was pretty tough. In these increasingly difficult economic times, it's important that the whale watching industry and the local business and communities who rely on Gray Whale tourism are doing okay.

It's important to remember that when Gray Whale numbers were way down (as they have been in the last four seasons) no action was taken. Until such time as the Coalition sees the numbers increase over at least four or five seasons, we will remain focused on the major threats and increased protection under existing laws.

More Good News

The scientific petition which the Coalition submitted to National Marine & Fisheries Agency (NMFS) to have the Gray Whales upgraded to depleted status under the Marine Mammal Protection Act was denied. It was no surprise.

However, the number of responses in support of the petition was amazing, with more than 1,400. Some of the in-depth comments from the scientific community were particularly helpful.

The Marine Mammal Commission submitted extensive comments which supported the concern of the Coalition but did not recommend a status review by NMFS but instead, suggested that a review be tacked on to major marine mammal conferences which will be held some time this year. The Coalition has been in touch with the Executive Director of the Marine Mammal Commission who has reported that as a result of the depleted petition, the California Gray Whale is well and truly on the agenda of NMFS headquarters.

The Coalition has raised the profile of the Gray Whale and we will be keeping in touch with the Commission as more research and information becomes available.

As well, we will soon have a decision from the lawyers as to whether we can go ahead with a lawsuit over the decision by NMFS to deny the petition.

NASTY INCIDENT AT SAN DIEGO

Captain Bill Reese sent out a message to alert whale watching boats and others to a situation which is becoming increasingly common.



Photos courtesy of James Dorsey

“ Saturday Jan 22, 2011, at 1515 , a small pleasure sailboat 38 ft. ran over a small gray whale calf in the vicinity of MV Adventure Hornblower, (Capt. Bill Reese), MV Marriotta,(Capt. Rick McPherson), and MV Producer (Capt. Frank Brenha). Many guests witnessed the incident. The sailboat's name was "Playtime", hailing port Coronado.

They were aggressive approaching this whale calf and drove right into it. The whale calf never surfaced again. Also the mother disappeared as well. The true fate of the calf is unknown at this time. The boat "producer" contacted SV Playtime on VHF #16. The sailboat admitted they had a collision, but said the whale ran into them. The sailboat ran back to shore as fast as they could, and never answered the radio again. Several guests aboard Marriotta have very good video of this incident.

I contacted the US Coast Guard first by radio and filed a report, and later in the day by land line with Sector San Diego. I spoke with USCG Lt. Cmdr. Jordan. He has all of the pertinent information. He was extremely grateful for our full co operation. He said it will be easy for them to identify the boat.

This year off of San Diego we all have been plagued with many weekend boaters that have been harassing, and intimidating these whales. I have personally "talked" with the boaters either over the radio or by the Loud Hailer on board my vessel. The understanding of the way for a boater to encounter these whales needs to be learned.”

The Coalition took up the complaint with National Marine & Fisheries who have responsibility to enforce the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Unfortunately, no one managed to get the boat's licence number and apparently, it was in Mexican waters when the incident occurred.

But the increasing number of private boats harassing whales is becoming a major problem. The Coalition believes that NMFS needs to ensure they have boats out in the season in places like San Diego where there is so much boat traffic. The lack of enforcement is a worry.

The Coalition is deeply grateful to the many responsible whale watching captains who are not only extremely responsible in their operations but also take the time to report harassment.

COALITION WILL VISIT SAN IGNACIO

Two representatives of the Coalition will go to San Ignacio Laguna in March to check out the status of Gray Whales.

Last year, the number of cows and calves was very low. In fact it was probably one of the worst years ever recorded. So far, the news we're getting is that numbers are thankfully much improved.

As we always try to go at the peak time for cows and calves, we should get a better idea of how the population is faring.

As always, we'll be meeting with the Mexican fishermen who run many of the camps at San Ignacio, although sadly many, if not most, of the camps there are now sold to American interests.

GOOD THINGS HAPPENING BEHIND THE SCENES

The Coalition is busy planning the next major step in the campaign to ensure the highest level of legal protection for the Gray Whales. We'll provide all the details as soon as the plan is cooked!

Sue Arnold CEO California Gray Whale Coalition.

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