



## CALIFORNIA GRAY WHALE COALITION

### PROTECTING THE MOST ANCIENT BALEEN WHALE ALIVE TODAY

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# GRAY WHALE NUMBERS UP BUT...

**Two California Gray Coalition staff flew to San Ignacio in early March to check out the cow calf numbers and to see if there has been an improvement since last year's disastrously low numbers.**



Photos courtesy of James Dorsey

Two California Gray Coalition staff flew to San Ignacio in early March to check out the cow calf numbers and to see if there has been an improvement since last year's disastrously low numbers.

It was a great relief to see cows and calves had increased significantly, all looking in good condition.

After 12 years of visiting San Ignacio at the so-called peak of the season, we had the sense we were looking at younger mothers. Many of the cows had few barnacles and most of the ones we saw were not the great big Mama cows we've seen in past years.

At Guerrero Negro, numbers are also up with many cows and calves. Although some of the tourist operators claimed the season to

be "the best in the last 15 years", our calculations and past records did not substantiate this claim.

So we will see what happens next season and keep fingers crossed that the numbers will continue to increase or that a sustained stability will be the scenario. Unfortunately, the increase in calves will mean more tucker for transient orcas to munch on as the whales make their long migration back to the icy waters of the Bering and Chukchi Sea. The Coalition's scientific advisors have expressed caution in celebrating too soon, pointing to the fact that the heavy predation of calves and juveniles may take out any decent increase.

As well, the Coalition takes note of the caution expressed by one of our advisors that the kinds of extremes in population numbers we have seen over the past few years can be an indication of problems.

For example, the increase this season may be as a result of an age class coming into oestrus, survivors of the 1999/2000 crash. Or, the increase could be a response to the ongoing population collapse with younger animals going into oestrus, a common biological mechanism to restore the population after a crash.

In any event, the good news is that the numbers have increased and there's a sense of relief all round.

Mexican operators have suffered badly with the decline in whale numbers and the ongoing drug wars.

We were saddened to see how few people made it to the Laguna San Ignacio this year, tourists just too frightened to come to Mexico even though Baja is pretty safe with no evidence of any of the dreadful drug murders.

## COYOTES MOVE IN ON SAN IGNACIO



**At the Laguna, we were surprised to see so many coyotes. Every night we would hear the mournful howl of large numbers of wild dogs.**

During the day, coyotes appear to have no fear as they come close to the camps looking for water. At our camp a dog would regularly come in to sip the gray water from the showers. With so little fresh water available, it's a miracle they not only survive but are increasing in numbers.

We watched in amazement as the coyotes would move out into the Laguna at low tide looking for edible seafood. Fishermen told us that the dogs are so smart, they would look for a big clam shell which was partly open, shove their tails in the gap and then bang the shell on a nearby rock until it opened.

The coyotes are so adaptable they can swim across to the nearby island, where they take the eggs of rare birds from their nests, putting more pressure on this magnificent World Heritage wilderness. Things are changing at San Ignacio. More and more tourists want connections for their laptop computers, they want flushing toilets and showers. The idea of spending time in a desert wilderness without the trappings of our technologically addicted society is no longer appealing to many tourists, unfortunately.

We were also a little shocked by the folks who demanded to know why they didn't have a friendly whale at their panga. Or why another panga had a whale and they didn't.

Flying to San Ignacio was a new experience and we missed the long drive through the desert wilderness.

We missed the wonderful Margaritas at Loreto, we missed the delicious food and the local markets. But the folks who had come by car told us that Loreto was deserted as more and more tourists give up the idea of going to Mexico, in spite of the fact that Baja has no drug wars and no record of the ugly murders which have taken place in the border towns.

## AN HISTORIC SCIENTIFIC WORKSHOP

*The Coalition has been busy over the last few months organising a scientific workshop which will be held in Marina Del Rey in late October.*



Photos courtesy of James Dorsey

We have invited some of the best experts in their fields to the two day workshop and we're pleased to say that all the invited specialists are coming.

With no status review of the major threats to the Gray Whale for the last 11 years, the Coalition believes a workshop is long overdue. Originally, the idea of a workshop was suggested by Tim Ragen, CEO of the Marine Mammal Commission. In fact, he invited the Coalition to submit a grant application to fund a 'gap' workshop. But the ongoing shenanigans in Congress with no budget funding for agencies and no indication of a stable budget forthcoming, put paid to the possibility.

So the Coalition Board made the decision that we would use our meagre funds to hold this urgently needed workshop. It will not be open to the

public so that the scientists can focus on the workshop priorities. Without getting too complicated, the outcome will be a very useful tool for community groups, whale watching organizations and the general public to readily understand the plight of the Gray Whale. This tool will also make it much easier to lobby state and federal governments.

The advantage of the process is that it will enable the major threats to be prioritised; in turn allowing research to be prioritised as well as providing the National Marine & Fisheries Service with a template for proper conservation of the Gray Whale population without conflict.

In the coming months, we will be appealing for funds for the workshop. It's no mean effort for a grass roots Coalition which runs on a volunteer basis!

## HOW BAD THINGS ARE IN GOVERNMENT

*We visited with Southwest Fisheries Center at La Jolla as its important that key NMFS scientists come to the scientific workshop in October.*

The relevant scientists are very keen to be involved BUT there's no funding for any staff to attend workshops or conferences. So they have to apply to funding organizations for money to allow NMFS to participate in important events.

Given that the drive from La Jolla to Marina Del Rey is about three and a half hours, it is nothing short of extraordinary that grass roots Coalitions and non government groups now have to PAY for government scientists to attend meetings. Meetings and workshops which the Government should be funding to ensure they're meeting their statutory obligations.

Yes. We were shocked.

## PLEASE KEEP US POSTED ON MIGRATION

*Please keep the Coalition posted on the migration, we're keen to hear how many cows and calves are sighted and whether there's any incidence of skinny whales or anything unusual.*

**You can do so from the contact form on our website:**

[www.californiagraywhalecoalition.org/contactus.shtml](http://www.californiagraywhalecoalition.org/contactus.shtml)

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