

CALIFORNIA GRAY WHALE COALITION

PROTECTING THE MOST ANCIENT BALEEN WHALE ALIVE TODAY

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GRAY WHALE FATE HANGS IN THE BALANCE

As the 2011/2012 Gray whale migration season approaches, many scientists, tourist operators, the whale watching/tourism industry and environmental organisations from Canada, the US and Mexico will be waiting to see if last season's major increase in cows and calves is sustained

Photos courtesy of James Dorsey

Confounding most scientists' predictions, last season was definitely a WOW situation. After five years of very low cow calf numbers and many emaciated, skinny whales, it was with relief that whale watchers were able to document increased numbers.

There are many theories about why the increase occurred. National Marine & Fisheries claim the increasing and rapid disappearance of sea ice is opening up new feeding areas for the whales. What they don't add to this hypothesis is the fact that the melting sea ice is also opening up large new areas for the transient orcas who predate heavily on calves and juveniles. Other scientists believe that the whales have switched major prey species from benthic amphipods to mysid swarms. Mysids play a critical role in the marine ecosystem and produce very dense swarms which are being devoured by the whales.

Since access to adequate food is the primary requirement for any reproduction, the bottom line in last season's increase in cows and calves has to indicate the whales are getting enough food somewhere. As it takes about 18 months for the reproductive cycle to move from good food to successful pregnancy, birth and survival, the mysid theory has proved to be somewhat contradictory. In 2009 mysid swarms were not evident. In fact most swarms had disappeared completely. In 2010, scientists were astounded by the huge increase in swarms. It was the same year that the salmon run was estimated to be around 30 million, a number not seen in years.

Others have suggested that the increase in cow calf numbers was a result of young female whales coming into oestrus (season) earlier than usual, a common response in populations under threat. To add to the puzzle, we have no idea how



many calves survive the long migration to the Bering and Chukchi Seas. This omission has always presented a major gap in the research as without information on survival of juveniles and calves, it's difficult to evaluate the status of the population.

What we do know is that National Marine & Fisheries, (NMFS) under serious pressure from the California Gray Whale Coalition as a result of our lobbying efforts in the California Assembly and Senate and in Washington DC, was forced to undertake the first proper population assessment since 2001-2002. A field study which was undertaken in 2006/07 has been passed off by NMFS as a population estimate but the results, which showed the same numbers as the estimates in 2001-02 demonstrated that Gray whales had not increased since the disastrous collapse in 1999-2000 when more than one third of the population died of starvation.

Two thorough population assessments have been carried out by NMFS for the 2009-2010 migration and the 2010-2011 season. NO RESULTS are available in spite of many requests for the results. This is an appalling situation. It's the first time in 12 years of monitoring the Gray Whale population status that population estimates have been with-held.

Think about it. There's been no population estimate since 2001-2002 save for a field study in 2006/07. It is now almost 2012 and we have no idea of the latest population numbers. All we do know is that going by the field study figures, there's been a negligible increase if any. The Coalition cannot recall any time in the past 12 years that population estimates have been kept from the public for nearly two years. Field study results from 2006-07 were made available to the International Whaling Commission three months after the count.

RUBBERY FIGURES FROM NATIONAL MARINE & FISHERIES

Recently, NMFS published its draft Stock Assessment Report for the Gray Whale for 2011. Astonishingly, the latest estimate given comes from the 2006-07 field study. In other words, NMFS is relying on an estimate which is going on for six years out of date.

Photos courtesy of James Dorsey

In a further effort to create even more confusion, NMFS scientists have re-assessed the population estimates for the last 23 years coming up with a brand new set of figures which allow the Agency to claim that the Gray Whales are “at carrying capacity” and the population is doing fine.

The Coalition would like to emphasize that although there was a good increase in cows and calves last season, one good season does not make for a proper, prolonged recovery.

Given the massive changes taking place in their Arctic environment, we must wait and see what transpires over the next few seasons.

Incredibly, the excerpt below, which comes from the Draft Stock Assessment Report indicates some of the major changes in Gray Whale habitat. Yet there is nothing being done to investigate the impact of these changes. The Coalition has highlighted some of the inconsistencies in this statement.

*“Evidence indicates that the Arctic climate is changing significantly and that one result of the change is a reduction in the extent of sea ice in at least some regions of the Arctic. These changes are likely to affect marine mammal species in the Arctic, including the gray whale, due to the impacts of a changing Arctic environment on the species benthic food supply. **Pretty serious stuff.**”*

*With the increase in numbers of gray whales in combination with changes in prey distribution gray whales have moved into new feeding areas, spreading their summer range. **A desperate search for food putting them in competition with other Arctic species.***

*Moore and Huntington (2008) observed that “gray whales are perhaps the most adaptable and versatile of the mysticete species,” are opportunistic foragers, and have recently been documented feeding year-round off Kodiak, Alaska. **This is a resident whale population which according to local environmentalists are perpetually skinny and have not given birth to any young for some years.***

Bluhm and Gradinger (2008) examined likely trends in the availability of pelagic and benthic prey in the arctic and concluded that



*pelagic prey is likely to increase while benthic prey is likely to decrease. They noted that marine mammal species that feed both pelagically and benthically (such as gray whales) will fare better than those that only feed benthically **Gray whales do not feed “pelagically” (in deep water) but are coastal feeders. There’s no research to back up this statement much less indicate what the whales will feed on. This statement is an hypothesis, yet to be proven.***

*Global climate change is also likely to lead to increased human activity in the arctic as sea ice decreases, including oil and gas exploration and shipping (Hovelsrud et al. 2008). This increased activity will increase the chance of oil spills and ship strikes in this portion of the whales range. **It sure will, putting all Arctic species at risk.***

*Shipping and some O&G activities have been occurring throughout the whales’ range over the past several decades but have not prevented the species’ recovery. **This is untrue. The extent of sea ice loss has created totally unprecedented situations.***

*Ocean acidification is another future development that could affect gray whales by affecting their prey. Increased acidity in the ocean will reduce the abundance of shell-forming organisms. **Gray whales are almost entirely dependent on shell-forming organisms, ocean acidity presents an extremely serious risk to the whales future survival.***

GRAY WHALE SCIENTIFIC WORKSHOP POSTPONED UNTIL MARCH 2012

Due to family illness impacting the lead scientist and Coalition CEO Sue Arnold, the workshop has been postponed until the end of March, 2012. Fortunately, almost all the scientists who were invited to the October workshop are available. The plus side of moving the workshop to late March is that we will have a good idea of the status of the 2011-2012 migration with information from the Baja Lagunas and whale watching counts of cows and calves.

The workshop is an historic event. It will bring together experts on climate change, transient orca predation, Gray Whale population status, migration, ocean acidity, prey and habitat changes, and the vexed question of population assessments.

The Coalition is not opening the scientific workshop to the public but the results of the two day meeting will be published and made available to interested groups as well as the California Assembly and Senate.

Our hope is that the massive changes taking place in the Arctic will benefit the majestic Gray Whales and their future survival will be secure. However, the Coalition has serious concerns about the management of the whales by NMFS and the lack of any research on the major threats facing the whales. In the absence of proper information and science, the current management practices leave a lot to be desired.

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