

Day 52, Voyage 2, July 30, 2011

It was a day with whales, but no biopsies. These whales were simply not interested in being approached. They were sporting new satellite beacon tags and would simply sink under the water and disappear. I have attached pictures of some that we saw. It almost looks like mutant whales in a 21st century movie.

For one stretch, the entire team was on deck for almost 4 hours. The sun keeping us on slow and deep roast. I even picked up and prepared the third crossbow for me to use as the best looks we got were near me along the pilot house. Needless to say, once I was fully armed and ready to go, none of the whales swam near the pilot house! So I took no attempts either.

We did have one remarkable moment earlier on. The one whale we did almost get close to sampling. We were pulling alongside and the biopsiers were readying their aim. Everyone was in place. I was standing alongside the pilot house watching the final approach. When, suddenly, just a few feet from the whales head, a small dolphin breached! Right in front of the whale!

It was a stunning image and a bit discombobulating as the first thought I had was, that it was a teeny tiny sperm whale baby, as I had never seen dolphins that close to sperm whales before. But, it was not. It was a large pod of dolphins that had come to play and bow ride. The whale, however, was neither amused nor interested in dolphins and simply slipped deeper into the water and swam away. The dolphins played with us for a while and that whale would not let us near with them around.

We ended the day, hot, frustrated and with a lot of work still to do. Dinner was late- about 9:15 pm, as we do not eat until the work is done. Still the team maintained its good spirits.

That is indeed one of the true marvels of these experiences- the team spirit. Imagine yourself on this boat. Hot- usually. Tired- always. Under constant work expectations with spikes of intense periods of effort. Little comfort food. No TV. You might even be seasick. Your showers are infrequent. Sleep is irregular. You are at sea with a group of people, some you hardly know, and others maybe just to a certain extent. Not exactly the recipe for camaraderie and harmony.

Yet, we have been blessed with just that. On each leg, every person has worked to the known limits of their individual abilities and then beyond. Not everyone is the same, so the end product is not the same for all. But all, have indeed given more than I think they knew they had in them. They have all done it with good humor and good spirits. For that and for them, I am truly grateful.

I attribute this effort success to a number of factors. The crew are fine men, who know what they are doing and who extend their patience and flexibility to us to do our work. Adjustments are made as needed, but when asked for are done so with patience and grace. Many thanks to Bob, Ian and John for all their hard work and patience. Next is the parent organization who runs this boat. Iain Kerr patiently listens to my comments and adjustments and, also with patience and grace, makes them in a timely and helpful manner. There of course is the cook. She keeps us all fed and hydrated with a smile and says little. Everybody loves the cook.

Then there is the core science crew. Johnny works very hard each day to ensure the team is prepared, organized and on task. His role is complex as he has to oversee and help perform a wide array of tasks and try to make sure the rest of the team finds rest and reward within the long hours of work. All while trying to carefully balance the challenge of working under one's father and supervising one's sister-not a simple task while overworked and exhausted. His is doing a difficult job admirably and usually with a ear to ear grin.

Cathy, too, works hard every day carrying out her watches and duties and ensuring the cells and samples are healthy, safe and sound. She, too, usually has a warm smile and friendly ear for those who need it. She has to balance the challenge of working for both her father and her brother- perhaps an even harder task- all while overworked and exhausted! The two of them make the core science work and while sibling tension occasionally appears, it is infrequent and rapidly resolved. I think one day, they will look back and marvel and they work they accomplished together and the truly unique experience this has been.

It's a great core team that works hard, eats well, laughs a lot and is carrying out a unique and important study. Most importantly, they make everyone who comes, whether for 2 minutes or 2 weeks, feel welcome, engaged and needed. One of our visiting science team said to me on one leg that the spirit of the core team had really made a difference to her experience on the boat. More often than not, she observed, people in this type of position (high intensity, high stakes, focused work) get insular and closed to ensure the work is done their way. Our team, in contrast, is open and supportive and helps others engage, participate and is open to suggestion and change.

It's a great core team that has been blessed with exceptional short-term team members. That mix is a recipe for success and indeed, success we are having. Camaraderie at sea... ours is simply awesome!

The next two legs will be frenetic with very brief ports stops further testing out patience and our mettle. I am confident our esprit de corps will remain despite the short breaks and we will continue to make all welcome not matter how tired and overworked we are.

There are not many days left in this year's expedition. I plan to cherish them all. I hope my team does the same. Pictures of the sunset (early and late) attached- a colorful treat.

John

P.S. We are on the Gulf off of Louisiana. Our current location is 28 degrees 15.7 minutes North and 89 degrees 23.0 minutes West, for those who want to track us as we go. For Google maps (not Google Earth – but maps) or Bing maps use (include letters and comma): 28.157 N, 89.230 W

For those of you who are new to this email diary - the previous days can be found at: <https://cms.usm.maine.edu/toxicology/dr-wises-voyage-leg-summaries-2011>





