

Friday, April 14 – Day 4 by Dr. Wise

Dear All,

Just as I was nodding off for a morning nap, I heard the call “ballena”, Spanish for whale and pronounced “buy ay na” wafting through the open ceiling above my bunk. Andrea has spotted another morning whale. Most every morning we have been on this trip, Andrea has found a whale. I am impressed by how consistently she spots them. Exactly, what species is unclear at first, but flash a little whale skin at sea and Andrea will find you.

I gathered myself, woke Johnny as I walked past him in the salon, and headed onto deck. Sitting in the crow’s nest was Carlos – up on watch guiding the boat to the whale. A very talented whale scientist, Carlos is a local Ph.D. student at a university in La Paz and he was on the voyage with us last year. He helps us find the whales both by spotting them in the sea and by helping to chart our course, and his dissertation research has been focused on these whales, particularly the fin whales.

Of course, the first thing I had to do is make a quick decision. The fin whale was about two miles in one direction. Two humpback whales were about 2 miles in the opposite direction (naturally-cause Murphy’s Law abounds at sea) and opinions differed on which direction to go. I have the ultimate call so I had to make a decision and quickly. Exactly, what to do is not immediately clear and once opinions form the information gets murky.

I decided we would split into two groups as there was little chance at all 3 whales as a single group. With me in the RV Martin Sheen (the boat we are travelling on) would be: Mark and Rick on the crossbows; Mike on the helm; Rachel on data and sample processing; Carlos and Andrea on whale spotting and Carolina guiding us from the crow’s nest and filming. A strong team, I had for sure. Now, in the dinghy would be Captain Fanch and Johnny as only two can fit in the dinghy. They would seek the humpbacks and we would go for the fin whale.

Hesitant? Eh, yeah, I had my reservations as the dinghy, while much faster than the Martin Sheen, gives off a high pitched engine whine that seems to spook the whales, and I wasn’t sure they could spot whales effectively from so low to the water. Really though, this was our only shot at all 3 given the direction they were travelling and the distance they were already, so we gave it a go to see what might work.

The Sheen as a boat is comfortable, but with a top running speed of 8 knots, it takes a while to reach a moving whale in the distance. We did as we do, and churned away the distance moving closer and closer, but never close enough to the whale. The dinghy on the other hand, as I feared, could not find the humpback whales and soon returned empty handed too. But, their return solved another matter and with us guiding them, they were able to get a biopsy of the whale, and we returned to our course journeying north towards our ultimate goal of San Felipe where we will swap out Wise Lab crew.

What did we learn? Well, the dinghy can be a tool, but the situation and the conditions need to be right. Probably best deployed for fin whales on very flat weather days where the Sheen can guide

it. On the other hand, it is fantastic for recovering arrows. We did find a different humpback later in the day and successfully sampled it.

Our total is now 9 biopsies from 7 whales and 3 different species (humpback, fin and Bryde's).

I have attached pictures of Andrea (in front) Rachel (in red) and Carlos (back) while searching for the fin whale. I have also attached picture of Johnny and Fanch in the dinghy, a remarkably image of our midday sun, some layers of mountains, and our course our magnificent sunset.

All is well with us in the Sea of Cortez. A big thanks to Jorge for sending us Carlos and Andrea as they are excellent team members and a big help. We are motoring all night to cover some ground as San Felipe is still a long ways off.

Good night from here until tomorrow.

John

p.s. Speculation on the boat is that we may not have consistent signal again until San Felipe which we will arrive at in a week. Yesterday, we were surprised with signal so you never know. I can assure you the team is quite pleased and excited when we do get signal and phones start trilling with text and email tones so please do keep sending them even though you may not get a reply for some time. We are going to hop this email get out from a Sat uplink and then distributed through our lab email to the distribution list by my son James. I won't know until I have signal, but I will keep sending them as I can.













