

Sunday, April 16 – Day 6 by Dr. Wise

Dear All,

Must be Easter.

You see it was a remarkable day and a rebirth of sorts. Shortly after dawn, I held a team meeting (I know so early??? - but yes, we need to maximize the day to find whales). We had some small kinks to iron out and being a few days in – it was time for a review. Each trip, I prefer to let the team work and gel for a bit so I can find the kinks, and then iron them out, after people have experience the whales and the working together. Each time it's different what needs tweaking on an expedition. The last thing I said to the team this morning as we concluded the meeting was to take a deep breath, reflect and remember that to be here is amazing, and an experience to enjoy and cherish, and to not lose that sense of wonder in the focus on the work. Perhaps, they were listening for soon the whales put and big exclamation point on my words!

It was just minutes after the meeting, as I sat reviewing some details on the aft deck with Johnny, when Mark came racing over to us, huge piece of toast in his hand and eye wide with wonder and glee. "X.X" might be the text message lettering used to describe his eyes, or perhaps it is more like "O.O", or maybe some combination of the two (but no, not hugs and kisses). It was a humpback whale right near our anchorage swimming to and fro, possibly sleeping so we started to follow. Eventually, the whale just appeared on our port bow in perfect biopsy position so we took one and considered in an early Easter gift. Guess you might say we woke the whale up; our biopsy count was at one for the day.

In a fairly short time, we found a group of five fin whales. Realizing it was the same group we came across yesterday, we carefully biopsied two of the five whales, meaning over two days, we sampled four of the five whales in that grouping. Leaving that group, we had a great sense of satisfaction for the kinks we discussed in the morning were now ironed out and working well and we had three biopsies and it was still early.

I attempted to shower, but no sooner did I get out of the shower than Rick informed me – more whales! This time there were 4 fin whales in a group. We biopsied them all, with the 4th one taken by our dinghy insertion team which is working efficiently now. That brought our total to seven biopsies. It was now 2 pm and with the exception of about 10 minutes – we had been on deck all morning and were hungry and tired, but elated with our success. Lunch today was leftovers, and they were greedily scarfed down, while we regaled ourselves with tales of the day. "Did you see that?" and "Wow! What an amazing day" rang out in different voices with different accents for we all come from many different places.

But, life and Easter had more in store for us...

Sperm whales! That's right shortly after lunch – a sperm whale was spotted just ahead. The team was abuzz with excitement and energy. We got close. The whale dove. But herein is the challenge – unlike the fins, and the humpbacks and the Bryde's – when sperm whales dive – it usually for about an hour. Nothing to do, but wait.

Andrea got out her hydrophone (an underwater microphone) so I could listen for the whales. Fanch and Mike turned the boat off to remove background noise. Sure enough, there it was, a clear beautiful sound of sperm whales clicking! That is if you consider popcorn-like noises beautiful – today I sure did! But wait... Was that...??? Yes, yes, it was – a second set of clicks! There were two sperm whales!!! Now, we just had to find them. The question was – where were they going?

An hour passed, and then the whale surfaced, and along with it the second whale. Now we knew where they were headed. Where next? I gave it my best guess. Another hour passed. Then, magically, the whale appeared just off our port side. I had guessed right. We missed that first whale, but biopsied the second one. Eight whales and three species all biopsied in one magnificent Easter day!

But, life and Easter had still yet even more in store for us.

We decided on one last attempt at the first whale as the light was getting low. On the way... a huge pod of bottlenose dolphins swam to the bow and rode for a while. There were far more dolphins than one could count, big ones, small ones and even little baby ones. They rode the bow, and leapt in the air, and marveled us with an acrobatic show. The dolphins brought out the kid in all of us, as the whole team oohed and ahed and squealed and shouted with delight. All everyone wanted to do is to jump in, be a dolphin, and play with them, even if only for a moment.

The water was clear, and as smooth as glass, and as far down as you could see there were dolphins twisting, turning and delighting in the boat, and staring right back up at us. The water was so smooth, and it reflected the brilliant blue sky with its fluffy clouds so effectively, that when I reviewed the videos on my phone later – it seemed as if the dolphins were swimming in the clouds. Very cool.

I wonder, when a dolphin swims in the bow of the boat, and looks back at us, – do you think it wishes it could jump on board, be a person and play with us – even if only for a moment?

The dolphin show ended. We made one more attempt at the sperm whale, but could not reach it before it dove. The light was getting low, so we headed for our anchorage. Each person was pleased and amazed with the day, and found some time to reflect in the sunset, and remember just how awesome life is.

We have 23 biopsies from 17 whales and 4 different species (sperm, humpback, fin and Bryde's).

All is well with us in the Sea of Cortez. We are at anchor and while exhausted from a full day, but we feel a deep sense of satisfaction. It's another a spectacular night sky, and we are in Ensenada el Alacran (bay of the scorpion). We are at 28.53.940 N and 113.22.672 W if you want to follow along on Google Earth or similar-type program.

I will send Day 6 pictures when we get a signal, and try to include a video of the dolphins. No pictures now as we still using the satellite uplink and there is no general cell signal. But, as I said before – please keep sending your messages to the team, they will be pleased to see them when we find a signal again.

Good night from here until tomorrow.

John









