

THE RETURN OF THE GREAT WHALES

By Hardy Jones and Julia Whitty

Environmentalists are rarely bringers of good news. But this story could be different.

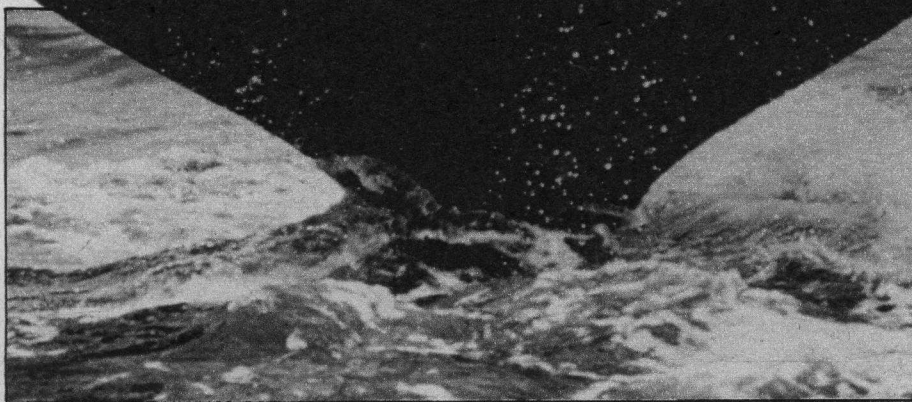
As environmental film-makers, we and our colleagues have watched fish float belly-up in polluted rivers, rain forests cleared to grow vegetables and hundreds of dolphins stabbed to death on Japanese beaches. But this fall we were able to watch something that seems almost like a miracle — the return of humpback whales, after an absence of nearly twenty years, to the waters just off San Francisco.

Most Bay Area residents would be able to tell you about the California gray whales that migrate along our coast during the winter and spring. But almost no one, not even the experts, knew there were other whales out there — humpback whales, minke and even blue whales.

We first heard rumor of the humpbacks from fishermen at Pillar Point, near Half Moon Bay. They said they'd seen whales — "not grays, something else" — during the months of August and September. As directors of the Sausalito-based Living Ocean Society we helped organize whale-watching trips to the Farallon Islands to investigate these reports.

The humpbacks were there.

The first trip sighted fourteen humpbacks. Later, blue whales, some of the rarest animals on earth, were seen. When we reported these findings to humpback experts in Hawaii and on the East Coast, there was great surprise, perhaps even suspicion. "Do they know a hump from a gray?"



[Julia Whitty]

We spent the past summer studying a school of dolphins in the Bahamas and returned to San Francisco at the end of August. While away we couldn't get rid of the idea that one of the great whale stories of the decade might be unfolding just outside the Golden Gate.

So, with the help of Karl Keesling and Tony Chase, who together have logged more than a quarter of a million miles under sail — most of it in the South Pacific — we sailed out aboard their 68-foot ketch *Pegasus* in search of whales.

And there they were — along with hundreds of dolphins, sea lions and myriad birds. On our very first trip to the Farallons we found humpbacks just south of the islands. A mother and calf swam side-by-side on a northerly course. We watched the pair briefly, gladdened by the presence of the youngster, hoping it was a sign of increasing abundance for the humpbacks.

We made it a policy to avoid crowd-

ing the whales — to watch them from a distance of 100 yards or so and wait to see if they were interested enough in us to come investigate. The mother and calf were not and they soon disappeared from sight. But within minutes we were in the midst of four feeding whales, so concerned with getting their share of dinner that they swam within a few feet of our boat.

We surveyed the Farallon Basin from the air as well as the sea, first with Tom Dohl, a marine mammal scientist from the University of California at Santa Cruz. On the way we saw more than 40 humpbacks, five blue whales, dozens of dolphins and finally six bottle-nosed whales, a very rare species. The waters outside the Golden Gate are, it seems, teeming with life.

Finding the blue whale off San Francisco may have been the biggest surprise of all. These are the most gigantic mammals that ever existed on the face of the earth at any

time — even larger than the dinosaurs. They range up to 125 feet long, and they're one of the few species that travel all the oceans of the world.

Most whales, like the humpbacks, will not cross the equator. They're bound to a particular hemisphere, which may be related to the fact that weather systems are also hemisphere-bound — storms travel either north or south of the equator. But the blue whales go everywhere. Because they have difficulty communicating over such long distances, they've been having problems getting together to reproduce.

Gray whales were hunted to the brink of extinction in the 1800s and again in the 1930s, but small colonies remained and, under protection, they've grown back to substantial populations.

But the humpbacks weren't hunted near San Francisco until the 1950s, when whalers operating out of Richmond at the north end of San Francisco Bay went after them. In the next ten years, they took more than a thousand humpbacks, not to mention sei, fin, sperm and blue whales. By the late 1960s, there were no longer enough humpbacks to hunt, and the industry collapsed.

Those were years before the world became aware of whales, so nobody missed them. When we began to pay attention to whales, it was the shore-swimming grays we first noticed. The humpbacks we studied in the warm, clear waters of Hawaii. Now, to find them only 30 miles from San Francisco

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We photographed the tail of one humpback in waters off San Francisco. When we compared it with photos shot in Hawaiian, Alaskan and Mexican waters, we found it was the same whale.

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was a dream come true.

Today we have a new whaling industry — an industry that revolves around whale-watching rather than hunting, studying the animals in their own habitat, getting them used to us being around and knowing we are not a threat to them.

And in our studies, we've had cooperation from the whales themselves. After all these years of being hunted by small boats, you'd think they'd be extremely shy when such a boat pulls up. But many are not. You can see how it is with the California grays in Baja California — there, you can actually get in a boat, lean over the side and stroke the whales.

The most remarkable aspect of this is the dramatic return of marine life to the waters off San Francisco. How did it happen?

The obvious reason for the growth in the numbers of humpbacks and other whales is that we've stopped hunting them. The United States outlawed whaling in 1972.

But there may be another factor at work. Fishermen report seeing a substantial increase in the number of dolphins in local waters recently, which leads them to believe that the sardines that once sustained a thriving fishing industry in Monterey are reappearing. Humpbacks eat both small, krill-like crustaceans and schools of small fish, and because of the presence of fish-eating sea lions and dolphins where the whales are feeding, we believe the whales are eating small, shoaling fish. In this regard, we should note that both crustaceans and small fish depend on clean water — a fact which should give us pause as we contemplate drilling for oil in these same waters.

We still have a lot to learn about the migratory patterns of these whales, but we're getting closer. We photographed the undersides of several humpback tails, or flukes (each humpback has its own unique pattern of light and dark); when we compared the photos with others shot in Hawaiian, Alaskan and Mexican waters, we discovered there was more than just a resemblance: Among them were the same whales. We're now convinced that at least some of the humpbacks off San Francisco travel to Mexico for the winter.

The film we finally made (to be aired Tuesday on KQED, Channel 9) shows how much life exists just outside the Golden Gate — not only birds and fish, but air-breathing, large-brained mammals in great numbers. □

