

Gray whales removed from endangered list

Whales and Whaling

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

The California gray whale, once hunted to the verge of extinction, was officially removed from the federal endangered species list Wednesday.

It is the first time an endangered whale — or any other sea creature — has recovered enough to be removed from the list. The recovery was hailed by environmentalists as a rare victory for vanishing wildlife.

"This is a great success story and a cause for celebration," said Commerce Secretary Ronald Brown. "Two tough federal laws from the '70s — the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act — have helped bring this animal back from a critically low population."

Government scientists estimate the California gray whale's population at 21,000 animals, up from a population of less than 10,000 in

the 1930s. Biologists estimate there are at least as many gray whales now as in the pre-whaling days before the California Gold Rush.

Vicki Nichols, executive director of Save Our Shores, a local ocean advocacy group, cautioned that man's activities can still threaten the whale's survival.

"Historically the largest threat has been whaling," Nichols said. "That has stopped, but primary threats remain including vessel traffic (including oil tankers), pollution, ocean noise levels and development of their breeding grounds."

Nichols and other environmentalists said they are "delighted" the whale has been removed from the list, but question whether it will remain adequately protected.

Although removed from the endangered species list, the whales remain safeguarded by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which

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WEATHER



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Abortion rate falls

The number of abortions dropped to the lowest level since 1979, according to a non-profit group that studies reproductive issues. **Page A6**

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outlaws harassing or killing the animals. Scientists with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration also will monitor the gray whale population to ensure the recovery continues.

Ken Norris, a retired UC Santa Cruz biology professor and authority on whales, said it was time to remove gray whales from the endangered species list.

"The species has been in pretty good shape for a while now," Norris said. "The numbers are up

more than the estimates of old numbers before major whaling started. It is clearly not an endangered animal."

Norris said the gray whale population has recovered more quickly than other endangered whale species as their population was not reduced by hunting as much as other whale species, and their social gathering and matings enhanced reproduction.

The California gray whales migrate farther than any other marine mammal, making a 13,000-mile

round trip journey from feeding grounds in the Bering Sea near Alaska to breeding grounds in southern Baja California, and back again. Their migratory transit graces the waters of Monterey Bay, where they are a familiar sight from November into early May.

Norris said he expects the gray whale population to level off or perhaps expand into the western Pacific where large numbers of the whales once gathered off Korea and Japan. Only a small western Pacific population now survives.