

Whales and Whaling

# A Woeful Tale Of The Waning Grey Whale

Whale-watchers of Santa Cruz County and other California coastal areas may lose their favorite winter and spring pastime if a federal research program is not renewed by July 1 to safeguard the herds of grey whales that migrate annually along the shores from the Bering Sea to breeding lagoons in Baja, California.

"If this \$65,000 budget doesn't get through, you can just forget about the grey whale in 10 years or so," Dr. Roger S. Payne, a research biologist with Rockefeller University and the New York Zoological Society said in an interview in San Diego.

Payne was in San Diego to appear at a dinner kicking off a "Whale Fund West" campaign to stop worldwide killing of the earth's largest mammals, the Associated Press reported.

The research program is conducted by the federal Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, which determines the numbers of California grey whales in the herds

passing to and fro along the migration routes.

The grey whale is protected under a worldwide agreement intended to preserve the species.

"But the Russians and Japanese are trying to lift the ban on them," Payne said. "Every time the International Whaling Commission meets, they try to get the ban lifted."

"The research program in question applies because it determines honestly the grey whale stocks. As of July 1, the program is to be stopped. If the program is stopped, we will simply lose our voice in the International Whaling Commission in regard to the grey whales," Payne told the AP.

Whale-watching in Santa Cruz County is enjoyed at its best in the Davenport area because of a geographical feature discovered by Captain John Davenport, the region's earliest settler.

The feature is a seaward thrust of the coast that makes

the Davenport area one of the few points in California that extends close to the whale's migration line.

In the first half of the last century, Davenport and his men captured many whales from boats which were launched whenever lookouts on the bluffs sighted the creatures feeding in the kelp beds or scratching their skins on rocks along the beaches.

Davenport's most successful whaling year was 1862, when he secured 1700 barrels of oil.

Heavy slaughters of whales in the last century brought the grey whale almost to the point of extinction. The herds recovered sufficiently to be harvested by foreign factory ships in the 1920s and 1930s. Since 1938, however, the grey whale has been given complete protection by the international agreement.

In Santa Cruz County, according to Frank McCrary of the Big Creek Lumber Company above Davenport, the grey

whales can be seen beginning in December, moving south. They reappear in April and May, this time moving north.

"Several times this year," McCrary said, "I've seen whales in the coves, scraping along the rocks as if trying to get rid of barnacles or something."

The grey whale feeds in the summer in the Bering Sea above the Aleutian Islands, according to Burney J. LeBoeuf of UCSC Crown College.

The southward migration begins in December-January is to breeding grounds in Baja, California — Scammon's Lagoon, Black Warrior Lagoon, and even around the tip of Baja California into the Gulf of California.

"Point Loma in the San Diego area is very close to the migration line," LeBoeuf said, "so the whales have become quite a tourist attraction there."

LeBoeuf theorized that the whales bear their calves in the Baja California lagoons both because of the plentitude of food

there and because of the warmer water temperature.

"The calves have little blubber when they are born," Le Boeuf said. "Blubber is the whale's primary insulation. By the time the herd migrates north, the calves have developed the blubber they need for life in cooler waters."

At maturity the grey whale ranges from 40 to 60 feet in length. It is estimated that an average whale weighs a ton and a half per lineal foot.

Huge though the grey whale is, however, you are likely not to see it passing even close to shore unless it spouts or sounds.

And don't expect the spout to be a veritable geyser you can't miss seeing against the backdrop of water or sky. Distance reduces the apparent size of the spout. Looking for the spout just above the water level is the best practice, even when you're whale-watching from a Davenport highland close to the ancient migration routes.