

## Wednesday, April 13. Day 12 at Sea - by Dr. Wise

It was time to head into port and then head home. The trip has been a fantastic success both in terms of samples collected and in the interaction of our team. We entered the day thrilled by the voyage and our individual and collective experiences. The weather, the whales, the team, it was all so excellent. Still, in the back of my mind and I was sure in the mind of Johnny, Mark and Rick, lay one nagging thought.

Sperm whales.

We had not seen nor heard any sperm whales. We had traveled through primer sperm whale country. Carlos said they usually didn't come until May. There was also much local comment that the whales were in weird places this year due to El Nino displacing their food. We had resolved ourselves to not expecting any sperm whales given that it was April and they normally didn't show till May. Still I had hoped. We had hoped and we had searched in vain. It was disappointing, but not the kind you hold onto against such amazing success overall. After all, the blue whale, the humpbacks, the fin whales, so many amazing experiences. I fought against thinking "yeah, but...".

The time was against us as well as we had to get into port to pick up the Captain so she could bring us to dock. The times were particular so we were down to our last three hours and then we would be forced to stop. We had seen no whales at all this day.

Suddenly, Johnny and Rick had spotted several blows. Six whales laying on the surface of the water like logs. They couldn't see them well-enough to identify them. They suspected sperm whales. Carlos assured us again that this area, just off Cabo San Lucas, was definitely not sperm whale territory.

I wanted it to be sperm whales. I mean Johnny and Rick have looked at probably a thousand sperm whales over the years. Carlos chuckled at me as I pressed him again. Could it be? If not, what else? He shook his head in good humor. Man, I wanted it to be sperm whales, but it simply was too far fetched.

I told them to keep looking and went back aft to see if they emerged behind us. Hoping against hope. The time ticking away.

What followed was probably the most amazing sea experience I have ever had.

I kept a close look out behind us, sitting on the port side of the boat watching aft. Suddenly, Mark, who was in the crow's nest. Started shouting "sperm whale!!!". I looked up at him and watched him rise up and lean three-quarters of the way out of the crow's nest pointing to the starboard side and yelling: "sperm whale!!! 9 o'clock." The entire team turned and looked.

The whale breached! Just as the entire team turned to look, the whale breached. A full-on, entire body out of the water – breach. I saw the entire side of the whale in the air! Then, as if that wasn't enough, the whale wiggled its mouth while in the air as if to say "haha we are here"!!! Then it breached again. Then it turned its body perpendicular to the surface of the water so its tail was sticking straight up into the air. It was stunning acrobatics. Then to our further amazement and disbelief, it waved its tail at us!

You couldn't write a movie like this one. Nobody would believe what we all saw this whale do. It was surreal. I mean what are the odds that the whale we sought the most would turn up during the last three hours of our trip, off Cabo San Lucas where you don't normally find sperm whales??? But, on top of that, to enter into our scene in such a fantastically dramatic fashion... Wow! To say we were elated...well, that would be a gross understatement.

The arrival of the sperm whales was jaw dropping and stunning for all. It was so sudden and so unexpected, picture were impossible. But, we are seasoned marine toxicologists and very quickly we were are work and off to get biopsies. There were six sperm whales in the group. We set to the work with a bounce in our step and a new found excitement. The whales continued to breach!

We had collected three, when the first mate told me our time was almost up and we would have to head into get the Captain and dock. I grimaced, but understood. One more pass.

We tried on the last pass, but no luck, we did not get close enough. Still, three was better than none. I smiled at the luck.

But, lady luck was not done with us yet. The Captain texted into the boat. Her bus was delayed by two hours. We had more time!

By the time we had to leave, we had biopsied 5 sperm whales!

As the voyage ends, we have 29 whales biopsied, from 7 different species!

This trip was a remarkable experience with many improbable, but necessary events falling into place to make it happen. Many thanks to my science team, Johnny, Rick, Mark and Carlos for their awesome work. They each excelled at the work needed to be done and did so with enthusiasm and dedication. Thanks to the Sea Shepherd team for their excellent support. Thanks to all of you for your support for without it – this voyage does not happen.

Our next steps are straightforward. We have to obtain the necessary permits to export the samples from Mexico and import them into the United States. Those applications are already pending but likely to take 3-4 months. Then we analyze them for metal levels.

The good news is Sea Shepherd has invited us back for next year! We will need to raise the funds for it again, but it will be an exceptional chance to pursue a multi-year study of this very important sea.

I have attached pictures of the first whale tail lobbing, 5 sperm whales, and a sperm whale breaching (note this was not the breach first described in this email when the whale arrived but one later in the day). I have also attached a picture of the team taken by JP. First row is Mark in our orange shirt, Mike our first mate in a gray sweatshirt, and Captain Oona standing in a blue sweatshirt. Second row is Carlos in our orange shirt and in blue sweatpants, Shannon our cook next to him with her sunglasses down, Rick next to her in our orange shirt and then Mar our second mate with sunglasses atop her head. Back row is Johnny in the red bandanna, Sean our engineer next to him, then me in our orange shirt and then JP our medical officer in a dark sweatshirt.

It's been a great trip. I hope you have enjoyed following along. We will be updating our lab progress here on our Experiment page.

We will also be making plans for next year's voyage.

Many thanks again to all of you.

I look forward to home.

John





