

Wednesday, April 13 – Endgame - Mark Martin

It was the end of a trip of a lifetime

It was incomplete

We had half a day and people had cell phone service again. It had been spotty even when we had it. There was something disappointed about having it again. Spouses got called and texts were sent to colleagues. The unreal world waited at some airport some of us had not chosen yet. It was such an incredible trip we were not able to feel too sad. Some people were tired, the crew had been on the boat longer than us, in a way they were ready for port. Bags started to get organized, tickets booked and equipment started getting packed. Some of us were still feeling whales.

The captain was not on board; she was actually part of the reason we were going to port early. The crew was split between the ones that thought we were done and the ones that had a certain desperation of finding what was not supposed to be in these parts. The biggest brain in the world on the deepest diving lunged creature on earth. Sperm whales. Not supposed to be here, but again we were riding with miracle workers.

A 4-meter hammerhead came by the boat fin slicing the sea evenly. It ignored the boat and actually took a pilot position at the bow for a while. Beautiful in its undeniable mystical force that demanded respect. Beautiful, but not a whale. A Manta ray spinning right below the surface, 4 or 5 meters as well. Mantas are a symbol of conservation for my island of Vieques and the name of the student group I would be teaching with this incredible journey. Amazing, but not a whale. In this Vermillion sea those big sharks and wide rays were small.

In the past two days, Carlos, Johnny and I had spent most of the time. I was up there remembering the other whales. No whales. More sport fishing boats, traffic and ferry's. More reminders we were no longer in the real Cortez. We exchanged emails, summarized our appreciation for the everything's and made sure we told our new friends who they were.

I heard the validation of why it had been a good trip, whales that flew, ran, the myth and the legends we shared seas with. Dr. Wise started making sure we knew we did good. Me and Johnny were not having it. Then I think we felt it before it happened. I made a

mental note that I didn't forget before writing about it. Something was coming up. But we were close to shore it felt like a marina. Sailfish jumping seven times. You're a great fish. Even if this thing were not whales we loved seeing them, we just had a mission.

Whales!!!

A bunch, Carlos or Johnny spotted them, we chased, nobody knew what they were. I took the Crow's Nest one last time. I was proud to, I had become better at directing the captains as we tracked and danced with whales. They were far but we all saw them about 5 or 6 blows, side by side. Short blows. The species game started, fins, no not fins. Definitely not blues or humps. Pilot whales? Maybe we chased at our top speed, we knew this was big and the endgame. We had Johnny and Ric ready, all hands seemed to be on deck for the last try. Orcas? Could they be Orcas

A whale shark was almost on the sights, you are only a whale by name fish and we have no time for you. But you are really cool. It was a big one too. Onward.. Sean gave us another "*there she blows*" this was a crew with a sense of humor. We fit right in.

We timed a short dive, we got closer and boats went by. We started seeing better, spending more time on the top they seem to be going in a general area now more zigzagging than going farther. Sperm whales? We discussed and could have rationalized species by species but the guessing time was over. We were there called out 7 minutes down, 9 minutes. They are here somewhere keep a look out 10 people on deck. Our captain Mike was solid. Except for Captain Oona who was doing advocacy and press releases we were all exactly where we needed to be I turned and there it was.

My old friend came up it was in an angle that I saw its undeniable head come out in that plowing thrust only it can do. A hydrodynamic body that lets it dive over 2,000 meters with a strong tail and a torpedo shape. The flat head became a battering ram that splashed forward and created a wall of water. And that was the first whale I saw, I screamed no radio needed "Sperm whale. It went down and nothing. People either did not question it or recognized the excitement in my voice. But they looked and didn't see anything. Then that something big that was going to happened came.

On the opposite site of the Martin Sheen for the first time since we spotted them and the first time I ever seen it came up. The sequence of events is still confusing to me. The

power of the whales took over the day. We had found our missing piece. We were ready.

A perfect bull sperm whale breached, jumping completely out of the water it opened its mouth in midair and time did slow down as it hovered before crashing down and beating the surface of the water. As it came down with its open mouth we opened ours. I'm not sure what was said there. Noises and gasps first. Then did you see that, then business. Turn to port and so on. Down stillness for a minute or two. Our collective minds were gleefully playing with this incredible memory we would never forget. Oh my god did I get it on camera, no, JP? No Embedded in our brains forever but not on film. Time became confusing to me the whale jumped again. We couldn't believe it. I personally didn't know sperm whales did that. It was the most incredible whale I have ever seen.

We did our thing the turning circles brutally sharp, we had to make sure they turned off the instruments that could be scaring them. Then the radio died in midchase. Everything was running low. I called out everyone started talking and giving orders. Big bull coming up. I yelled. The pumped up crew gave orders because they didn't hear the radio. I screamed and used that strong captains voice I may have to apologize later for. *"I got it let me lead! Tell the captain what I'm saying, but otherwise,"* you know the rest. Bull came up again we were close they were big, a bull and his girls. Johnny got the bull, Ric missed, reloaded, hit, Some more misses and decision time arrows or whales. We had few arrows left and there were clearly sperm whale samples in the floating arrows. It took a lot of time. Tick, tock, time is running out and it was moving faster now.

A whale watching boat had followed the whales with their tourists so it wasn't that hard to keep track of them. I wondered what they thought of us.

Still I held the mast. I sat up there with no one relieving me at the crow's nest. I was anxious to be down. But they were moving and I didn't want to come leave the nest empty and lose them. They loaded again and we were back on them. They were less cooperative, running deeper and coming up shorter, and those turns. Our maneuvering was good and we pass them close, sometimes very close.

The Bows released again misses

Then hits

We had four sperm whale samples, victory. I came down Johnny processed the samples inside the boat as we crossed we had that smile that said deep down we knew this would happen. It was that kind of trip.

I waited as we picked up arrows as we turned around, I waited. Slowly different people came up and spoke to me as in a funeral stating that our time was over and we were going home. I kept the bow in my hands. People came and left, I saw the whales in the distance, it was wonderful to see a happy family living together and surely making more sperm whales. To see them in the surface I daydreamed a trip down with the bull as it changed from the sunlit surface with the creatures we were traveling around to the dark world where things glowed and eerie creatures with unfamiliar shapes swam and crawled in their extraterrestrial way. Down there this power of nature battled different giants that roam the deep. Giant squids were an impressive diet. I was happy to imagine the fight I knew I would never see in person. For the eleventh or twelfth time in the trip I looked at whales and wondered what it philosophized about and what it thought about us. The Wises came up chuckling and said, *“So if you wait after things are over they start again, that is the philosophy?”*

I was about to say I was just saying goodbye, when they said. Oona is late we have about 40 minutes.

To the whales

After a while we got there, here we were. My turn.

It took longer and I could hear the Captain ready to go, sun and waves and time combining to complicate. We reached them uncomfortably and Johnny released, hit, we had five samples now.

I looked had the magic arrow on the bow. Looked good it came up just barely, no more time.

Last chance I released.

I hit the water and then the whale. Sometimes it can get a sample that way but we will never know. We never found the magic arrow. In any case a Miss.

We looked and found Johnny's arrow. Number 11 was lost.

I looked at the whales for a while. That last moment could not touch what was definitely one of the best trips of my life and a very successful scientific expedition. We not only had a great variety of species

Humpbacks, Fins, Pilot, Minke, Bryde's, Blue, now we had the sperm whales. The whales we came to find and the only ones we could use in our comparison to the original journey. Last day at the last hour, perfect We achieved the goal set out for this Return to the Sea of Cortez.

The alliance with Sea Shepherd would surely not end here. We would sail again and we give them our support and good vibes in their noble quest. Hopefully we will round the globe in search of whale science and environmental health. I encourage you to explore the Sea Shepherd website and their conservation efforts. To you our supporters, Gracias, Thank you. We would not have had that success, those glorious moments and the chance to use real science to help whale conservation without you. It is a world where we all have to act to even our part and change the climate change we started. We invite you to be part of the social change with science that will let us find the truth and the answer to our environment and the challenges we face. I say we because we are part of that environment and of the beautiful nature that swims in it. Thanks for sponsoring our project which I assure you is a great investment in scientific research for the benefit of human health, cetacean conservation and environmental education. The networking that was achieved during the trip will surely produce more collaborations.

In a personal note I thank you for given me this opportunity and want to assure you that the people you sponsored and many more not featured in this blog and that are working hard at the home base worked as hard as we could.

Except when the work was done and we had a great last dinner in Cabo San Lucas were we ate and toasted and vowed to do all we could for whales.

Gracias

Bye Stormy! And thank you for the fish

Mark