

Friday, April 1 - Arrival and Setting Sail by Johnny

The day started early, with my mom shaking me out of bed after getting barely 5 hours of sleep. The drive down had been exhausting – not only was it late at night and raining, but the knot in my left shoulder had reached a steady pain level of 7 for most of the drive. By the time I reached the house I was exhausted, strung out from pain, and beginning to question my ability to go on this voyage. Why did my back have to tighten up just before leaving?!?

Without much delay, I got out of bed and got dressed as mom walked my pooch (Bucky) and prepared us some coffee while I made the final adjustments to my packed bags and moved them from my car to hers. We were out the door within 15 minutes, headed to meet my pops at the airport (NB: they were in separate houses as they are moving from a rental to a house they recently purchased, and mom will be watching Bucky and my cat, Rocco, in the rental house). The travel from Louisville to San Diego was largely uneventful – one tiny plane that I couldn't stand up in to get us to Houston, then a more comfortably sized plane to get us to Cali. Our luggage consisted of my two backpacks (clothes in one and reading material/laptop in the other), 2 large orange suitcases (one with pops' clothes, the other with our hydrophone array), another large black suitcase with lab supplies, pops' huge heavy backpack with computer supplies, and a final smaller suitcase as my second carry-on filled with electronic equipment for the hydrophone array and the head of our directional hydrophone. This last suitcase caught the attention of the TSA agent, who insisted on checking the bag for dangerous items, and we began our story to explain our trip – we're going to the Sea of Cortez for two weeks to collect skin/blubber samples of whales to measure contaminants in their tissue. Every time I tell it to a stranger I always feel like I'm telling such a farfetched story that is rarely told/heard by most people that I wonder how much of it they believe. The TSA agent quickly shifted his disposition from suspicious to interested and wished us well on our trip after he was satisfied we didn't have any equipment to blow up the plane (he did confiscate a screwdriver that was too long).

So I've mentioned a few pieces of equipment that some of you are likely unfamiliar with – there are some new members to my email list and some veterans that were with me for the Gulf of Mexico voyages. To review/introduce you to the equipment: we have the hydrophone array (which I will refer to as the array) and the directional hydrophone (which I will refer to as the directional). The array is a soft plastic tube about 30 feet in length and

3 inches in diameter; it is filled with a special oil that matches the density of the sea water about 100 ft below the surface. Within the tube are four underwater microphones which pick up the clicks/whistles/moans of the whales, and we tow it in the water behind us while underway; it has a blue cable about 200 feet long that plugs into a special box for us to listen in on the underwater acoustic landscape. This is not a piece of equipment that one travels with easily, and usually isn't stuffed into a suitcase and brought onto a passenger plane – it is very expensive, highly technical equipment, and very heavy. The directional is a device of our own creation; it is a single underwater microphone that is placed inside a large metal funnel which is at the bottom of a 30-foot PVC pole. To use this, we will stop the boat, dip the funnel/microphone in the water, and rotate it to listen for the whales through a set of headphones and get a sense of which direction they are in relation to our boat.

The boat- she's an 80-ft motor sailer named the *Martin Sheen*, currently owned by Sea Shepherd. I say currently because she was previously owned by Ocean Alliance and was named the *Caribana*; we worked on her several times in the Gulf of Maine to sample humpbacks and fin whales in the autumns of 2011 and 2012. So, she's a familiar ship, but with a new crew, new ownership, and a new name.

For our crew, there is myself – now a seasoned whale researcher with over 200 biopsies from five different whale species (minke, humpback, fin, pilot, and sperm whales) – my pops, Dr. John Wise, Sr., (also a seasoned whale researcher with a handful of biopsies from humpback and sperm whales), Rick Walker from South Woodstock, VT (a seasoned crewmate that was with us for most of the Gulf of Mexico voyages and also a top biopsier), and Mark Martin from Vieques, Puerto Rico (relatively new to whale work, he joined us for a weekend in the Gulf of Maine, but has not biopsied a whale yet). Because we are working in Mexican waters, we have a Mexican whale researcher with us – Carlos (more about him later when I learn more). Finally, there are the 6 members of the Sea Shepherd crew – Oona (the captain), Mike (the first mate), Sean (the engineer), JP (dive master/medical officer), Shannon (cook), and Mar – again, more about them as I learn about them and work alongside them.

So- we had all this equipment between two of us flying from Louisville, KY (my pops is now a professor at University of Louisville) to San Diego, where we had arranged to meet Rick and Mark, as well as my brother, James, who would drive us across the border to drop us off at the boat in San Felipe, Baja Norte, Mexico. As pops and I were the first to

arrive, we checked into the hotel and walked over to the historic Mexican villa a few blocks away to get lunch and pass the time while we waited for everyone else to arrive. As we waited, we caught up on life and shared our excitement for the upcoming voyage. By 11pm everyone else had arrived and we settled in for some rest.

The next morning started early – I was again up before 7am (this time without any alarm), as excited as a little boy on Christmas morning! Not long after, Rick and pops were also awake and we agreed to test the array and the directional – to make sure they were working properly. After all, our friends at the Scripps Institute (world experts on underwater microphones, and the group that designed our array) were right down the street and could supply us with any last minute repairs or parts we might need. That meant we had to unpack the 200-ft long cable and 30-ft long expensive tube, get everything plugged into boxes and proper jacks, and tap on the microphones to make sure they were in good working order – in our hotel room. This is when we encountered our first hiccup. The array box has a power plug that is hard-wired into the unit (i.e. the part we would plug into the wall) – but the other end of it is extremely non-standard. It comes out of the box as a blue wire, then splits into two red wires – one end is a small male plug that looks like what you plug into a battery charger or a small laptop, the other end is split again and is designed to be attached to a car battery. Neither end could we plug into our hotel wall outlets. By this time James and Mark were awake and had joined us – 5 grown men in a single bed hotel room with a huge cable spread across the floor. It was time to pile into the van and run some errands – West Marine (for some rope and a net), CVS and Walmart (toiletries and clothes), then to Radioshack (didn't have the parts we needed) and Fry's (didn't have the parts). After Fry's Rick came up with a plan to take an AC/DC converter, cut the wire and splice it onto the wires for the array box – we tested it back in the hotel room and created a power source! All the hydrophones tested good (the test consisted of me wearing headphones while Mark and Rick tapped and sang at the hydrophones). So we packed it all up and began packing the car for our 4-hour drive across the border to San Felipe.

The border crossing was uneventful – turns out you don't need to show a passport to get into Mexico. The border town, Mexicali, was in disrepair and clearly suffering from poverty. Lots of stores were boarded up, skeletons of decrepit buildings and houses lined the streets, and the streets were filled with trash. As we made our way out of town the decrepit house skeletons became more sparse, but the trash lining the sides of the streets continued for miles and miles. Meanwhile, the scenery became more and more desolate

as we travelled from the city, into the dry rocky mountains of Baja, then through the orange and white sandy desert (some pictures attached from the drive) before reaching the periphery of San Felipe. Upon arrival we said hello to the Sea Shepherd crew, unloaded the car, and said our farewells and thank yous to James for driving us over the border.

Here's where we encountered our second hiccup – the refrigerator for the boat's food was broken, and the local mechanic that had the parts closed up shop before we could get the parts from them! Not accepting defeat, Captain Oona set out to find the parts from another source. Meanwhile, Mark and I took an inventory of all our research supplies, while pops and Rick convened with the crew to discuss the details of the voyage. Fortune favored us again, and just as we finished the inventory, the captain returned with the parts we needed and Sean got to work on the fridge. Two hours later we pushed off the dock and set out to sea under the clear Mexican night sky with some of the major constellations dancing around us – Orion, Cassiopeia, and the Big Dipper – all surrounded by a dense cloud of stars that can only be found in such rural places. As we reached the breakwater, someone on shore began shooting off a bunch of fireworks, raising a bunch of cheers and whoops from our crew as we began our adventure.

For sleeping arrangements, Rick is in one of the aft cabins with a crew member from Sea Shepherd, while Mark, pops, and I are in the fore cabins (in the bow). Mark is also in with a Sea Shepherd crew, while pops and I are sharing a bunk in the foremost cabin. The bed is awkwardly shaped, such that the end of the bed closest to the door is much wider than the end towards the bow – leaving us with our heads slightly below our feet as we sleep on the rolling waves. Furthermore, there is a large pole that comes down from the deck through my side of the bunk, adding a novel sleeping experience for me, I find myself adjusting my leg orientation to be straddling the pole or sideways on either side of it – I never thought I would be pole dancing in my sleep!

Johnny