

Saturday, April 2 - Mark Martin

The start of something big

The days before today were a whirlwind. Like many of my colleagues, we left busy lives in very different places to be here in our version of one of our heavens. In the sea, the sea of Cortez or the Gulf of California or the vermillion sea. The names have different memories to different people. The Cortez one probably the most glamorous to some. Unless you're from the indigenous people there who actually and sadly met Cortez.

We all left places and flew, drove and were now floating together. In the words of Ric the Blue, is there anywhere else in the world you rather be right now? I have a feeling that every day of this expedition, there won't be. We left the city of San Diego and were driving by our trusty driver, James "Chago" Wise. It is to be my training as a whale biopsier. I had gone on a whale research trip as a spotter on this same boat (then called the *Caribana*) for a few days also to learn from the Wises. It is such a great and interesting family. Think of it, a family of Toxicologist going together to study Leatherback turtles Puerto Rico to whales around the world, alligators in Florida and whatever else is possible to research the environmental health and how it relates to humans. Even the students that work in the Wise labs have become family of sorts, as have I. We were finally here San Felipe setting of for whale country with the Martin Sheen boat and their Sea Sheperd crew. We spent some time discussing the methods and reasoning for this type of research with the crew. It is common to have concern at the biopsies that are collected with an arrow. We explained the many benefits to the species and the information regarding current and changing environmental health conditions. Dr. Wise also when on to detail how the whale research has been used to study the effects of certain metals on humans and whales to help understand the condition of these majestic giants and how we can learn from their physiology to help ourselves. The Sea Sheperd crew was not fully convinced and Johnny Wise and I explained some of the methods of the actual sample collection. As we prepared the equipment to take to the bow we pulled out the arrows. They look like a perfectly normal archery arrow, carbon fiber alloy, good quality with the colored flights in the back. The front is custom made with a foam stopper/float in the front of the arrow and right after that a metal tip which is about an inch and a half long. The tip has an edge and the hollow inside of the tip has some prongs to hold on to the sample. Once people see the small size of the tip and what it captures it is easier to understand. In my training I was lucky to have Johnny Wise, probably the best biopsier in the world, with over 300

whale samples collected. I also had Ric, who has a certain whale Zen and is a seasoned veteran with a great love for the whale conservation work. And then there was John who masterminded the whole team and its coordination with the Sea Shepherd, Ocean Alliance, University of Louisville, Wise Labs Research Group, the VCHT and our generous backers. He knew our strengths and had a certain ability to move the pieces and step in and pull rank when he had to and let us figure things out when we had to. I approached and talked to the crew of what I had learned in terms of the sample collection, the area varies between whale species but there is a very specific protocol to have a green light to release the arrow. The position of the whale in relation to the boat is key. We do not want anything, but perfect since it could risk a misplaced shot. Today as we worked with the first whales, the small (for being a whale) and elusive Minke whale and later on the sleek and fast Fin whales, we fine-tuned our maneuvering with the very capable Captain Oona and her solid first mate Mike. We went over biopsy zone in the whale, which again varies by species, but it is always way away from the head and blowhole and usually below and back of the dorsal. We do not shoot on the underside of the whale and never in the tail. Considering that although it is like a doctor's visit the whales and their mothers usually do not cooperate by providing a sample area, it is tougher than you think. We practiced with the Minke's but never had a real opportunity. They were fast and gone before we really could get a proper shot at them. Then our whale party begun. Fin whales, large and fast they were beautiful, from the Crow's nest they were impossibly beautiful. They were far and we were slow but there was a certain logic to the slow methodic approach with not too much noise and following the footprints or whale-prints they left in the sea. We came around them and we were able to get a sample. We had done this before but the excitement of seeing our first whales up close of getting our first samples on this trip we had been waiting for so long to do, was a moment. A moment of relief and the mark of a real first step in our voyage. We looked around Johnny went on to process the sample as soon as it was netted as it floated by the boat. I wrote the information down in our data sheet, I looked up and Ric said to me "I always ask Johnny this so let me ask you buddy. Is there anywhere else in the world you rather be right now?"

No Ric, Nowhere else. I understood that it meant the everything of it. The excitement, the need to be good at it in order for it to have valid science. It meant the beautiful scenery that looks like the Grand Canyon still full of water. It meant we were doing our part for conservation. He also meant the Sea, the boat, us.

Nowhere else I rather be.

We took refuge for the night and we saw stars paint the sky. We talked whales and star lore and shared our stories, the teams talked about their work in conservation and slowly we saw the beginnings of the wise team and sea shepherd blending into one. There was even a ghost story by the captain. The internationalism of the group of eleven was proof of the benefits of cultural diversity.

I slept on the sail outside and dreamt of whales, ghosts and tomorrow. Looking up at a sky with no light pollution I saw a shooting star. No need star, no need.

Mark