

Matt Braun's Reflection for Leg 3

My name is Matthew Braun. I am a student at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, Maine. I have been on the third leg of the Voyage of the Odyssey, 2010 covering Mobile, AL, into the Gulf of Mexico, and back to Bayou le Batre, AL.

We had now been into the Gulf for a month without having seen whales for 3 weeks. We were restless and eager to find some and experience the excitement once again. This leg we saw whales! Thank you all for wishing us them. But, I will get to that later.

We were in a routine at sea and very used to seeing each other that had been on since we left Portland. It was sad to see one person leave to go back home, Cathy. She was a crucial part of our team and she, Johnny, and I seemed to do everything together at port and at sea since we left. We played quelp, the hilarious game that is guaranteed to bring you fame and a video on youtube, and laugh out loud, rolling on the floor entertainment, played cards, watched movies, and simply had fun enjoying the motion of the boat and all the incredible sea life. She also led us in our bow workouts during both calm and wavy days, really testing to see just how fit and on top of our balance we thought we were. But, sadly she left, as she is a key player on her soccer team and this is one passion she enjoys more than marine mammals. We did not know it at the time, but we would see her again at the end of the leg. I will get to that later, too.

This leg became known as the monkey brethren leg. I will tell you how it began... We were getting ready to leave Mobile, AL to cruise across the sea looking for whales again. We often ran many errands the last few days of port to get everything that we needed. One of the essential things was to make sure that we had enough food (and the right ones). We always craved and never had enough fruit: apples and bananas, in particular. This time, we told our cook to make sure that we had enough of those. He assured us that we did, and that each person would be allowed one of each a day. Dr. Wise, Johnny, and I pondered this thought for a little while. We calculated that we would need 140 of each if Kyle's math skills were right. Something did not seem quite right to me. Where did we have the room for 420 pieces of fruit? Dr. Wise, Johnny, and I investigated, and Kyle had only bought 25 of each. That meant that every person could have two and a half of each the whole two week leg. This wasn't going to work at all. So, we set out to go to the store a mile away.

Along the way we talked about how ridiculous and tiring it was going to be to lug 140 pieces of each fruit a mile in the blistering sun. Dr. Wise had occasionally referred to Johnny and I as monkeys, because we were so fast at climbing up the mast to assume watch positions. I said that carrying all this fruit would certainly confirm people's perceptions that we were indeed monkeys. We got to the store and went to the fruit section. No green bananas!! There was no way that we would be able to eat 140 yellow bananas before they got too ripe. So we bought about 40 and proceeded to trudge the mile trek back to the boat. We certainly felt like monkeys walking back with our arms full of bananas. We couldn't help but discuss other ways that we had been monkeys in the past and probably would in the near future.

A few days later, I was down in galley and noticed that the bananas were getting too ripe. Sure enough, we had barely made a dent in the ones that we had. I wondered what we should do. It would be hard to let all those bananas go to waste. I ate four of them. Then I walked through the salon and the pilot house with bunches of almost too ripe bananas asking people, "want a banana?" No one would eat one. "Come on please eat a banana; don't make me eat them all by myself!!" Fine. Since no one would eat any, I ate three more before I physically could not eat any more. *What to do with them?* I pondered to myself. We could make banana bread. But we had far too many bananas to make only banana bread. Then I thought back and remembered that a friend of mine had had done something else with them. He had frozen them. I had eaten a frozen banana once and it was delicious. So, I froze about 15 of them. Thanks for the great idea, Don! That night, I suggested that we sit on the bowsprit, frozen banana in hand, and eat it while we watch the magnificent sunset. This was the start of a great tradition. Dr. Wise, Johnny, Rick, Rob, and I did this every night, while I sometimes made monkey sounds to be in character.

Some of us had begun to get fed up with the lack of whales, especially Johnny and I. On day two of this leg, we heard the one word that is music to our ears no matter whether it is at 7am to wake us up after a long, sleepless night, or at 1pm when we are simply too hot and too tired to move: whales. Whenever we got the call of whales, first from the person on watch and then by the rest of the crew inside, it was never just "whales". It is always something like whaaaaaaaales!!!!!!! The crew was in position before anyone could blink. Suddenly, Johnny and Rick had the first and second biopsies. These were our first sperm whale biopsies from the Gulf of Mexico. I had gotten video footage from the whale boom. Dr. Wise grabbed the biopsies and went down to the lab; I followed closely behind. He sat down on the chair and attempted to cut the tissue into pieces. This was not an easy thing to do for a few reasons. One, the skin is thick and almost leather like. Two, the boat is always in motion, and thus we are always trying to compensate for which way it moves. And three, the boat almost always presents us with random, jerky movements rather than smooth ones. It was a difficult endeavor, which made it even more exciting when we had finished it. This leg, Dr. Wise processed the first few samples and then let me process a few.

The next day, I realized that the footage from the whale boom was not the right angle. Next time, I would try from the midlevel platform. We got the call for whales again; they were only a few hundred meters from the boat. We would have to act fast if we were going to get this biopsy. Before the crew knew it I had climbed up the mast. It had taken me about twenty seconds to grab the camera, put on my harness, and get forty feet up the mast to the platform. Twenty seconds later, I had what I believed to be my best footage of a biopsy attempt, yet. I heard the arrow smack the body of the whale and climbed down to get the sample from Rob, who had scooped it up with the net just as I was getting down. Someone had spotted the whale and within a minute, I was up the mast, got some video footage, climbed back down, and was on my way down to the lab to process the sample. I felt like a champion!

Being one of the cell culturists on the boat is a very rewarding job. About 10 days after the samples were put into culture, the cells began to grow out of the tissue pieces. Waiting for those cells to grow and finally seeing them under the microscope was like opening up presents on Christmas morning while snow was gently covering the ground in a fluffy blanket. Successfully growing whale cells on a boat is something that only a handful of people have ever done, and they were all on this trip!!!

We headed into port a few days early, unfortunately, because a storm was going to make the water very turbulent. Johnny and I spent the first three days that we were docked inventorying the entire boat, which was quite a task. The last few days at port were much more interesting. Alexandra Cousteau came to the boat and was interested in our research and wanted to put a story about us in with her current expedition. For anyone who does not know of Alexandra Cousteau, she is the grand-daughter of Jacques Cousteau (the most prominent marine biologist in the world). Alexandra had taken over his legacy and was involved in an a hundred and thirty eight day expedition around the U.S., Canada, and Mexico exploring critical water issues. The first two days were purely professional. She had flown Cathy (the first person to grow whale cells on a boat) to the boat to interview her about what it was like. She interviewed her about the cell culture process, Dr. Wise about the goals and toxicological aspects of the voyage, and Johnny about the biopsy process. It was so cool that Alexandra was interested in our research.

The last day (which was the night before we were going to head back out to sea), Alexandra and her crew came back to what was called "the bus meets boat event." She put together a catered event out in the parking lot in front of our boat, and drove in her crew in the tour bus to meet us. This was particularly awesome because we could put all of our science and research and just relax and talk with Cousteau and the rest of her team. We sat on the boat and talked while we ate delicious food. It was one of the best events of the voyage. There was truly a remarkable chemistry between the two groups as conversation flowed comfortably and continuously in all areas of the boat, parking lot and bus. Later on, they showed the inside of their bus. It was a really nice bus, and when Dr. Wise and I went inside, we joked that perhaps we could trade a few days the boat for a few days on the bus. Previously, this bus had been Paul McCartney's touring bus, and then John McCain's presidential touring bus. This event was a great way to end our time here at port. Cousteau said she was including our research in a National Geographic short film and documentary that would come out later this year or early next year. We are excited to see it and excited to get back out to sea to continue our work.