

Cathy Wise's Reflection for Leg 1

My name is Catherine Wise. I am a student in the Wise Laboratory at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, Maine.

There is nothing quite like life at sea. Whether it is the constant pounding of rough waves or the gentle sway of sailing over glassy waters. The experience cannot be expressed in words. The ocean is full of miraculous creatures. Ones that we have sought to find and others that have happened upon our path. Nature seems to put on a variety of shows for us; between the patterns of the weather, sun, and nighttime skies. Every day is a new scene with new marine life and new experiences.

The views that we admire are more exquisite than any fine art gallery can convey. The natural phenomena of the world are even more magical out here on the ocean. Simple everyday things such as sunrise and sunset are like fingerprints each is unique and majestic. Once the sun is down the moon and stars are mirrored in the water. During a calm night the moonlight will catch the angle of that mirror and will dance across it with the flow of the waves simulating fireflies dancing through a summer night. Nothing quite captures the excitement of seeing a storm rolling in; the crazy patterns of the clouds hovering above sometimes with strikes of lightening flashing in the distance. The only thing more exciting than these views are the living ones.

I had never before seen the brilliant colors of a Portuguese Man O'War; let alone gotten the chance to take a close up look at its delicate structure. Nor have I seen the curiosity of a dolphin checking out a nearby sea turtle. I never knew how long a flying fish could soar over the water before diving back down. There are so many things that we see and learn about with our own eyes out here that no screen or textbook can show.

It seemed at times as if the dolphins were seeking us out. From the observation platform we would see dolphins off in the distance; the next thing we knew they were making a bee-line for the bow to have a little bit of fun. Sometimes it was only a couple but other times it was more than I could keep count of.

We have sought out the gentle giants of the sea; whales. We have spent countless hours searching the horizon for whale blows and listening for them on the acoustic array. Once they are spotted we follow them so that we can collect a skin sample for our studies. The pursuit of collecting the samples is by far the most enjoyable part for me. During the time that we are approaching the whales is when I get to watch them. At that time nothing else in the world is important. The beauty and grace with which these animals move is incredible. Between the deep and shallow dives exposing their bodies above the surface one inch at a time for us to see. The action almost seems to be in slow motion with the grand finale being a view of their tale flukes. Occasionally we are treated with a vision of their full body all above the water at once when they breach. This sight is pure bliss.

Once the first sample has been collected my moments of awe are halted. I must now begin the most tedious yet important job; processing the samples in the lab. First cutting the parts to be frozen down for analysis. Then, cutting what is left into tiny pieces in hopes of creating a cell line from the tissue. This job was no cake walk on the first stretch of our trip, between coping with the movement of the boat and the heat of the laboratory located in the aft cabin; which was by far the hottest room on the boat. It's hard work especially knowing that everyone above is still enjoying the view of the whales.

No one quite feels the disappointment that I have experienced from some of the accidents that occurred in the lab. The sacrifice and hard work feels wasted when we lose a flask that hold the potential for a cell line. Only one thing may go wrong such as the power shutting off and losing the sterile atmosphere inside the hood resulting in contamination. We learned that everything needed to be secured extra tightly. Duct tape wasn't enough to hold the incubator door shut in rough waters. We lost a few flasks as they flew across the room early one day and many others had their tissues uprooted from the base of the flask from the crash landing. Talk about adding a layer of stress to the job. Everything from the doors to the gimbals was then secured tightly with industrial strength Velcro. Some flasks have prevailed through all the chaos and stress of being cultured on a boat for the first time. Upon arriving in West Palm Beach we got view of the first cells plating out. By the time we shipped the cells about a week later there had been some growth. I have my fingers crossed that these will continue to grow once they have reached the Wise Laboratory.

This voyage is an amazing journey. Everyday offers something new. There are many Kodak moments that have been locked into our memories, sights that even the best camera cannot capture. Any picture can capture the beauty of nature and of any scene; nothing but memories can capture the breathtaking awe of the sights, the emotions, and the glory of the complete experience of living out at sea. Our adventures have only further emphasized my love of the ocean and marine life.