

Day 1: Friday, May 25, 2012

Dear Family and Friends,

"Cast off" the Captain stated in a very matter-of-fact tone and with that our third year of Gulf of Mexico whale research was launched. No loud shouts or mad scrambles. No tearful goodbyes or waving crowds. Just a simple phrase and the toss of a rope and we were off to sea. One lone person seeing us off with a simple wave.

Nine of us set off on this the first leg of our 2012 voyage. Our core personnel remain the same. Bob Wallace is our Captain, Johnny Wise leads the science team and serves as primary whale biopsier. Sandy Wise is our whale photo-id person and cook. I am here as well. Cathy is not with us this summer as she is doing a mandatory EPA fellowship in Massachusetts. We miss her already.

Our boat crew is different. First mate Ian Glass has left to become the Captain of the wooden schooner Bagheera, a ship that ironically works out of Portland, Maine. Deckhand John Bradford is off doing the next requirement in his college training at Massachusetts Maritime Academy. We will miss their good company.

So now we have new crew to share the adventure. Hugh is our new first mate. He is from Boston. Ike is our second mate. He is a navy Gulf war veteran most recently from Key West. By the end of the summer, I am sure they will be full fledged members of our voyage family.

On the science team, this leg has two veterans of our 2010 voyage: Carolyne LaCerte, a graduate student in my lab and Dr. Tania Li Chen who was my graduate student until her graduation about two weeks ago! We also have Josh Jones from Scripps who was on the global voyage for several years and knows Odyssey well. Josh is here to help tune our acoustic array and train us better it its use. Odyssey lore holds that Josh can bring the boat within 10 feet of a whale after hearing only a single click. A legend, I remind him of as needed. We are glad to have him here.

Our vessel, Odyssey, is ship shape as ever. New paint, new varnish, new window frames and a fully repaired and repainted hull and she is raring to go. I swear she smiled and bobbed as each of us came on board for this launch eager as all of us to get back out to sea and the work we do.

The day was spent as all launch legs are spent - saying goodbyes to loved ones at home, assembling components, checking systems, stowing gear, double checking, triple checking making sure all is ready and then finally waiting for deep water. The Gulf of Mexico you see is shallow (i.e. less than 300 feet) for a long distance. It will be morning before we see water deep enough to deploy the array.

The most notable thing about day 1 is that you soon realize just how busy your land world is. Within a few hours all your requirements are done. There is no cell phone service and no land in sight. It's just you, the team, the boat and water as far as you can see. Suddenly, there is nothing more to do, but wait for deep water. It hits you like a ton of bricks and immediately you realize how fast your world has been moving.

By dinner, you are acclimated, or at least I am now. The rhythm of the sea, the hum of the engine the glow of the sun all conspire into a soothing blend and relax your mind and your body. One evening to just be.

Oh and what an evening it was. A beautiful orange sunset ended in a brilliant green flash. We ate our first dinner together on the aft deck just drifting with the sea, gently pulled along by our main sail. On the port side, the sky filled with colors starting with orange at the sea and ending in a purple hue of the oncoming night sky. A single bird circled round and round making a dramatic silhouette against the stunning colors. On the starboard side some clouds against a dark sky treated us to nature's laser light show as first one, then two and then three clouds sparkled inside with lightning, dancing together to the beat of music only they could hear. It was mesmerizing. We all found peace if only for a few moments.

This leg will be short and focus on training and acoustics. We have brand new crossbows to break in, helicopters to fly, submarines to drive and a new technique to attempt to measure oil pollutants in whale tissue. There is much to do and much to see. I look forward to telling you all about it as we go....

Pictures of the sunset (Johnny silhouetted in the bowsprit and Tania under the light box), the green flash and Carlyne (tie dye shirt), Tania (blue t-shirt), Johnny and Sandy looking at the picture of the green flash are attached.

Good night.

John



