

Days 39-46, Voyage 2, July 16-24, 2011

This port call was unusual as we started in Biloxi and then the boat sailed to Baton Rouge for the meeting with our sponsor Albemarle. Johnny took the long break as an opportunity to grab a little summer fun with college friends and returned to Maine. Sandy and I went to North Carolina for a couple of days to work with the EPA, but made it back to Baton Rouge for some of the festivities. Cathy stayed on the boat as cook and science head and showed everyone in Baton Rouge just how well trained USM students are. Ocean Alliance stalwarts John Atkinson and Mark Hayes flew in and helped Captain Bob, First Mate Ian and John Bradford with the ride up the Mississippi. Roger Payne and Iain Kerr joined the team in Baton Rouge. Ultimately, several hundred people visited the boat and learned of our work. The team thoroughly enjoyed the people from Albemarle and the time in Baton Rouge.

We learned in port from NOAA that we are indeed the only group studying the toxicology of chemicals in these Gulf whales. NOAA took a few samples last year and have moved on to other concerns. In fact, there is only one other group studying anything all in these whales. Their efforts are to satellite tag them to see where they go. You might remember the picture of the whale with the blue antennae attached- that was their work. Ironically, they developed their original tagging protocols some 18 years ago on the Odyssey with Iain Kerr and Captain Bob!

It's just us now. Welcome to the cutting edge of whale toxicology research. I thought about this outcome a lot while in port. My team's work is commonly on the very edge of what is known in whatever we do. I like to discover new things and new approaches.

At the same time, the edge can be a very lonely place as science is a discipline built on skepticism. The more one can answer and address that skepticism with data, the stronger the work becomes and the quieter the criticisms get. The challenge is, when you work on the edge, this far out on the edge, you are like a fish in a small barrel for the skeptics. Little data and lots of vision, great fodder for those who like to criticize.

But, the more I thought about it, the broader my grin got. For I am not out here on my own. We have, have had, and will have, a crew of people on board who devote themselves to this project with me. We have a team of researchers in my lab working hard every day to ensure we have the support we need and that samples that come home are handled correctly. We have fantastic partners at Ocean Alliance and a myriad of exceptional expert collaborators. We have generous and insightful financial supporters. We have a University of administrators, faculty, staff and students helping us with essential work in payroll, human resources, sponsored programs, business

services, information technology, research compliance and many other departments to help us succeed. We have all of you with words of encouragement and interest. We are a team here out on the edge of whale toxicology. Thanks for your support! We are in this one together.

So now we are back at it sailing down the Mississippi - headed back to the Gulf. We have new crew on. Dr. Bob Kuech, our science education professor at USM, is back with us. He will be our photographer. Ariel Kaplan is a biochemistry major at USM. She will man the data. Rikki Kuech is a nursing major at USM. She will be our spotter when we are on whales. Brady Kuech just graduated from USM. He will be manning the nets and arrows. John Atkinson, Iain Kerr and Mark Hayes spent the day sailing down with us, but they departed in New Orleans.

All is well. We are ready for more whales. Picture of the sunset over the Mississippi attached. It was taken facing behind the boat.

John

P.S. We are on the Mississippi in Louisiana. Our current location is 29 degrees 54.6 minutes North and 90 degrees 06.3 minutes West, for those who want to track us as we go. For Google maps (not Google Earth - but maps) use (include letters and comma): 29.546 N, 90.063 W

For those of you who are new to this email diary - the previous days can be found at: <https://cms.usm.maine.edu/toxicology/dr-wises-voyage-leg-summaries-2011>

