

Day 59: September 13, 2010

Another day that started out rather uneventful. It was not surprising as we had been this direction before. Then about 4 pm things got a bit more interesting. Bob was tracking whales on the array and we had a visual on one. But then in the typical pattern, it dove before we could get close. Then it came up again just after 5 pm and by 5:30 we were within range. We reached the whale just as it was about to dive and a sample was successfully taken. But this whale was different than the others; it had a massive tail suggesting that it was a large adult male. By 7:00 pm we had three additional samples taken and had our eye on one more whale.

About halfway to the horizon there was one whale who had made 1 large circle tail slapping the water. The behavior had nothing to do with us. It is called lobtailing. Breeches often accompany lobtails though we saw none of those. I could swear I heard one though.

The purpose of lobtailing is not entirely clear, though it can be used by sperm whales to ward off killer whales, but it also appears to be a behavior that whales do from time to time for fun (or maybe practice?) while they are at the surface. It was fascinating to watch this tail in the air slapping at the water every 10 yards or so.

Sandy came by the pilothouse and saw the look in my eye and said "You're not going for one more sample are you???" The light won't last!!!!" Carolynne yelled down from the midlevel platform that she too felt the light was getting too low.

I thought about it a second, grinned, and then said "Of course we are" and so she glowered at me, collected the biopsy log and headed to the bow. A few minutes later, she came back into the pilothouse grabbed a flashlight, showed it to me to further make the point, and headed back to the bow. (It was not that dark yet).

It's good to have your team check your thinking, keeps me thinking straight. I always give them room to question plans and sometimes they convince me otherwise and we change plans. But after so many days out here at sea, I felt we had just enough light for 1 more sample. The biopsiers, Rick and Johnny, had not moved from their positions, Matt stood steadfast and ready with the net and Bob maintained the helm so I was not out on this limb alone. On the other hand, it could just be a guy thing...

By the time we reached the whale, the tail slapping had stopped and the light was dimming. The whale was resting along the surface again, and, as often is the case, started its normal dinner dive before we could get into ideal position. I was on the net ready to collect an arrow before the light got too low to see it, when in front of my eyes there was a flurry of activity. The primary biopsier made an attempt, which the secondary biopsier read as a miss and took an attempt as well. The camera flashed and both arrows went in different directions- one to port and one to starboard. Total visual chaos!

Being on port, I tried for the port arrow- no luck- and so tossed a ring to mark the spot. The good news was that luck was on our side and with some extra effort both arrows and the ring were retrieved before it finally got dark. We collected that biopsy 1 minute later than our "sunset" biopsy of the other day. Too dark? Almost but not quite! Doubt we would have had another 10 minutes though, so it was close.

With that, we had our 49th biopsy sample (though not all from sperm whales)! 41 sperm whales sampled so far. 35 biopsies since cameraman Ian left the boat and Iain Kerr left us for Peru. Must be something about Ian's leaving us that brings us biopsy luck. But we are not letting First Mate Ian go!

I know what Iain Kerr will say when he sees this comment- he is going back to Peru! He will do whatever is needed to make this voyage successful. We, of course, will not let him get away that easily this time. We are, however, hoping for 50 biopsies before we talk to him, except he is due back tomorrow... guess we won't be answering the phone for a while ;)!!!!

With that our day ended with stew at the aft table and lively conversation. Tonight we will follow the whale clicks to see what tomorrow brings.

On another note, we have more news from the Cousteau group:

1. There is a guest blog from me on their website with a really neat picture looking down on Alexandra and me from the midlevel platform. Please see it at:

<http://www.alexandracousteau.org/field/expedition-blog/sea-cameraman-ian>

2. Cameraman Ian also made a blog about his experience with us. Please see it at:

<http://www.alexandracousteau.org/field/expedition-blog/whiplash-high-seas-prowl-sperm-whales-crew-ocean-alliance>

3. Cameraman Ian has a video of us biopsying at <http://www.vimeo.com/14889350>

Be sure to post comments on all three sites!

Soon we will be posting a blog from them on our website too. Stay tuned!

Array is clicking- gotta go!

John