

Day 61: September 15, 2010

I woke up this morning thinking about the days ahead and how well this leg had gone. Standing on deck at sea can really remind you of the days of yore when being at sea was a long uncertain journey. I found myself thinking we had done so well, the next real priority was to get the cells and tissues off the boat and back to our lab on the USM campus.

It's not that I was thinking we won't get back-, but rather that there was a myriad of technical issues that could arise that could cost us samples. Things like rough weather or electrical issues. I found myself wondering if that was what the leaders of expeditions in the old days thought you know "our holds are full enough let's get back to port" or did they keep pushing for more? I imagine it went both ways. I lean towards the former approach and was thinking the goal should be to get in and sample what whales we encounter on the way in, but cut down on the searching.

When I fully awoke, I realized that we had exactly one of those problems brewing. The air conditioning was off and not functioning. That could pose a real issue if it gets really hot as the incubator can be affected by ambient temperature if it gets too hot and whales cells do not like hotter temperatures. I was not worried that this outcome would occur as the ac goes in and out now and then and Captain Bob always gets it fixed. But, it did reinforce my earlier thoughts. He did get it fixed.

It was cool on deck so many of us were outside. A storm hung on the horizon and we looked at it and immediately donned our bathing suits hoping for a warm summer shower. Plus at this point temperatures in the boat were at 90 degrees. Carlyne even grabbed some soap and shampoo! But alas, no rain came. Lots of wind and lot's of waves and lot's of stormy skies. Matt and I entertained ourselves by allowing the ocean spray from the waves slapping on the boat soak us. Don't get me wrong the waves were not that big, just one every once in a while. I had Matt take a picture of the oncoming storm we hoped would shower us with warm water. Sandy thought I was crazy, but I told her then it was likely to be the picture of the day... and it was. It is attached to this email.

The wind and the waves stayed with us all day though the skies rotated from gray to blue. No whales were seen or heard though lots of studying and USM lab work got done. The highlight of the day was that Iain Kerr, my partner in this endeavor had returned from Peru. I thank his wife Amy for getting him off to Peru and on a trip with no phone or internet access. He earned this much needed break and we are glad to have him back refreshed and ready to go.

We of course were not going to ease him back into it. Nope, right back into it we went never missing a beat. We settled on a port to end this leg- Biloxi. We discussed the need for more arrows - we are down to 6, so more will be waiting in Biloxi. We agreed on the need to paint them a more neon color to make them easier to see - orange was decided on (surprise, surprise, surprise). We went through a whole host of questions

and needs and got him right back into the swing of it. We also swapped stories about what was working well and what adjustments we had made. Iain's fingerprints are all over this voyage and we are pleased he is back to resume his role on the team.

By the end of the day we were motoring at a whopping 3 knots (normally we do 6-7). We did not make our normal dinner and drift routine, else the wind and waves push us back to where we were yesterday (only half serious). By dinner, it was 2 knots and in looking at the weather it could be this way all the way in to Biloxi. We are now hopeful to reach port on Saturday- Sunday at the latest. There we will reprovision, rest for a couple of days (meaning only 10 hour workdays- no helm watches or whale watches but lots of boat, lab and class work), take on new team members and head out again.

James has posted a blog from Anne Casselman, the science writer from the Cousteau group on our website - you can read it at:

<http://usm.maine.edu/toxicology/gulf/vistors/Casselman.php>

Anne really impressed me with how well she captured the scientific aspects of what we were discussing. Even more remarkable was that she did it with activities going on all around us. She is also a really pleasant person.

So we will be riding out these waves and winds, the strongest Carolyn and Sandy have seen yet. The rest of us are rather used to it now and since we screwed down the bench to the floor- no more salon sledding!

Again, I marvel at how technology has made the world small as tonight I am in an email discussion with colleagues in Barrow, Alaska about our data in bowhead whale cells. You may remember Barrow from years ago. It is the northernmost city of the US and Sandy went there 4 years in a row for the fall native-Alaskan whale hunt and developed bowhead whale cell lines. I believe several of you joked that I banished her to Alaska... Of course now USM has banished me to the Gulf!!!

Seriously though, we are intrigued and excited by our bowhead whale data as these whales appear to be resistant to chromium-induced chromosome damage a finding that came out of our work with our high school students and is now being built upon by Juli and others in our lab.

I may have to go to Barrow and present the data! Guess I'll be the one banished then ;).

Hey, we are up to 2.5 knots!

Good night.

John

