

Day 87: October 11, 2010

The team is frustrated. The entire team from Roger and I on down to our most recent crew member Jane. Great weather, broken boat. It manifests itself in different ways from Iain letting the salty sailor in him come out and explaining to me that the engine and transmission are new and should not be failing at all illustrated with some colorful adjectives. Sandy stomping around a bit explaining to me that "This. This is not science!" Johnny disappearing on deck with a net deciding that since we cannot follow whales we can always move forward with our plan to look at jellyfish and spending the day netting them in while we travel along at 4 knots (not an easy feat to net at that speed). And no he did not need any help. Matt expressing his concern and anxiety that so much pressure would be on the last leg to get samples that it would be stressful. First Mate Ian simply looking glum, way out of character for him. Bailey being the superstitious sailor worrying that his arrival had jinxed us since all of the problems started then. Other too had their concerns and frustrations.

That is when my job is the hardest and yet most important. It is when the worry and concern I have for those working so hard on this effort amps up, but it also allows me to remind myself and them of the big picture. To get everyone to lift their eyes up from the trees and see the forest. Today, I write to them as much as I do to you, because they too read these my letters to home as they too are an important part of what home is.

Yes, the boat is broken again after we just fixed it. But we have to look beyond that. We have to look at and judge this expedition in its entirety not any 1 leg as a microcosm of it. Our nation had its worst environmental crisis. We stepped up to launch our effort to help understand it. We did not know what we would encounter. We did not know how we would fare at sea as most of us, including myself, had never been. We spent some time worry about if the expedition would even happen. We spent some time preparing for the threat of the oil to us personally. We planned and hoped and made our best guesses at what to do. We knew then we were starting on what would be years of work.

We are now in the final stages of the first year of the expedition. We have already exceeded our best expectations at the start. We have collected biopsies from 51 whales, when we hoped for 20-25. Our cell culture laboratory, never tried before, yielded cell lines from all of those whales, though some would be lost later due to circumstances (like heavy weather) we did not have enough experience with. But we proved to lab to be true and to work. We isolated three tubes of DNA from each of those whales, which is now allowing for gender id work. Only 1 biopsy did not yield enough blubber for petroleum products and dispersant analysis and so we have 50 biopsies for that. We have 51 for metal analysis. More than enough for each. If we knew in June/July that this outcome would be our fate we would have been thrilled. I am told the NOAA boat only managed about 10 biopsies in the same time frame at almost 23-times the cost.

But we have gone beyond that. We have 43 fish sampled, which means many more subsamples from each fish. We have water samples, sediment samples, air samples, krill samples, many other invertebrate samples, dolphin blow samples, parasite samples, acoustic data, videos, many letters to home, logs, blogs and writing pieces and scores of images. Had we been promised that in June/July we'd have been over the moon.

But we have gone beyond that, we have met with and built relationships with OSS, Oregon State University, St. Andrews University, NOAA, University of South Florida, Greenpeace, Dauphin Island marine lab, University of Alabama, Mobile Baykeeper, University of Southern Mississippi, Alexandra Cousteau's group and Blue Legacy, Tulane University, Louisiana State University, LUMCON, Grand Isle Marine Lab, University of Georgia, and Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Ten of these groups have either been on the boat or are collaborating on projects with us or both. Most of these relationships, which will prove invaluable to our future efforts came because weather or repairs forced us into port. These port trips are important and successful too.

We learned to live at sea, to plan a voyage to respond to challenges and to constantly be increasing our skills and capabilities. We learned in our bones just how amazing, vast and powerful the ocean can be.

Yes, the boat needs repairs. But as Roger would tell me: "Why John, this is how whale expeditions go. Now, you are an experienced whale field researcher!" Roger taught me to see the whole expedition and not just the momentary problems. This expedition by whatever metric you want to use is off the charts successful. So to my team as we limp into port again:

Yes, Iain Kerr, the engine and transmission should not have broken. But they did and we overcame them and that's all that really matters. We are in port safely. The boat will be fixed and we will resume our work. You have seen to all that you could and even beyond and we are grateful and have been back out to sea faster because of it. Keep up the excellent support

Yes, Sandy, limping in is not science, but it is an unavoidable part of a scientific expedition into the deep ocean. Again overall, the problems could have been much worse, just be glad our problems have been so solvable. But also, these port calls have given us invaluable relationships, positioned us to be a leader with the Gulf universities in the crisis and opened doors to funding and opportunities we never imagined. I would prefer to be at sea, but let's once again maximize the impact of the port call.

No Matt, The last leg will not have more pressure on it to succeed. There is no need to be anxious about it. We are off the charts successful and the last leg will only add to that. You have done well and grown so much these many days at sea. Value that more and worry less.

Cheer up First Mate Ian, we need your smile and your humor and for you to reassert... how would you say it... your awesomeness.

Bailey, don't be silly you are no jinx. Just the way the ball bounces sometimes. We life give us lemons. We make lemonade! It has worked so far.

Jane and Monique thanks for the work and the good humor, we will strive on without you.

Shouping- remember in port- you're going to cook us some jellyfish. Seems my peanut butter and jellyfish sandwich joke may come true after all.

Johnny- its good you can't keep still. Just keep on catching those jellyfish and everything else that you can, but now it's time for us to help again. Plus we need your smile and laugh as well. You too have grown so much and performed so well - enjoy it!

Captain Bob and I appreciate all of your hard work and passion and desire for constant success and maximizing all opportunities. Rest in port and be ready. Stop focusing on momentary opportunities missed. Remember the glass is always half full. Task some time in port to reflect on the whole expedition and bask in the glow of a job well done. Bit don't get too cocky, after all...

We are not done yet!

John

P.S. Thanks again to John Atkinson for lining up the transmission repair guy to be here in the morning. John's back from Argentina and of course with his return the weather improves! Hmmm wonder if this means we have to send Iain back to Peru so the whales will return... Just kidding Iain!