

## CHAPTER 17

### *Gentle Giants*

*I'm not a very sentimental person. I don't think we ought to save whales because they're cuddly or pettable. But it's simply an amazing experience having those whales roll over and look at you eye to eye. There's really an interspecies contact there. There's an intelligence.... That's about as far as I want to go with that, but it's... extraordinary.*

—Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.,  
National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) Lawyer  
(from *Eye of the Whale* by Dick Russell)

I watched as a long, thin, gray-knuckled ridge rose to the top of the water from the aquamarine depths below. Like some great primordial water dragon, it slowly widened to reveal a patchy gray and white exterior that extended about eight feet across and the length of two boats. It was a California gray whale that had just surfaced about nine meters to the port side of our *panga*, a small motorized skiff operated by one of the locals.

I was in Magdalena Bay, near Boca de Soledad on the Baja Peninsula. The bay is one of three lagoons on the Pacific side that have been safeguarded as sanctuaries for the gray whales who migrate here every year to breed

and birth their young. It was February, and I was here on a weeklong expedition to kayak along the mangrove estuaries and to see the whales.

In the summer of 2004 I had traveled up to the lush isles of British Columbia on a paddling adventure with the orcas. Now, six months later, opportunity had brought me south to the cacti and arid vistas of Mexico. I had heard about the “friendly” whales of Baja — the mother whales and their babies, especially — who would approach visitors in their boats seeking contact. Here was my chance to experience firsthand the truth to these whale tales. I was curious to see how the whales’ interest in humans compared to that of dolphins.

There is a remarkable story about how a human is first reported to have touched one of Baja’s “friendly” whales. In 1972, a man named Pachico Mayoral and a friend were out in a small fishing boat in Laguna San Ignacio, another wide bay along Baja’s western coast. Quite unexpectedly, they were approached by a large gray whale that rubbed up against the side of their boat. At first, the two men feared for their lives, but as the whale continued its attentions, Pachico finally reached over the side and touched it. Later, he talked of this event as being a profound and life-changing experience, similar to that of holding his first-born child. The gigantic whale seemed to relish the contact and continued to submerge itself and reappear on the other side of the *panga* for at least another two hours. Pachico returned to his village, and the story spread about how the two men had touched a whale. This was the beginning of a whole new change in attitude toward the

whales and the start of a new industry in whale-watching and whale-petting.



The story of the first “friendlies” stayed in the back of my mind as our group of eleven kayakers and three guides quietly paddled by the tangled roots of red and white mangroves. We were headed for our campsite on a remote and windswept island in Bahia Magdalena. Great white heron and snowy egrets roosted in the thick branches on either side. Pelicans, ospreys, cormorants and gulls flew overhead and lined the edges of sandy coves. In the distance we could see the feathery spouts of whales as they surfaced for air. As we skirted a final bend in the channel, we saw the rounded white domes of two spacious tents on a wide beach. We had arrived at what would be our new home for the next week.

Tomorrow would be our first day on the water for a closer look at these gentle giants. Instead of using our kayaks, we would be adhering to whale-watching regulations by traveling in two open-air *pangas* driven by licensed operators. That evening, as we sat in a circle under the flickering light of a lantern in one of the domes, we heard a retelling of the account of the first “friendly” whale. As the story ended, I knew we were in for a rare treat when we learned that our guide Poncho was one of Pachico’s sons. Growing up as a fisherman, he had witnessed the gradual shifts that had taken place in his community as a result of the changes in attitude towards the whales and as awareness grew for the need to preserve the environment. This led him to work with several organizations whose aims were to protect declining

species and to train locals in language and leadership skills. Today, he does what he likes best — being a guide and introducing people to the beloved *ballena gris*, or gray whale.

As the evening continued, and over the days ahead, we familiarized ourselves with whale facts and history. For centuries, the gray whales were hunted — first by the native hunters of North America and Asia, and later by the Yankee and European whalers. Whale bone and baleen were used to make hoop skirts and corsets, and although the oil from gray whales was of poorer quality than that of other whales, it increased in value as the whale population declined. With the evolution of whaling technology, and the use of explosive harpoons and steam-powered ships, it was estimated that less than 1,000 Pacific gray whales were left by the 1930s. With extinction imminent, an international agreement was finally reached in 1946 that banned all commercial whaling. The treaty was signed by most whaling nations. Today, the Pacific gray whales have undergone an unprecedented recovery, with an average annual increase of 2.5 percent.

Gray whales are part of the subclassification of cetaceans known as the Mysticetes, or baleen whales (which use a fine rubbery fringe on the upper and lower jaws to filter plankton and other tiny aquatic animals). This is different from dolphins, who are classified as Odontocetes, or toothed “whales.” Toothed whales are considered predatory, feeding on fish or other marine mammals. For the most part, the gray whales graze in shallow waters, scooping up mud along the bottom, which is then pushed and filtered through their baleen with a giant tongue. Small invertebrates are left trapped

inside their mouth and then swallowed.

Another peculiarity of the grays is the fact that they are hosts to several species of barnacles and amphipods, or whale lice, which feed on the whale's skin. These tiny crustaceans give the gray whales their characteristic mottled appearance. Born a shiny black, the whales are soon discolored by large distinctive patches of crusty white. The small parasitic creatures that attach themselves seem to assist the whales by keeping them clean.

An additional characteristic of the baleens is the presence of two blowholes on the top of their head, as compared to the one blowhole of a dolphin. When a gray whale surfaces to breathe, it exhales with a tall heart-shaped spout. Appearing like a faint mist from afar, this watery plume actually rises up to over twice the height of a human. Later that week, some of us would be lucky enough to see the rainbows that sometimes blink in the sparkling haze of the whales' breath.

Finally, the gray whales do not have a dorsal fin like dolphins. Instead, a series of six to twelve bumps traces the length of the whale's spine, making them at first glance look like some ancient and primitive creature that has come back to life from another age.

What the Pacific grays are perhaps most known for is their extraordinary migratory route, one of the longest of any species of mammal. Taken each winter from the nutrient-rich arctic waters of the Chukchi and Bering Seas off Alaska, they traverse the entire length of the North American continent to the southern reaches of the Baja peninsula. It's a round-trip journey of about 10,000 miles — almost two months of travel each way. To prepare for the trek, the whales accumulate from six to twelve inches of extra blubber over a summer of

intensive feeding. Then, with the gestation period of a baby whale being about twelve months, the goal of the mothers by midwinter is to reach the tropical waters of the south where their young can be safely born.



*The author petting Bubbles.*



On our first morning of whale-watching, we gathered in the faint early light wondering what lay ahead. After pulling on our life jackets, and loading up on our cameras and film, we motored out into the center of the bay. There, among a euphony of spouts, we had our

first close-up view of the long, speckled bodies of several mamas as they rose to the surface, and nearby their babies, whose small heads looked like little antique dinosaurs with long downturned mouths etched along their jaws. Gingerly, we pattered closer, transfixed by the gentle rise and fall of their giant bodies and the soft whooshing sound of their breathing. One mother/baby pair, who particularly caught our attention, quickly received the nicknames “Scarface” and “Bubbles.” The mama had a distinctive white scar near her blowhole, and her baby, we noticed, seemed to enjoy blowing big,



*Poncho stroking the baleen of the whale.*

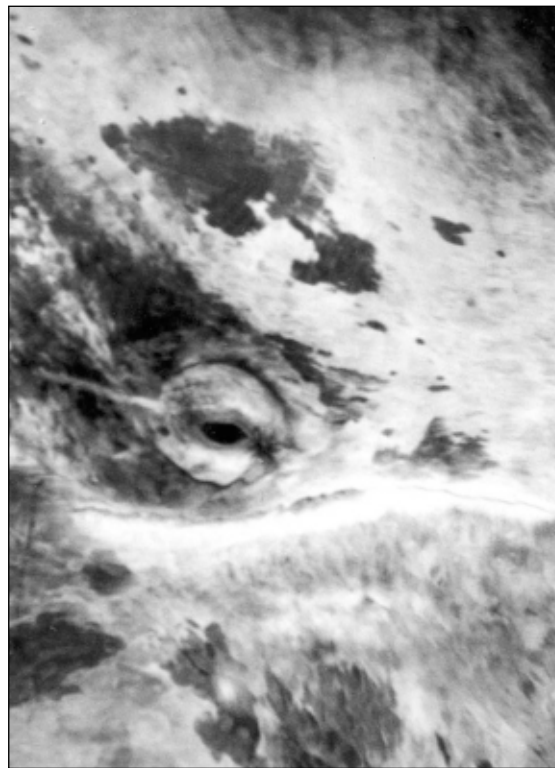
round bubbles that came tumbling up to the surface in short bursts. A few people were able to just reach the whales from the boat for a brief touch. Otherwise, the whales remained a discrete distance away from us.

As our session went on, we navigated out to the choppiest waters at the bay's mouth, where a number of juveniles frolicked in the waves, breaching and spy-hopping. I couldn't help wonder, as I had with the dolphins and the orcas, how much their behavior was purely for themselves and how much might have been for us. Either way, the air was soon filled with our delighted shrieks as these giant leviathans came crashing down in thunderous displays of water theatrics, or as they stood vertically, apparently eyeballing us with curious consideration. Some of the whales would swim alongside us about ten meters out before disappearing into the watery depths. On our return trip we cruised into what appeared to be a whale nursery, a quieter area off one of the islands. Several mothers floated motionless for long periods of time, as if they were sunbathing. Then, we would see the small spout of a baby next to one of the mamas, and we guessed that her calf had been nursing.

On the day of our second excursion, there was a heightened feeling of anticipation among the group's participants. Traveling with Poncho, our boat soon made contact with a mother and baby. Interestingly, the mom did not interact, but hovered protectively nearby as her youngster bumped up against the *panga* and went from one person to the next receiving scratching and caresses. Its rostrum was covered with circular white barnacles and short little hair bristles. When it was Poncho's turn, he ran his hands along the baby's mouth, which then

opened to reveal a feathery fringe of baleen that he combed with his fingers, much to everyone's delight and amazement. Soon afterwards, we encountered Scarface and Bubbles again. While Bubbles interacted with each of us along the side, his mom swam slowly back and forth beneath our boat, rubbing her back against the hull.

Later, as I rinsed my hands in the surf after a picnic lunch, a sudden plopping sound caused me look up and see the graceful silhouettes of two dolphins leaping out in front of me. It was as if they were sending a quick "hello," wishing me well with their large mammalian friends.



*Eye of the whale.*

On the last day of our whale adventures, a few of us decided to pay our driver for some extra time. We headed back out into the lagoon with Poncho, knowing that this would be our last encounter. Almost right away, we met Scarface and Bubbles. With great enthusiasm, Bubbles bobbed from person to person. As he slid along the edge of the boat, sideways in the water, I could see his eye looking directly into mine. Despite his size, I felt profoundly struck by his vulnerability and apparent trust. Shyly, he opened his mouth and allowed me to stroke his tongue. I had the feeling that if given the opportunity, he could easily learn to recognize simple gestures and respond to certain voice intonations, much like bottlenose dolphins.

As our motor idled, we were joined by several other *pangas* seeking a closer look. Perhaps most impressive, the whales took care to greet each of the newcomers, swimming from one boat to the next, giving everyone a chance to pet or stroke them. Several times, as the mama approached, her giant spout would douse the passengers with a cloud of whale's breath as they shrieked with laughter. A couple of the *pangas* carried Mexican visitors, and it was particularly endearing to see them, with ear-to-ear smiles, reaching over to pet what had once been known as a fearsome devil-fish.

As we headed back to camp and I stared out at the large expanse of bay with the many spouts that appeared at regular intervals, I couldn't help but wonder how it was that we had managed to find the same whales on each of our excursions. Did the whales recognize and remember us from one day to the next? Did they seek us out especially? Of all the whales in this vast lagoon, were there only a few interested in making contact with

people? Days later, when I perused a wall full of colorful whale photos for sale, I found myself saying, “No, that’s not Bubbles. That’s not him.” I left the kiosk empty-handed, relying instead on the photography skills of myself and our group.



At the end of the week, we loaded our gear into our kayaks and later traveled by van through the desert landscape of central Baja to the city of Loreto, a small tourist town on the Sea of Cortez. Gradually, we re-entered a more “civilized” way of life, with our metal vehicles and glass window panes, our currency and our ice cream. I fit myself back into the closed security of four walls, hot running water and flush toilets. As much as we humans have come to enjoy our creature comforts, I knew that a price comes with it — the risk of forgetting our intimate connection to the rest of the natural world.

As I boarded the plane, I took in a few more long breaths of warm, moist air. Then, gluing my face to the tiny window by my seat, I looked for the delicate spouts of the whales in the sparkling sea below me. Inwardly, I thanked them for offering me an experience of such disarming trust and vulnerability. If the whales harbored any residual memories in their cells or DNA of their earlier relationship to man, they seem to have decided to forgive their former enemies, offering instead a new way of relating that was both compelling and profound. I decided to keep my personal snapshot of Bubbles safely tucked away in my heart.