

Celebration of Conservation

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SEAMAIL™

FROM: Dave Weller
TO: Virtual Team Leaders and Science Team
SUBJECT: Flex, the famous gray whale

Dear Virtual Team Members!

American whalers referred to gray whales as “devil fish” for their ferocity when threatened. Especially when the mother was protecting her calf. Today the species is recognized for its “friendly” behavior toward whale watching boats in the wintering lagoons of Baja.

Did you know that the **eastern** gray whale population – the whales we are watching – were almost hunted to extinction, twice? *That was a long time ago when people hunted whales along our coast.

Fortunately, before we lost them forever, people protected the whales from hunting. People also protected their breeding and feeding areas, too. In addition, we have done a lot of research to learn more about **eastern** gray whales. That helps us continue to keep the population healthy and strong. Once endangered, today, there are so many **eastern** gray whales they are no longer considered endangered species! It is a wonderful success story, don't you think? That is why we call this program the *Celebration of Conservation*. We can save other ocean animals if we work together and protect their homes, can't we?

This leads me to some other gray whales you might not know about. In the photo identification Seamail, I mentioned a famous whale named “Flex.” We think he is special because he helped us make an important discovery.

The story begins in the western North Pacific off the Island of Sakhalin Island, Russia. This is where a critically endangered population of gray whales spends their summers. There are only about 170 “**western** gray whales,” as we call them. For decades, though, we thought the western gray whales were extinct. Then in the 1990s, a small population was found off the coast of Russia. Though the population is still struggling to survive, the discovery and a (slow) recovery is another cause for celebration!

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*In 1972, the USA passed the Marine Mammal Protection Act. That's the law that protects all whales and other marine mammals. Other countries also have similar laws.



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Flex, the Gray Whale (*continued*)

Flex is one of these western gray whales. We first met Flex when he was a newborn in 1997. Here is our photo-identification catalogue page and a picture of Flex swimming off the coast of Russia.

In 2010, researchers attached a satellite tag to Flex to track his migration route. These small tags are attached to a small dart that is shot with a crossbow. The tag holds on to the whale with small barbs that do not hurt it. In the next photo you can see the small tag (yellow circle) attached to a gray whale (not Flex) and the dart that was used to deploy it (orange circle). The cool thing about these tags is that they transmit the location of the whale to satellites in space and this information is then delivered to our desktop computers. Sort of like putting a GPS tracker on the whale.

We expected Flex to swim south from Russia to waters off Japan, Korea, or China. However, Flex migrated across the Pacific to the United States! Check out the map. On the left side you can see where Flex was tagged on October 4, 2010 and by February 7, 2011, when his tag stopped transmitting, he was off the coast of Oregon!

Flex's travels told us something new that we did not know – some western gray whales migrate to the east during the winter. By July 2011, Flex was back off Sakhalin Island where he was originally tagged in 2010. He has also been seen there in 2012.

That is the story of Flex - a young whale that helped scientists learn something new and important about gray whales. Maybe some of the whales passing by us today are heading back to Russia instead of the Arctic! As you can tell, there is so much to discover about ocean animals. Well, that's all for today.

Have fun,

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