

Celebration of Conservation

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FROM: Jake, the SeaDog
TO: Virtual Team Leaders and Science Team
SUBJECT: More about gray whale calves

Hey Virtual Science Team,

As you know, keeping track of the number of calves helps scientists keep an eye on the entire population. Is it growing, staying the same, or getting smaller? If there is a change, especially over many years, the science team looks at what could be the cause of the change in numbers.

I thought I'd share a bit more about gray whale calves with you. Gray whale calves are born in the lagoons in Mexico. The mothers swim from the arctic down to the warm, shallow, lagoons. Every winter, the lagoons become giant gray whale nurseries. The water is shallow, warm, and provides a safe place for moms to give birth and care for their calves. The mother and calf stays in the lagoon for a couple months before heading north.

Whales are mammals. Like other mammals, the baby is born live. Unlike most mammals, though, the baby is born under water. Can you imagine that?

A newborn gray whale calf is about 15 feet (4.5 m) long. It weighs about 1,000 lb (500 kg). How many students would it take to equal the weight of one calf? Would a calf fit in your desk? Your car? Your bed?

The calf nurses (gets milk) from its mother. The mother's milk is very rich. That means it is high in fat. Many of you might drink milk called, "2%." That means the milk has 2% fat. That's just a little bit of fat. People often drink 2% or even "fat-free" milk because we don't need too much fat in our diet. A gray whale calf, though, needs a lot. It must grow up quickly. It needs to develop a thick layer of *blubber to keep it warm. It also needs to grow quickly because its mother will only nurse it for about 7 months. Then it has to find food on its own.

How much fat do you think is in a gray whale mother's milk?

It is 53% fat! If you had a glass of that milk, more than half of it would be fat. Hmmm, probably not as appetizing for a human! But a baby gray whale gulps it down. A calf drinks about 50

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More about gray whales calves (*continued*)

gallons of milk every day. Fifty gallons! Does your entire class even drink that much in a day? If you invited a baby gray whale to lunch, how many pint-size cartons of milk (the size you get in the school cafeteria) would you need?

The calf stops nursing when it is about 7 months old. By then, it isn't so little any more. By the time it stops nursing, the calf is about 27 feet long. It weighs about 15,000 pounds (6800 kg)! How many kids would it take to be as long as a gray whale calf? How many would it take to weigh as much as a 7 month old? Could one fit in your classroom? How about your car?

Attached are a couple of fun activity sheets for you. (There's room at the top of the chart for you to draw yourself to compare your "actual size" to whales at various ages.) Have fun.

Talk to you soon,

Jake, the SeaDog
Team Gray Whale
WhaleTimes, Inc.
seamail@whaletimes.org

PS About blubber: *Blubber is the thick layer of fat that keeps the whale warm, streamlines the body so it's smooth and cuts through the water, and, whales live off the blubber when food is not available. Gray whales, like other baleen whales, only eat a few months out of the year. They live off the blubber the rest of the time.