

Celebration of Conservation

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FROM: Dave Weller
TO: Virtual Team Leaders and Science Team
SUBJECT: Identifying Gray Whales

Dear Virtual Team Members!

We don't just count gray whales. We also identify and track individual whales.

All gray whales have unique coloration patterns, kind of like a fingerprint. One of the best ways to learn about individual gray whales is by using a technique called *photo-identification*. We take photographs of the whales. Think of it like taking your classroom school photos. Then we identify each whale and note when and where we observed it.

If you get a good photograph of the whales, you can identify them as individuals. Can you see the distinctive coloration pattern of the whale in the photograph?

We put the gray whale photographs into a photo-identification catalog. This catalog contains photographs of every gray whale we have identified. I've attached an example page. The whale shown on this page is nicknamed "Flex." Can you find the photo of his right side? Now his left side? How about the underside of his tail? Compare and contrast Flex's left and right sides. What do you notice. Why do you think we have photographs of both the right and left side?

That's correct. The right side and left side have different color patterns. That is why we need to get identification photos of both sides of every whale. What do you think might happen if we only have a photo ID of one side or just the underside of the tail?

How do we get these photos. Well, the whales don't stop and pose for us. So we have a plan and take many photos, often from small boats, go get ones that are clear and will be helpful to identify the whale the next time we see it. (See photo). Here is a photo of my research team when studying gray whales off Sakhalin Island, Russia. The orange suits are called "survival suits." The water temperature off Russia's coast is very cold. The survival suits give us protection and keep us warm.

You see that the scientist in the front of the boat has a camera with a telephoto (giant) lens. The next person takes digital video. Then there is our data (information) recorder. Finally, the boat driver. Yes, it takes four people to do a good job collecting photographs and data.

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Identifying Gray Whales (*continued*)

Finally, let me introduce you to one of my favorite whales named “Pirate.” Pirate is female and has had many calves during the time we have known her. Look very closely at the underside of Pirates tail. Can you see how she got her name?

Okay Team Members, I have a couple of questions for you. How do you think we can use these catalogue photos to track gray whales, learn more about them, and protect them? My second question is, can you think of ways we can use the latest photo and video technology to study gray whales?

Have fun,

Dr. Dave

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