



This Green Life

A Journal of Sorts



IN THE BAY OF WHALES

April 2006

Having just returned from an expedition to the last pristine gray whale nursery in Baja California, which NRDC and its members helped to save, I want to branch out from my usual subject matter to describe it, for it was without doubt one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life.

To cut to the chase, I have kissed a whale and now I want to tell.



First, though, let me give you the back story on this incredible place, called Laguna San Ignacio. In 1995, the corporate giant Mitsubishi teamed up with the Trade Ministry of Mexico to build an industrial salt works there. NRDC spent the next few years working with a coalition of Mexican and American groups to fight it and, in March 2000, won.

How a factory could ever have been considered for this spot -- an internationally recognized World Heritage Site and Biosphere Reserve -- is a mystery. I only know that of the many tactics NRDC and its partners used to defeat the project, one was key: getting the facts out to people like you and encouraging them to speak up. More than one million did.

But like most environmental victories, this one wasn't final. Today, there is talk of resurrecting the salt works, as well as of oil and gas drilling. Piers have also been proposed.

To fend off these new threats, NRDC and its partners are trying an innovative new approach -- buying up the development rights to a million acres surrounding the lagoon and putting them in trust. Already, 120,000 acres have been secured.

I visited Laguna San Ignacio with a few of the bigger funders of this campaign to see for myself why the place merited so much effort. Since the site is (thankfully) still rather remote, the trip from San Diego, where we all met up, took the better part of a day, involving a car ride to Tijuana, charter flight down the Baja peninsula and a boat ride to our campsite directly on the lagoon.

Oddly, my most striking first impression of Laguna San Ignacio was its apparent emptiness. Despite the unrelenting wind, an intense quiet prevailed. The day was cloudy and the water opaque, revealing nothing. Nor was the landscape -- a dun-colored desert with a bit of scrub -- more lively. The only touch of green was a line of mangroves along a small patch of shore. Of whales, I saw none.

So, it was with some surprise, when gazing out later from the low bluff at our campsite, that I spied their telltale spouts everywhere. From left to right, I counted five, six, seven blows at a time, with new ones appearing all the time in different locations.



Sheryl Eisenberg, a long-time advisor to NRDC, posts a new This Green Life every month. Sheryl makes her home in Tribeca (NYC), where—along with her children, Sophie and Gabby, and husband, Peter—she tries to put her environmental principles into practice. No fooling.



Ecotourism done right - In Laguna San Ignacio, there are no power lines, phone towers, running water or paved roads. Every effort is made by the government, camp operators, pangueros (boat drivers) and other local people to keep human impact to a minimum. Even so, I never felt I was roughing it because our terrific tour operator, Baja Discovery -- <http://www.bajadiscovery.com> -- arranged things so comfortably. All our provisions, from fresh water to box wine, were brought in by boat. We ate simple but delicious Mexican fare in a dining tent powered by solar panels, used odor-free outhouses equipped with composting toilets and showered with solar-heated water bags. The absence of phones was a gift from the gods.

Partners in action - NRDC's partners in the ongoing effort to preserve the Laguna San Ignacio include Wildcoast, <http://www.wildcoast.net>, Pronatura, and the International Community Foundation, <http://www.icfdn.org>

This was wholly unlike my other experiences with whales in the wild. Those sightings, from whale-watching ships off Cape Cod, had been iffy. They'd required knowledge and patience, wishing and waiting, hoping and praying that we were in the right spot, whereas in Laguna San Ignacio, there were more whales than I could track. Even when I closed my eyes, I could tell they were there from the deep whoosh of their breathing.

The waters that had initially looked so empty were actually full of life. Well, of course, coastal waters always are, but usually it's the scaled and shelled kind that runs and hides without looking back, and even when cornered, will not return your gaze. This life, on the other hand, was the big, brainy sort that not only sees you, but seeks you out.

Yes, a fair number of the whales that frequent Laguna San Ignacio want contact. I saw many of these "friendlies," as they are known, in my short time there. Usually, they were babies that either swam over to our boat on their own or were inexplicably pushed up and towards us by their mothers. Often, they heaved themselves out of the water right next to us. The first time, I was too excited to notice anything beyond the sheer presence of the animal a couple of feet from my face. But by my third encounter, I was calm enough to see the large eye of the whale trained on me. When I stroked her head, she shut it and rolled over in seeming pleasure.

The kiss came later with a different whale. At the prompting of one of our wonderful guides, I brushed the baby's head with my lips when she rose up to greet me. It was thrilling and satisfying in a way I can't explain or justify. But if kissing is the quintessentially human way of expressing love, I guess it makes a kind of sense.

In the grand scheme of things, whales may be no more important than spiders. But to the human heart and the human soul -- by which I mean that part of us that wonders and marvels at the great mysteries of life -- whales are among the most compelling animals on earth. Why this should be so is not entirely clear. Surely, their immensity and intelligence have something to do with it. So, too, must their existence as mammals in a watery and therefore alien world. Whatever the reasons, their hold on us is unmistakable, and if we were to cause whole whale species to go extinct as we are now in danger of doing, it would feel criminal to say the least. I always knew this in an abstract way, but now that I've been to Laguna San Ignacio, I know it in my bones.

If what I'm saying resonates with you, I encourage you to do four things:

- 1) Give some money -- any amount -- to help purchase development rights to the area around Laguna San Ignacio.
<https://www.savebiogems.org/baja/donate.asp>
- 2) Take action on NRDC's BioGems site to help other important and imperiled ecosystems survive. <http://www.savebiogems.org/>
- 3) Support NRDC's campaign against underwater military sonar, which harms and kills whales, dolphins and other marine life.
<http://www.savebiogems.org/whales/>
- 4) Go out whale-watching yourself if you ever have the chance. Even if you just see one whale up close, you'll remember it for the rest of your life.

—Sheryl Eisenberg

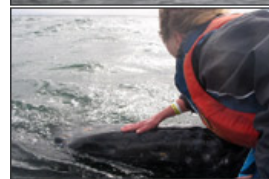
Sheryl Eisenberg is a web developer and writer. With her firm, Mixit Productions (<http://www.mixitproductions.com>), she brought NRDC online in 1996, designed NRDC's first websites, and continues to develop special web features for NRDC. She created and, for several years, wrote the Union of Concerned Scientists' green living column, *Greentips*, and has designed and contributed content to many non-profit sites.

ONLINE RESOURCES

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR: The Price of Tranquility - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1205/p13s02-sten.html>
THE SAN DIEGO UNION TRIBUNE: Owners to Limit Growth at Oasis - <http://tinyurl.com/oj8yo>
PARKSWATCH: El Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve - <http://tinyurl.com/nc432>
MARINEBIO.ORG: Gray Whale - <http://marinebio.org/species.asp?id=279>
HOW STUFF WORKS: Whales - <http://science.howstuffworks.com/whale.htm>

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Our trip in a nutshell: we came, we saw, we made contact. (Thanks to Tolford Young for his picture, at top, of our arrival at camp, and to Liz Enger for her shot, at bottom, of the closed eye of a whale being stroked.)