

Whales thriving in lagoons once threatened to become salt ponds

By Susan Tripp Pollard

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LAGUNA SAN IGNACIO, MEXICO — Naturalist Patrycja Kaczynska tells the 20 guests they might get sprayed with snot from a 35-ton mammal — and if they were that close, it would be a good thing.

The next morning, the guests pile into open, panga-style fishing boats to seek whales, but these are ecotourists more in the vein of Jacques Cousteau than Captain Ahab.

More than 400 miles south of San Diego, along the Pacific coast of Baja California, lies a complex of three lagoons that together make up one of the largest gray whale calving and breeding grounds in the world.

The smallest and most pristine of the three is Laguna San Ignacio, where California gray whales each year begin and end one of the longest mammalian migrations in the world, a 10,000-mile round trip between Mexico and Alaska.

In the late 1990s, a partnership between the Mexican government and Mitsubishi wanted to develop a large salt works in Laguna San Ignacio.

The salt works, critics said, posed a severe threat to the breeding grounds and to an area Mexican officials have four times designated as ecologically important: as a world heritage site, a biosphere reserve, a whale sanctuary and a migratory bird reserve.

"There aren't many places on the planet you could say that about," said Joel Reynolds, a senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council. "It's a wonderful ecosystem that when you're there feels like it's changed very little over thousands of years."

Ten years ago this month, then-Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, under pressure from environmentalists, Mexican intellectuals, fishermen and others, surprised them all by announcing his government was suddenly pulling the plug on the salt project.

There was no lawsuit. Rather, environmentalists and others had launched a massive public relations campaign to bring attention to the plans. When the plans were halted, they were elated.

"That was probably one of the most significant environmental victories due to citizen action in history," Reynolds said. "It was the largest environmental coalition in the history of Mexico."

Instead of a 116-square-mile industrial salt works, about a half-dozen whale-watching camps now surround the lagoon. Visitors sleep in rustic cabins or army-style tents, isolated by a rough road.

The only electricity comes from the sun, wind or propane tanks.

Maldo Fischer and his family run the ecolodge Campo Cortez. Maldo's wife, Katalina, was a descendant of the original six families that lived in Laguna San Ignacio.

Now, Maldo and his family make a living taking visitors whale watching from December to April, and fishing for lobster, scallops, sea bass, mackerel, snapper, grouper and other fish the rest of the year.

In the evenings, Maldo and his staff educate and entertain visitors, over margaritas, beer and chips and guacamole, with whale tales — like the one about a gray whale that went under his boat and placed its pectoral fins on either side of the craft in an embrace.

Today, the California gray whale population is healthy, and in the winter months lucky visitors may have a

close encounter.

For Donna Williams, who is blind in one eye and losing sight in the other, a recent trip was the chance of a lifetime.

"Oh my gosh, my dream has come true," said Williams, an interior designer from Long Beach. "It was a very spiritual thing for me. I've been depressed because of my eyes. It changed my life. It made me see how beautiful nature is and to just go with the flow."

What she saw during the days was a monochromatic scene of gray sky, gray water and gray whales, its serenity occasionally broken by the whoosh of a whale blow and the cheers of nearby whale watchers.

Later, at sunset, the shades of gray give way to the blazing hues of a Baja sunset.

California gray whales, or the Eastern North Pacific stock of gray whales, were severely depleted by commercial whaling beginning in the 1800s until an international ban on hunting the species was enacted in the 1930s.

Today, the danger to gray whales no longer involves harpoons but collisions with ships, habitat changes and other threats.

In 1994 the whales became the first marine mammal removed from the list of endangered species after their numbers rebounded. Recent estimates have put the number of California gray whales at roughly 26,000. Western Pacific, or Korean gray whales, remain endangered; the Atlantic gray whale is extinct.

Migrating California gray whales, which grow to nearly 50 feet long and weigh as much as 80,000 pounds, spend the summer in seas around Alaska and eastern Russia and move south for the winter to Baja California, where they breed and calve mostly at the lagoons.

Because they often travel near the coast, they are some of the most often spotted whales along Northern California shores.

But it is here, in a Baja California lagoon, where you can see the whales up close. Whale lice and barnacles give their skin a granitic, mottled appearance. Baby whales have fewer marks and barnacles and lice. Their dark gray skin is more solid.

During the last of six trips onto the lagoon the wind kicked up suddenly, and the boat drivers put on their yellow slickers. The water became choppy, and plastic baggies helped protect cameras against the sea spray.

Soon, the whales appear: A blow at 10 a.m. A fluke at 3 p.m., and a nearby panga is treated to a show when a whale peaks above the surface — a "spyhop" — less than 10 feet away.

Like a finale at a fireworks show, the whales suddenly appear around the panga.

A mother edges her baby close to the boat, and, swiftly, one must choose whether to reach for the whale or reach for a camera.

Donna Williams reaches out and touches the whale. "It felt like suede," said Williams, who now has a memory and a connection to the gray whales of Laguna San Ignacio that will last a lifetime.

