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Grey Whales Missing from North Pacific Feeding Grounds

Earthwatch volunteers to investigate feeding behavior off Baja, Mexico this winter.



Earthwatch Institute, Maynard, MA, 20 October 2006 — Finding one thirty-ton animal in the vast North Pacific may be as hard as finding a needle in a haystack. But when the entire estimated population of 17,000 grey whales is hard to find, it is cause for concern. Researchers reported very few sightings in the grey whales' traditional summer feeding grounds last season. Earthwatch teams are invited to join Dr. William Megill (University of Bath) as he explores the impact on these whales at the southern end of their migration, in Baja California, Mexico.

"We've just come off a second summer in Canada in which we've had next to no whales show up," said Megill, principal investigator of Earthwatch-supported research on grey whales in both British Columbia and Baja California. "Not only in our little area, but apparently throughout the traditional feeding areas from Washington on up north. We have no idea where the whales all went this year."

Grey whales usually spend their summers feeding in the plankton-rich waters of the North Pacific, from northern California to the Bering and Chuckchi Seas. The whales migrate every winter to the warm lagoons off Baja California, where they breed and give birth to their calves. The extraordinary 6,000-mile exodus, one of nature's great spectacles, is one of the longest mammal migrations known on Earth.

Although they were the first great whales to be removed from the endangered species list, the future for grey whales is by no means certain. The fact that they have abandoned their traditional summer feeding grounds indicates to scientists that the whales may need to range further to find sufficient food.

"Presumably they found other feeding areas, but they will have had to look hard. This suggests they may be quite lean this winter, particularly as this is now the second summer they've had to deal with this problem," said Megill. "We know that the Bering Sea has taken a beating over



Grey Whales © Jen Reber



Grey Whales © Jen Reber



Grey Whales © Jen Reber



the last ten years, and that productivity has plummeted there, forcing the whales into new habitat. A new blow to the productivity in these marginal habitats could hurt badly."

Since 2000, Earthwatch volunteers have helped support Megill's grey whale research, both in British Columbia and Baja California. This winter, in January, February, and March, they will be paying special attention to feeding behaviors exhibited by the whales. Although grey whales historically have rarely been seen feeding on their winter breeding grounds, teams last year observed whales trying to feed from the lagoon bottom.



Grey Whales © Jen Reber

"How much they were getting out of the mud they were sifting, I don't know," said Megill. "But there was a lot of it going on, more than I'm used to seeing. We're expecting to see the animals feeding even more in Mexican waters this year. We'll be heading out into the Pacific to see what the whales are doing offshore."

The research site for Earthwatch teams is Laguna San Ignacio, in one of Mexico's most remote regions. This turquoise lagoon, surrounded by salt flats, mangrove forests, mesas, and desert, has been a sanctuary for breeding grey whales for centuries and is one of the most pristine breeding sites left. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Laguna San Ignacio was the focus of a recent agreement between local landowners and a consortium of environmental groups to promote sustainable development in the area.

Earthwatch Institute is a global volunteer organization that supports scientific field research by offering members of the public unique opportunities to work alongside leading field scientists and researchers. Earthwatch's mission is to engage people worldwide in scientific field research and education to promote the understanding and action necessary for a sustainable environment. The year 2006 marks Earthwatch's 35th anniversary.

Be sure to watch *A Year on Earth*, a two-part special to debut on Discovery Kids Channel on December 3 and 10. *A Year on Earth* chronicles the adventures of three American teens who join Megill in Baja California and several other Earthwatch research projects around the world. Together, they discover how ordinary people can make a difference in the most pressing environmental issues of our time.

[More information about Among Baja's Grey Whales](#)

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