


THE LAST LAGOON

Brenda Peterson

ERIC CHENG is an award-winning underwater photographer whose work has been seen in over a hundred magazines and books worldwide. He shot this baby gray whale over a recent weekend in San Ignacio Lagoon. "I've spent a lot of time in the water with whales of various species, but in many ways, my time floating in a boat next to these gray whales was the most intimate. They really do seem to crave interaction; in fact, if one approaches and you don't splash the water around and give it a vigorous rub down, it will lose interest and leave! It's one of the most special wildlife experiences you can find." Echengphoto.com.



All night camped on this desert lagoon, we hear them breathing—sonorous sighs of the mothers accompany the short responses of their newborn calves. It is an otherworldly but intimate lullaby of new life in a remote Baja, Mexico, nursery for gray whales. Where else in the world can we listen to wild animals sleeping so close, trusting a human camp? It is as if we all belong together here under the brilliant burden of stars.

In the morning, our wooden skiff skims across San Ignacio Lagoon as we scan warm turquoise waters set in bright salt flats. Eight of us in the boat raise our binoculars; a grandmother sings lullabies to attract the mother-calf pairs.

I am following the whales from their winter lagoons to their summer arctic feeding grounds on assignment for National Geographic Books, along with my Native co-author, Linda Hogan. But for others on this journey, this is their first time claiming the connection to nature that is everyone's birthright.

“Kids are whale magnets,” Renaldo, our boatman, says. “The whales, they always choose boats with children. Maybe we are their toys?”

Perhaps that helps explain what scientists call The Friendly Whale Syndrome—the unique contact between grays and humans that was first documented in the 1970s, three decades after the United States banned the commercial hunting of gray whales in 1946.

That a young mother in our boat is calling out the old whaler's alert—“Thar she bloooows!”—that we reach out our hands instead of harpoons, is a small redemption of human history. In the mid-nineteenth century, Yankee whalers relentlessly pursued the grays into their nurseries; they were hunted to the edge of extinction. Today these most watched of all whales have rebounded to an estimated twenty-six thousand. It is a success story of restoration, but like all happy endings the future is full of doubt and danger; Japan and Norway are fiercely lobbying to resume commercial hunting worldwide.

A barnacled body the length of a semi-truck glides straight toward us, as the mother surfaces. Her blow is a prismatic rainbow, her huge snout rising, baleen-striped mouth dazzling.

Eager hands scratch and stroke the supple gray skin, which feels as smooth and cool as melon. Her eye is dark, unblinking; that eye holds ours, gazing at us as if from the bottom of the ocean. These grays are among the oldest of all whales; their fossil record dates at more than fifty million years old. To touch such a living ancestor is like being called backward in time to a sea teeming with marine life-mammals like us, who nurse their young and breathe air.

Now the calf surfaces, curious but shy. He is brand-new—no more than a few days old, with baby whiskers and no barnacles. Only fifteen feet long, he is nursing on milk so rich he will gain a hundred pounds a day. When the calves are two to three months old, they will embark on the perilous twelve-thousand-mile round-trip journey between Baja and the Arctic, an obstacle course of orca attacks, supertanker boat propellers, Russian and subsistence hunters, and other hazards. Thirty percent of the calves will not survive.

The calf lifts a long snout out of the waves and twirls in a slow pirouette called a spyhop. Breath from his double blowhole is strangely sweet and his pectoral fins reach out like awkward wings. Inside each pectoral are the skeletal remains of a hand, a reminder that these grays once walked on land. Rolling on his back, the newborn calf offers a gleaming white-pink belly to scratch. Someone gasps, noting his navel cord is still attached. The mother lolls nearby, revealing a raised white slash of a harpoon scar along her long belly.

Time stops. Only the cries of cormorants and pelicans, the lapping of mild waves against our boat. Sixteen hands rest tenderly on the mother whale and her calf.

As the whales take a deep breath and at last dive, a woman whispers to the calf, “Safe journey, Little One.”

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Brenda Peterson is a novelist and nature writer, author of eighteen books, including Sightings: The Gray Whale's Mysterious Journey and her mermaid novel The Drowning World. Learn more at Brendapetersonbooks.com.