



# Laguna San Ignacio Ecosystem Science Program

A Project of the Ocean Foundation in Baja California Sur, Mexico

## FIELD REPORT UPDATE FOR JANUARY & FEBRUARY 2022

Our gray whale research teams arrived in Laguna San Ignacio (LSI) and Bahía Magdalena (BM) in mid-January to begin the 2022 gray whale research season. Our field research station the “Francisco ‘Pachico’ Mayoral” laboratory opened on January 19<sup>th</sup>. Leading the LSI team is our field Chief Dr. Sergio Martínez A., accompanied by Minerva Valerio Conchas, Regina Lobo, Andrés González and Adrian Zamora. Our drone pilots this year are Fabian Rodríguez-González and Job Olguin. Project Co-Director Steven Swartz joined the Team in mid-February. Dra. Lorena leads our team in Bahía Magdalena that includes Lorena Magallón Flores, Omar Garcia Castañeda, Mario Márquez Segovia, Montserrat Castillo, and Barbara Diago.



The first notable event was the launching of our new research panga the RV MASAM (Mayan word for “Whale”) which was built especially to support the gray whale research program in Laguna San Ignacio. We are grateful to our supporters for providing the resources to replace our previous 20-year old panga with this new boat.

Our initial gray whale abundance surveys began on January 19 with a count of 9 single whales and 3 mother-calf pairs. A month later on 19 February the Team counted 179 single whales and 4 mother-calf pairs as we approach early March which should be the time of maximum counts of gray whales in the lagoon.

During our photographic identification surveys we encountered an old friend to the lagoon, a single female that bears a large white “patch” or “saddle” on her back. She was first photographed in Laguna San Ignacio by Mary Lou Jones and Steven Swartz during the 1979 winter, and at that time she had a calf. She has been re-photographed 15 times over the past 43 years with at least 6 calves. This year she was first photographed by Lorena and her team on January 29<sup>th</sup> in Bahía Almejas in the southern portion of Bahía Magdalena. Then on February 20 Sergio photographed her once again in Laguna San Ignacio. On each occasion she looked in good health. Gray whales attain reproductive age at between 7 to 9 years. So, if she was observed with a calf in 1979, and again 43 years later this year, we estimate her minimum age to be 50-52 years. It is always great to welcome back our “old timers” to the lagoon, and perhaps we will see her again next winter with another calf!



Right away the Team was called into action to dis-entangle a gray whale calf from fishing gear, lines and floats. With the help of expert Pangueros from Kuyima Eco-Tourismo, the group implemented the RABIN procedure (Whale disentanglement network protocol).

Initially the LSI team attempted to remove the lines on the calf, but the mother and calf actively avoided the boat and made it difficult to approach them. A second panga was requested from Kuyima Eco-Tourismo, and by positioning a panga on each side of the swimming whales, each could be distracted long enough for the LSI panga to approach the calf and cut the lines that were wrapped in the calves mouth and around its head.

It required more than three hours from beginning to end to free the calf of the fishing lines and float. In the end, the mother and the calf have been resighted in the lagoon swimming well and looking healthy. Out thanks go out to Kuyima Eco-Tourismo for assisting with this dis-entanglement. And to our sponsors the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and Master Instructor David Matilla for providing the training that has allowed the successful dis-entanglement of 9 gray whales in Laguna San Ignacio, that undoubtedly saved their lives.



Another rapid attempt to save a whale involved a “flaca” or “skinny” adult whale that became stranded on a shallow “bajo” or sand bar. Again, with the assistance of Pangueros, the LSIESP Team used lines to pull the stranded whale off of the shallow area and into deep water where it could once again swim freely. Unfortunately, a few days later this “flaca” whale was found stranded again, but did not survive its second stranding.



To date, there have been 8 stranded dead gray whales found in Laguna San Ignacio, and most were extremely skinny, suggesting that they have been unable to find sufficient food during the summer months in the North Pacific and Arctic waters. So it appears that the gray whale Unusual Mortality Event (UME) that began in 2019 is continuing to result in higher than normal strandings and deaths of adult gray whales. See the NOAA webpage on the gray whale UME at (<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2019-2022-gray-whale-unusual-mortality-event-along-west-coast-and> )



On the brighter side, we are seeing many active courting and mating groups of single whales in the lagoon, generally more than we have observed in recent winters. These whales form surface-active groups to mate to produce calves 12-13 months from now. All these single whales look very good indicating that their body condition is at its best following a successful summer feeding period in higher latitudes. Similarly, while their numbers are currently low, all of the mother-calf pairs that we have observed also appear to be in “robust” or in great condition.



Please check back to our website [www.sanignaciograywhales.org](http://www.sanignaciograywhales.org) for additional news updates and our research findings as the 2022 winter season progresses.

If you haven't already, please consider becoming a recurring supporter of our gray whale research program in Baja California by visiting our Donation page on our website at:

<https://www.sanignaciograywhales.org/donate/>



*Thank you from  
The Laguna San Ignacio Gray Whale research team for 2022.*