Project Whale Watch:

Historical Whale Walking Tour

Humpback, grey, blue, killer (also called orcas and technically members of the dolphin family), minke, fin and Baird’s beaked whales are the 5 “whale” species that visit the Monterey Bay. Of those, grey whales are the most commonly seen baleen whale in Monterey. Patchy grey with a narrow V-shaped head and averaging about 45 ft, “The entire [eastern North Pacific] grey whale population migrates past the Monterey coastline every winter and spring. These whales have one of the longest animal migrations known, traveling over 12,000 miles from their summer feeding grounds in the Bering Sea to their winter breeding grounds in Baja California and back again”[[1]](#footnote-1). Generally seen off Monterey from December to May, 2018 had at least 7 documented cases of mother/calf pairs attacked by killer whales. Normally, grey whales hug the shallow coastline and kelp bed with their calves, but in the Monterey Bay, they become vulnerable, as they must pass over the deep-water canyon. Orcas do not live in the Monterey Bay, but visit to feed on marine mammals, fish and squid. They travel in matrilineal family groups of 8 to 20 individuals called pods. Transient and offshore pods can occur year-round, but are most frequently seen from January through May and September through November. The largest animal ever to live on earth at 80 to 100 ft long, the blue whale feeds entirely on krill, a tiny shrimp-like crustacean. Extensively hunted for their large quantity of blubber, blue whales are considered endangered but the California population seems to be the healthiest, making up approximately 2,200 of the 10,000 accounted for worldwide. The second most commonly seen whale and known as the acrobats of the whale world, humpback whales are extremely active displaying flipper and fluke slapping and breaching more than any other baleen species. Overwintering in Mexico & Costa Rica, humpbacks travel to the Monterey bay from January through November and are individually identifiable by “the unique white patches on their tail flukes, combined with notches in their flukes and other unique markings”[[2]](#footnote-2). These whales have the most complex and varied songs of any whale species, often lasting for up to 20 minutes. Minke and Fin whales are less commonly seen, usually in summer and fall. Baird’s beaked whales inhabit deep waters, dive for long periods, and therefore are rarely seen.

California indigenous cultures, including the Rumsien who lived on the Monterey peninsula, did not hunt whales, but would dry the flesh and utilize the bones if a dead one washed ashore. It is not until after the Americans take control of the Mexican Capitol of Alta California, Monterey that an interest in whaling begins. At the end of the Gold Rush and according to the First Brick Historical Structure Report made by California State Parks in 1983, Captain John Pope Davenport rented out the First Brick House and organized the first shore whaling company in California in 1854 named “Monterey Whaling Company”. “Its headquarters was Jack Swan’s old theater on Pacific Street. Only three or four of the twelve-man crew were experienced whalers, but they were fairly successful using old-fashioned harpoons and lances. The price of whale oil fell to twenty-five cents a gallon the next year, making it unprofitable for Davenport’s company to continue whaling; but a company of Portuguese, calling themselves the “Old Monterey Whaling Company”, formed in 1855 a, and used as their base of operations the building next door to the First Brick House, the present “Old Whaling Station”. In 1858, Davenport resumed whaling with two boats armed with harpoon guns. His crew, also, were Portuguese and known as the “New Company” to distinguish them from their competitors”[[3]](#footnote-3). Davenport moved to Soquel in the mid 1860’s and moved again a few years later to 15 miles north of Santa Cruz where he built a wharf in the town now known as Davenport. Davenport’s “New Company” whalers stayed in Monterey after he moved away and whaling continued in the Monterey area. As we walk next door to the Whaling Station, you will see the last remaining segment of whale bone sidewalk that whaler Juan Girardin put in in Monterey.

In 1946, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) was established to oversee the management of the whaling industry worldwide and put a voluntary hunting moratorium into place. It wasn’t until 1972 that the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) made it illegal for a person in the United State to kill, hunt, injure or harass all species of marine mammals, regardless of their population status or to import marine mammals or products made from them into the United States. Whales were further protected under the Endangered Species Act, a federal law passed made in 1973, which protects endangered animals and those that are likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future, and which listed all great whales as endangered species. Under this law, it is illegal to buy or sell any whales, kill, hunt, collect, injure or harass them or to destroy their habitat in any way.

These laws and regulations have protected the whales and their numbers have raised from near extinction to the present day levels. It is theorized that whales will never be able to reach the historical highs that they had prior to the whaling industry. Changes to our environment and human impact have altered the bays and oceans. For instance, with killer whales, “some of the possible causes of decline are: reduced quantity and quality of prey; persistent pollutants that could cause immune or reproductive system dysfunction; oil spills; and noise and disturbance from vessels”[[4]](#footnote-4). More work and research will contribute to our understanding of these great whale species for their continued protection and survival. Today, we are going to help participate in that process.

Walking Tour Timeline:

8:00 – Fisherman’s Wharf parking lot. Meet and greet at parking lot walkway and walk with group to the Custom House and introduce the basics about whales, their migrations and the oceanography that makes Monterey Bay an active whale location.

8:12- walk to First Brick.

8:15- First Brick House. Introduce history of American period whaling in Monterey, Davenport’s company, and why the whales were being hunted: $$

8:25 – Old Whaling Station (front). Continuation of Portuguese immigrant whaling day to day life of the whalers and introduce the consumer products like oil, scrimshaw and the sidewalk.

8:30- Old Whaling Station (courtyard). Visit the try pot to discuss oil extraction from blubber. Explain how hunting led to a change in whale behavior and a plummeting of the populations. Discuss the downfall of the whaling industry from an economic point of view. Finish with introduction of the shift from consumerism to environmental protection, laws that were enabled and the thriving economy of ecotourism in Monterey.

8:50 – walk with group to Discovery Whale Watch docking area on wharf

<https://www.afsc.noaa.gov/nmml/education/grammar.php> I had to look this up, so I included this in case someone else doesn’t know the grammar rules.

Sometimes writing about marine mammals is as difficult as studying them.  It is easy to spell names wrong, to italicize where you should not, and capitalize when you should not.  Here are a few writing rules for writing about marine mammals:

(1)  You should always italicize or underline the genus and species name.  Example:  Balaenoptera musculus or Balaenoptera musculus.

(2)  The genus name is capitalized and the species name is lowercase.  Example: Dugong dugon.

(3)  You should not capitalize, italicize or underline common names.  Example:  blue whale.

(4)  There is one exception to rule number #3.  You should capitalize common names of marine mammals that include proper names.  Examples:   Baird's beaked whale, Pacific white-sided dolphin, and West Indian manatee.

1. <https://www.gowhales.com/whales.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.montereybayaquarium.org/animals-and-exhibits/animal-guide/marine-mammals/humpback-whale> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. First Brick Historical Reports California State Parks [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/protected_species/marine_mammals/killer_whale/esa_status.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)