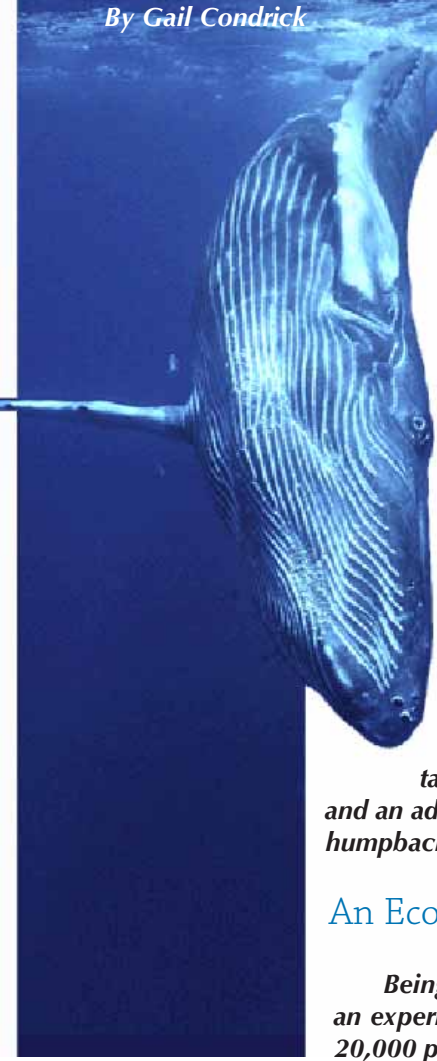


Lessons from Whales

By Gail Condrick



This is about falling in love. Seeing the Beloved and becoming more for them. Reaching deep inside the self and finding the inner strength to trust, to surrender to the unknown, and to leap into love. All it takes is one look into their eyes and the lessons begin: the desire to live fully, to understand the true nature of power, sacredness, humility and unconditional love. It is a life changing experience with universal themes. All it takes is a week, courage, and an adventurous heart. The humpback whales will do the rest.

An Eco Adventure Begins

Being here is an act of courage, an experience that fewer than 20,000 people in the world have witnessed, contact with humpback whales right in the ocean. Our international group of 23, seventeen women and six men, ranges in age from 28 to 64, with varying levels of fitness and experience in open waters. All of us are ready for the adventure.

Our group is sponsored by Wildquest, whose eco adventures swimming with wild dolphins in the Bahamas has expanded to include this humpback whale experience and captures both the excitement and the spirituality of the encounter. All of us are looking for a vacation with something more, an outer and inner adventure, and this trip qualifies all around.

There are yoga classes, practicing downward dog on a rolling deck top, dancing, and learning to breathe consciously just like the whales. Our group has brought our skills with us, when not in the water, some of us write, practice our healing modalities, play games, or listen to I-pods. Time is spent alone and in community and the flow of one to the other seems natural and graceful.

This is the inner journey that Wildquest specializes in moved to the vastness of the open ocean. "Being on the water and in nature, people are touched by the freedom and the joy and their hearts open," says Wildquest Team leader, Amlas. "We are there to support the opening and hold the space. Whales have a different energy than dolphins, a larger and deeper sensation to experience and what we try to do is to nurture the delicate space where human meets whale and support the person where they are in the moment. It is all individual to the person and the encounter."

Co-leader Atmo agrees, "There are no words," he says and pauses for a long time, struggling to explain what can not be fathomed. "They are so big, and quiet, and peaceful that words can not express the feelings of being with them in the ocean."

Our home for the week is the Nekton Rorqual, an 80 foot 200 square feet twin hull live aboard sleeping 28 passengers and 10 crew members. We are anchored 100 kilometers off the coast of the Dominican Republic, in the Silver Banks, the annual birthing and mating ground for 3- 5,000 migrating humpback whales from mid-December to April. The Dominican Republic is the first Caribbean country to establish a Sanctuary in 1986 and that has brought a new booming business, ecotourism. The Nekton Rorqual is one of three boats licensed to provide trips in the Sanctuary during the season. The ship is solid, designed for stability, safety and comfort. We are rocked gently by waves in air conditioned cabins, with portal views of the ocean in every room, non stop food and even a deck top Jacuzzi for sunset watching and telling whale tales

Overseeing the team on the Nekton Rorqual is Captain Tom Conlin of Aquatic Adventures, who has written the equivalent of the rules of engagement with humpback whales for the Marine Sanctuary. After 18 years as a dive master, photographer and cetacean naturalist, there is no question that Conlin knows what he is talking about, and he, and the entire crew, makes our week on the water safe for ourselves and for the whales. We are not pursuing whales; we are having a "soft in-water encounter," a phrase that will become a metaphor for the week. When we find a whale that is curious, or tolerant or both, we will slip into the water without sound and see if the whale is interested in us.

"Some whales are cooperative, and some aren't," says Conlin, "The whale is smart enough to know if you will hurt them or not. I am always amazed at how forgiving they are of what humans do to them. If they can remember a song, or a unique migration route, they remember us." Conlin knows he has a calling, one that he has devoted his life too. "I am meant to introduce people to whales; people who have this experience will do more for the whales and step forward to protect them."

Whales of the Silver Banks

The humpback whales are at the Silver Banks for a purpose, to birth and mate for the migration home to New England. Being female means you are a prize to be won, and much of this season is spent determining if a male escort who accompanies the mother and calf can be usurped by a challenger. Escorts have won their places of protection and often show battle scars with other male whales. At anytime they may find themselves defending their place and we are always alert for the battle of titans with rouge males desiring the females that can occur.

The baby, the size of a mini-van at birth, surfaces every five minutes for air and we watch the horizon for the spout that announces the presence. Adults may stay under for close to 20 or thirty minutes but they also eventually surface with the graceful curve of the back that has earned them their name of humpback. Other whale behaviors such as fin slapping, tail lobbing, or breaching can be seen from boats and have various courting, play, and defensive purposes, but it is the underwater ballet that we have come to see up close and personal.

Meeting the Whales

We will leave the boat in two groups on the Escort and the Challenger, two 25 foot tenders built for the wave action and to provide stability to us and the two-person crew for the whale encounters. All of us are new to this experience and getting from the boat onto the tender, stepping up, over and down from the ship to a rocking small boat is a hurdle that must be passed for the bigger adventure. It is a physical experience, in and out of boats and cold water and helping those who need help to make sure that we all get on. The tenders are out for as many as eight hours a day weather permitting, with a

break for lunch, and we are in and out of the water several times an hour as whales are spotted.

Tom Conlin is driving the Escort as we motor away from home base and look for the first sign of whales, water spouts. Suddenly, at a direction of 2 o'clock from the bow, three boat lengths away we see the air foam and he checks his watch, the time has started. We have five minutes before the baby whale surfaces again to pull along side and wait to see if they are interested in us. It is the moment we have come to experience. We sit quietly, gear on and ready, and wait for the go mode. "Come on darling," croons Tom, "We just want to see your baby."

A staff diver is in the water, testing to see if there is interest in us. And then, a thumbs up signal, the mother whale has placed her baby between herself and the boat, the escort is quiet on the bottom. We are in go mode and slip into the water, trying not to make a sound to disturb the whales, hearts pounding. Guests in this water world, we swim closer and then stop, the baby whale is an acrobatic delight of twisting, twirling, and moving to the surface some 20 feet away.

Contact with Whales

Suspended face down wearing wetsuit, snorkel and mask, the waves are riding me as I bob like a surfboard. Beside me, lined up and floating like a dozen human crosses are my new friends on this adventure watching the humpback baby whale. Suddenly, the mother also begins a graceful ascent from the depths, slowly rolling towards us.

The mind cannot hold her size, there are no words. I am on the end of the line closest to her. She sees me and registers my position, holding me with her eye. We are together in this moment, alone in the watery depths while all danger is forgotten and the heart takes over: an experience so intimate and familiar and impossible unfolds



like a slow motion movie. I am numb, dreamy, and I can not move, time slips away in the recognition of an ancient presence and what can only be described as unconditional love floods my body. Imagine the sensation of an energy healer, a Reiki master touching into you on all levels so that the very soles of your feet vibrate with the sensation flowing through you-or the scan of a dolphin-or the tingle of an MRI. Now take that sensation and multiply it by one thousand one thousands. That is how it feels to be in the presence of a whale.

I hear my breath resume as the eye leaves me and moves along the group while the entire 55 feet of her body dappled and mottled with the patterns of underwater light undulates beneath showing her full size. I am in awe, speechless, joyous, and humble, I am so small, so small, so small, how could I have ever thought otherwise?

Emerging into the light and onto the boat there is excitement and also quiet, the reverence of this moment will stay in my mind as a model of power, gentle strength and grace forever.

Lessons from the Whales

The week proceeds in slow motion bliss, with whale encounters almost daily. We grow together as a pod and in shared experiences, as each day brings more amazement and wonder. Surrounded by water, cut off from normal life, allows the shift into being and not doing, and so the inner adventure unfolds.

The Wildquest tradition of sharing circles are our time to talk about our individual reactions and note the universal themes of adventure, courage, joy, peacefulness, bliss and an urge to protect the earth and her oceans.

Lorna, a psychotherapist, brings us harmony and sound in song, a new communication that expresses more than we can formulate with words. Later she will say, "The whales told me that the ocean is my home as well as their home and that the entire universe is our home. For them there is no separation. When I looked at the whales and the whales looked at me I realized I was seeing the face of God."

Leaving the Sanctuary

We are in the last week of the season and it is time for us and the whales to depart. Leaving our new found Sanctuary has dangers for the whales as they begin the migration to New England. "Fishing, global warming, and pollution are doing the most to harm the whale population but education is bringing

change and shifts in attitude," says Conlin.

It is education and a shift in consciousness care of the entire planet that fosters Oneness with the natural world in all its forms, even in vacation adventures.

Now home, it is the journey into inner space that calls and reminds of the lessons of the whales. This is an egoless journey, a gateway that can not be passed until the outer world is stripped off and we surrender into the unknown waters of the heart. We have been in a Sanctuary, the birthing ground of the whales, and of ourselves. The birthing can be a rough and rocky process but we have made it through to the other side and we will never be the same.

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For more information on Eco Adventures in this article, aquaticadventures.com and wildquest.com.

