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## Perspectives

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Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
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Jason Colby

## Searching for Gigi: Captivity, Culture, and the Pacific Coast's Embrace of Gray Whales

It was March 1972, and the time had come to release Gigi. A young female gray whale captured off Baja California, she had spent the past year at Sea World in San Diego, affording dozens of scientists their first access to a live baleen whale and thousands of visitors their first glimpse of her species. But she had outgrown her tank, and with the help of Naval researchers, Sea World set her free on 13 March. "In the future," reflected one journalist, "it may be that present knowledge and treatment of gray whales will be dated BG and AG—before and after Gigi."<sup>1</sup> At first glance, it seems an overstatement. The species has been under international protection since the 1930s, and scientists in California had begun counting migrating gray whales in the late 1940s.<sup>2</sup>

Yet Gigi's captivity marked a turning point in human views of gray whales. Following her release, entrepreneurs launched the first whale-watching excursions to the Baja calving lagoons, while Mexico passed legislation to protect that critical habitat. Soon after, researchers reported that gray whales were visiting boats and welcoming human contact—behavior Mexican locals had never witnessed before. What did these cultural changes, both human and cetacean, have to do with Gigi?<sup>3</sup> Quite a bit, as it turns out. The display of this young gray whale reshaped human perceptions of the species as well as providing unprecedented opportunities for research on a live baleen whale. In the process, Gigi influenced scientists who played key roles in marine mammal policy and the protection of eastern Pacific gray whales.

1 Bob Corbett, "Gigi's All Heart—In the Cause of Science," *San Diego Evening Tribune*, 3 March, 1972.

2 On the history of commercial whaling regulation, see D. Graham Burnett, *The Sounding of the Whale: Science and Cetaceans in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); and Kurpatrick Dorsey, *Whales and Nations: Environmental Diplomacy on the High Seas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

3 Not much, if one believes the literature. See, for example, Serge Dedina, *Saving the Gray Whale: People, Politics, and Conservation in Baja California* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000); Steven L. Swartz, *Lagoon Time: A Guide to Gray Whales and the Natural History of San Ignacio Lagoon* (San Diego: The Ocean Foundation, 2014); Dick Russell, *Eye of the Whale: Epic Passage from Baja to Siberia* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001). An exception to this neglect is Eleanor Coerr and William Evans, *Gigi: A Baby Whale Borrowed for Science and Returned to the Sea* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), a short account written for school use.

A century earlier, commercial hunts had nearly wiped them out. In 1857, US whaling skipper Charles Melville Scammon had discovered the breeding lagoons in Baja California, and over the following years he and his competitors decimated the population. “Every navigable lagoon of the region was discovered and explored, and the animals were hunted in every winding and intricate estuary which were their resorting or breeding places,” he later wrote. “None of the species are so constantly and variously pursued, and ere long it may be questioned whether this mammal will not be numbered among the extinct species of the Pacific.”<sup>4</sup> And the threats continued. In the 1910s and 1920s, the Mexican government allowed Norwegian whalers to harvest hundreds of grays in its waters, straining a population that had likely dropped to fewer than one thousand animals. In 1937, an international agreement banned the hunting of the species, but many scientists feared the “California gray whale” was on the path to extinction.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, after World War II, the population made a remarkable recovery. In the winter of 1946–1947, marine biologist Carl Hubbs and his students at Scripps Institution of Oceanography began counting migrating grays, and they conducted surveys of the Baja lagoons through the 1950s. Meanwhile, human views of cetaceans were changing rapidly, due in large part to modern oceanariums such as Marineland of the Pacific near Los Angeles and Sea World, which opened in San Diego in 1964.<sup>6</sup> Six months after opening, the marine park participated in an expedition to Baja, where they harpooned a gray whale calf that survived briefly in captivity. “I don’t believe we would have any problems keeping one alive if we could catch it without a harpoon and get it into a tank in three to eight hours,” declared Sea World veterinarian Dave Kenney.<sup>7</sup>

Six years later, he got his chance when his team captured another female calf in Baja. Dubbed “Gigi,” the youngster proved distrustful of Sea World staffers and veterinarians until she met a “Sea Maid” named Sue Bailey. Within days, Bailey was caressing and riding the young gray whale. “I spent all my free time swimming, playing and working with her,” Bailey recalls. “She was my baby.”<sup>8</sup> And that baby grew quickly. In late May 1971, staffers transferred Gigi to a larger tank, placing her in a public viewing area.

4 Charles M. Scammon, *The Marine Mammals of the Northwestern Coast of North America* (New York: Dover, 1968 [1874]), 259–263, 270, 32–33.

5 Russell, *Eye of the Whale*, 25–26.

6 On the history and culture of Sea World, see Susan G. Davis, *Spectacular Nature: Corporate Culture and the Sea World Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

7 “Gray Whale Captured,” *San Diego Union*, 24 February, 1965; “Captive Whale Meets Press,” *San Diego Union*, 25 February, 1965; “Gray Whale Serves, Dies,” *San Diego Evening Tribune*, 13 April, 1965.

8 Author interview with Susan Nessel, 15 July, 2017.

There, the calf gave thousands of visitors each day their first close-up view of her species. Children, in particular, enjoyed the sight of Bailey riding the whale around the pool. Gigi also made an impression on scientists. Previous research on gray whales had been almost entirely limited to dead specimens. As Kenney put it, “we know a lot about dead gray whales, but no one knows about the living gray whale.”<sup>9</sup> For the first time, researchers were able to measure the baleen growth, heart rate, respiratory volume, and diving physiology of the species. Among them were marine mammals specialists G. Carleton Ray and William Shevill, who came to Sea World to observe Gigi’s feeding techniques, in the process enjoying their first experience in the water with a live whale.<sup>10</sup>

When the time came for Gigi’s release in March 1972, public and scientific anticipation was high. But within a day, technicians lost her radio signal. Over the following days, letters of concern poured in from across the nation. Despite intermittent signals and assistance from NASA, Navy officials admitted in mid-April that they were unable to locate her. “I guess Gigi figured this was her last chance to join the pack,” noted one researcher, “so she took off.”<sup>11</sup> But despite her disappearance, Gigi had left her mark. During her year at Sea World, hundreds of thousands of visitors had gotten their first close-up look at a gray whale, and news coverage of her release drew attention to the species at a time when public concern for the fate of the great whales was surging. In the fall of 1972, the US Congress, advised closely by Ray and Shevill, passed the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which President Richard Nixon signed in October.<sup>12</sup> In addition to formally ending US commercial whaling, the law gave unprecedented protections to cetaceans in US waters, including eastern Pacific gray whales. Two years later, the Scripps Institution sponsored a meeting between US and Mexican scientists and officials over protection of the Baja lagoons. All along the coast, it seemed that interest in gray whales was growing. In May 1975, the Canadian environmental organization Greenpeace, on its way to confront Soviet whalers, frolicked with gray whales off Vancouver Island. The encounter, reflected Greenpeace leader Bob Hunter, had the effect of “‘converting’ everyone into whale freaks.”<sup>13</sup>

9 Kenney quoted in Bob Corbett, “Gigi’s All Heart—In the Cause of Science,” *San Diego Evening Tribune*, 3 March, 1972.

10 Coerr and Evans, Gigi, chapter 8; author interview with G. Carleton Ray, 9 October, 2017.

11 “Scientist Says Gigi Goes North,” *San Diego Union*, 19 April, 1972; Evans quoted in “Big Search See for Missing Gigi,” *San Diego Union*, 23 April, 1972.

12 G. Carleton Ray and Frank M. Potter Jr., “The Making of the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972,” *Aquatic Mammals* 37, no. 4 (2011): 520–552.

13 Frank Zelko, *Make It a Green Peace!* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 213.

Meanwhile, Gigi's story continued to loom large at Sea World. The marine park's education department regularly held puppet shows for visiting school groups that detailed the animal's captivity, along with ecological information on gray whales. In the process, Sea World advertised the possibility that Gigi might someday return for a visit. In late 1977, after years of unconfirmed sightings, the Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute received photos taken off Point Loma. A gray whale had approached a small boat so closely that the operator had taken detailed photographs and even touched the animal. After noting the scars caused by the sutures for the radio, researchers confirmed that the animal was Gigi. Once again, the famous gray whale made headlines in Southern California.<sup>14</sup>

She also captured the imagination of Sea World employees. In early 1977, a staffer in the education department named Steven Swartz made his first trip to Baja, where he explored the possibility of field research. The following year, he and former Sea Maid Mary Lou Jones launched what would become pioneering studies of gray whale behavior in San Ignacio Lagoon. And it was during their first season, in early 1978, when Swartz and Jones noted a previously unobserved behavior among the gray whales. Beyond merely tolerating the presence of the few whale-watching vessels, some of the animals approached the boats and even allowed physical contact from people.<sup>15</sup> News of the "friendly" whales spread quickly, and by the 1980s they had become a key tourist attraction in Baja.

These developments reflected larger global trends. In 1982, the International Whaling Commission voted for a moratorium on commercial whaling, which took effect four years later. By that time, eastern Pacific gray whales had become symbols not just of Pacific Coast ecology but of shifting human relations with cetaceans. In November 1988, Mexico created the Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve, expanding protections over the calving lagoons, and over the following years eastern Pacific gray whales continued their miraculous recovery. In 1994, the US government removed the population from the endangered list, making it the only cetacean population to be delisted.

What was the place of the Gigis in all of this? Some who knew her well make sweeping claims. "The friendlies didn't show up until after we released Gigi," declares former trainer Sue Bailey. Researchers are more skeptical, noting the difficulty of identifying in-

<sup>14</sup> Coerr and Evans, *Gigi*, 110.

<sup>15</sup> By 1982, Swartz recorded two hundred such encounters. See Dedina, *Saving the Gray Whale*, 18.

dividual gray whales at the time.<sup>16</sup> Yet however uncomfortable it is to acknowledge in the current context of anti-captivity activism, Gigi's time at Sea World undeniably influenced public and scientific views. All but forgotten today, her captivity played a key role in the transnational embrace of gray whales on the Pacific Coast. Years before whale-watchers raved about Baja's "friendlies," thousands were introduced to Sea World's friendly gray whale. Those encounters reframed public and scientific perceptions of this now-iconic species and influenced scientists who played a pivotal role in writing the US Marine Mammal Protection Act. And who knows? Perhaps she influenced gray whale culture as well.

16 Author interview with Susan Nessel, 15 July, 2017; author interview with Jim Sumich, 13 February, 2018.