



**Laguna San Ignacio**  
ecosystem science program

a project of The Ocean Foundation

## Gray Whale Calf Rescued in Laguna San Ignacio



On February 7th, the LSIESP/PRIMMA-UABCS gray whale research team was conducting a routine whale abundance survey in Laguna San Ignacio when they observed a female whale and her calf swimming slowly at the surface and trailing several fishing lines with buoys attached. As the team approached the pair, it became obvious that the calf had several fishing lines and buoys wrapped around its body, and the weight of this fishing gear was making it very difficult for the calf to swim and surface to breathe.

Our field Chief, Dr. Sergio Martínez A, decided to attempt to dis-entangle this calf from the fishing gear, but to do so the team had to return to the field laboratory to obtain the special equipment needed to free the whale of the gear. Upon returning to the mother whale and her entangled calf, under the direction of Dr. Martínez the team implemented the "RABEN" (Red de Asistencia a Ballenas Enmalladas) protocol, or procedure, to begin the rescue process. In 2014 the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) funded a series of whale disentanglement workshops led by Ed Lyman and David Matilla (then working for the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission) to train LSIESP researchers and other boat operators in specific methods to safely disentangle large whales from fishing gear. NRDC also funded the purchase of especially designed equipment for large whale disentanglements, and ensured that caches of this equipment were maintained at the gray whale breeding lagoons, and at other key locations in Baja California. To date 8 gray whales have been disentangled and rescued in Laguna San Ignacio.



The team first used a grappling hook to attach a large red float to the fishing lines trailing behind the calf. This float allowed the team to know the location of the calf relative to the boat at all times, and also provided additional resistance to the calf's efforts to dive, and tiring the calf to slow its swimming. At this point the team closely approached the calf and determine that approximately 50 m of lines and floats were wrapped around the calf's body and peduncle. This had to be done carefully because female gray whales have a reputation for aggressively protecting their calves when they perceive the calf is in danger or injured. Fortunately, while this mother whale stood by her calf she did not interfere with the team while they approached

the calf to evaluate the degree of entanglement at close range.

Using specially designed knives on long poles, the team then began cutting the lines wrapped around the calf's body, and then those lines around its peduncle, ultimately freeing the young and exhausted whale. When the fishing lines and floats were recovered, the team discovered two wire lobster traps on the ends of the two 50m long lines with buoys. If this fishing gear were not removed, the gray whale calf would have certainly died. Ironically, the traps contained three lobsters, which were returned to the sea to live another day.



The regulations of the Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve do not permit the use of fishing lines, floats, traps or nets inside of the lagoon during the winter months while the gray whales are in residence. However, some fishing gear is lost each year when the strong daily tides wrap the float-retrieval lines around submerged rocks, and these traps cannot be recovered and pose potential sources of entanglement for whales and other marine life. In addition, as the whales migrate along the outer coast of Baja California, they encounter various types of lines and nets, and occasionally they become entangled in these.

This winter's gray whale calf rescue brings the total number of gray whales successfully disentangled in Laguna San Ignacio to 8 whales saved since this effort began. Many of these individual whales have been repeatedly sighted and photographed in years following their rescues. We salute the efforts of the LSIESP gray whale "RABEN" team to rescue these whales, and to NRDC for ensuring that this capability continues to be maintained in the gray whale breeding lagoons.

Your support makes it possible for our program to monitor and protect the gray whales in Laguna San Ignacio and in Bahía Magdalena. Please visit our website and consider making a donation and becoming a recurring supporter of our gray whale research program!

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