Building Capacity to Respond to Entangled Large Whales in San Ignacio Lagoon, Baja California Sur, Mexico: January 18-19, Kuyima Eco-Tourism Camp, San Ignacio Lagoon

by David Mattila

The entanglement of marine mammals in passive (fixed or drifting) fishing gear and marine debris is increasingly recognized as an epidemic source of human-caused mortality for many marine mammal populations. It has recently been estimated that 308,000 whales and dolphins die entangled in fishing gear annually. Moreover, this estimate does not include those that might die entangled in derelict fishing gear and other debris made of rope and net, and it is known to underestimate the entanglement rates of large whales, as they frequently drag fishing gear and other entangling materials many miles from the initial point of entanglement. Recognizing this and the recently identified serious animal welfare concerns (i.e. the average time to death for an entangled N. Atlantic right whale is six months), the International Whaling Commission (IWC) convened a panel of experts who produced several recommendations, including a strong recommendation for disentanglement capacity building globally. In a second meeting, the panel of experts reached consensus on the following: (1) established principles and guidelines for entanglement response ("best practices"), (2) developed a strategy and curriculum for building capacity, and (3) agreed to advise the 88 countries of the IWC on this topic. It also recognized that in addition to conservation and animal welfare concerns, there is another pressing reason to undertake capacity building. That is because of the increasing number of well-meaning but untrained people attempting to release entangled whales, resulting in many serious injuries and near-fatal interactions. These attempts, as with releases by fishermen themselves, often leave the lethal wraps of rope on the whale, sealing its fate.

On January 18 & 19, 2014 The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) supported the IWC endorsed, expert training for boat operators, park personnel and researchers in San Ignacio Lagoon, Mexico. This training workshop included one day on land in a classroom (provided by the Kuyima Eco-Tourism camp) and one day of practical simulation using boats provided by Kuyima and the Autonomous University of Baja California Sur (UABCS) research team. Other support was provided by the IWC and the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

The IWC and NOAA provided two expert trainers (David Mattila and Ed Lyman), for 34 participants in the classroom, 20 of whom were identified as key recipients for practical training on the water the following day. The trainees included: 12 fishermen/boat operators, 6 from Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT), 2 from UABCS.

The first day of the training was held in the classroom and included a full background of the entanglement issue (both locally and globally), species involved locally, potential legal issues and the ultimate need for a preventative solution. The remainder of the day involved going over the tools, techniques and safety protocols that are currently being used by countries with formal rescue networks around the world. This included theory, practical case studies and familiarization with tools on land.

The second day took place on the water with four boats (two for each trainer). One boat acted as a "whale" and towed a rope and debris, while the other "rescue" boat contained the trainer and two trainees at a time. This allowed for "hands on" practice with the basic tools and concepts in a simulated whale rescue scenario.

As most of the trainees were long-time residents and boat operators from the Lagoon, some had already been exposed to entangled whales, and were relieved to learn that there were established, safer ways to rescue entangled whales. During the practical training on the water, the trainees were evaluated by the trainers and given recommended roles in future responses to entangled whales. However, given that most of the trainees had a background that included handling fishing gear, operating small boats, and observing whale behavior, most of them received high evaluations. It was clear that they will form local response teams based on their long-term understanding of each other's particular strengths.

It should also be noted that some participants came from the (relatively) nearby Ojo de Liebre Lagoon, and that these trainees would be able to support the individuals in Guerro Negro, who received the previous training in La Paz (November, 2013). This training in San Ignacio was able to accommodate more participants than originally proposed, due to the contribution of an additional trainer (Ed Lyman), and the in kind support of the Kuyima Eco-Tourism Camp.

Immediate results of the training

Trainee evaluations:

Of the 34 participants who took part in the classroom training, 20 were selected, based on practical criteria, for training and evaluation during the second day on the water. Of these, all of the boat operators and experienced park personnel had the skills for immediate primary roles, some of the long-standing researchers could also serve in this capacity, but most were recommended for lead roles in the supporting team (i.e. on the support boats and collecting data).

Status of rescue tools:

As noted above, the custom tools used during this training were left at the San Ignacio Lagoon for the use of the newly trained team.

Postscript:

On March 22, 2014, researchers from UABCS successfully removed lobster-trap line and buoys from a gray whale calf using the methods and custom tools provided by this Workshop (Click here to see the LSIESP disentanglement report).

All of the local residents of San Ignacio Lagoon, the Eco-Tourism operators and their boat drivers and naturalists, and the researchers are pleased to have this capacity to respond to and address future instances of entanglement of gray whales in San Ignacio Lagoon, and they express their sincere appreciation to NRDC, IWC, NOAA, Dave Mattila and Ed Lyman for making this training Workshop possible.

(Photo Credit: Shane Keena)