

Whalefest Monterey explores ins and outs of whales

Marine life, planet's health focus of Monterey festival

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Children explore the inside of a life-size inflatable humpback whale... (DAVID ROYAL/The Herald)

It is convincingly disguised as a weekend of fun and frivolity, but Whalefest Monterey, in its fourth year, is really a tricky way to convince the rest of us to care a little bit more about our planet.

There's a 60-foot-long virtual whale that can be explored, inside and out, from snout to tail. There's a man in a shark suit. There are undersea experts offering the rare opportunity to fondle a dead squid, a giant whale bone, or the jaws of a sea lion. There are lectures by renowned marine experts, and documentary films. And there is music from eight groups or individual performers.

If you're not careful, you'll learn a lot, even from people who, if you saw them in a different context, might inspire you to cross the street.

"I'm Nina Rosen, and I'm dressed up today as The Bag Lady," said a volunteer for Monterey Bay Marine Life Studies, who was adorned head to toe with plastic shopping bags — the kind many of us mindlessly discard every day. "I'm here today to help educate people about reusing their plastic bags, and how they get into the ocean."

And, yes, they get there, and they float around, looking very much like food to sea creatures, which eat them and become ill or die.

On average, Californians use about 550 plastic bags per person every year. So much discarded plastic has reached our oceans that a vortex of plastic, approximately the size of Texas, is swirling in the North Pacific.

"The plastic doesn't go away, and a lot of it gets very, very small, so it becomes more easily ingested by sea life," said another Marine Life Studies volunteer, Alicia Beverage. "Particles of plastic actually get fed to young birds by their parents, who think that they're grabbing food from the ocean. Those birds suffer high mortality rates because they can't digest plastic.

"It never really goes away, so the more we put plastic into our environment, the more it will affect our natural resources, marine life and terrestrial life. It really is a big problem."

Allison Watson was part of a team from the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History manning a table where passers-by could plunge their hands into simulated whale blubber, or touch baleen, the two-foot-long, comb-like filter system that gray whales have instead of teeth.

"Gray whales scoop amphipods from the dirt and sediment. They shoot the dirt, sediment and water through the baleen, and the amphipods get stuck, and that's what they eat," Watson explained.

Professional whale watchers, it turns out, can recognize individual whales from the injuries and markings on their tails. Some whales that frequent Monterey Bay even have names, said Sue Leinweber, a volunteer with Marine Life Studies.

"There's a humpback whale out in the bay that is missing part of its dorsal fin, and his name is Stumpy," she said. "(Whale researchers) see him quite often. The markings on a whale's tail are like a fingerprint."

Hannah Rosen, a graduate student working at the Hopkins Marine Station, presided over one of the more popular exhibits of the festival: a table displaying a pair of squid, whose normal habitat is about 2,000 feet below the surface of the ocean.

"This is all ink, and it's very concentrated," she said of dark goo covering her hands and the tentacled creature on the tray in front of her. "When squid get scared, when they're being chased by a predator, they'll shoot the ink out of their bodies, it gets diluted by the water, and it forms a cloud that hides them from the predator and enables them to get away."

Scientists from the Pacific Shark Research Center were on hand to explain the plight of the greatest predators of the sea, many of which are now on endangered lists because of environmental abuse. A centerpiece of their display was the head of a short-finned Mako shark.

"Almost one-fourth of all shark and ray species are endangered, so our work here is to encourage the public to be more aware, and also to educate little kids," said East Bay native Kristen Walovich. "Ecosystems are in balance. Everything relies on everything else, and when you remove one of those pieces, inevitably the whole system will be affected. Reducing your overall footprint is a great way to help."

Children are a prime target of educators at Whalefest and other eco-aware events, she said.

"They absorb what we're telling them. They have that sense of curiosity, and I think all of us who became scientists started out as one of those persistent kids who always ask why ... why ... why?" she said. "Eventually we got older, but we're still asking why. You don't know the answers, so you go to grad school to find out."

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