

Whalefest 2014: A testimony to the evolution of thought

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Photographer Peggy Staps image of orcas at sea will be part of the Fins, Funds and Photos!"...

Whales evolved from land animals that lived about 50 million years ago.

A recent fossil discovery in Pakistan provided pertinent extra clues from the time between those small, terrestrial animals and the 49-foot gray whale of today's ocean.

"Their ancestors were almost a cross between a hippopotamus and a crocodile," said Dr Steve Palumbi, director of Hopkins Marine Station.

Zoom ahead to the mid-19th century and Portuguese fisherman spend their days in Monterey hauling in whales and boiling down their blubber in "try pots" — the huge iron kettles you can still find in places like the Old Whaling Station garden, its front walkway fashioned completely of the creatures' vertebrae.

Fast-forward again a generous hundred years, and those blubber pots are covered in flowers and linens for someone's wedding reception.

Trip along another few years and we've arrived at this weekend, when the fourth annual Monterey Whalefest will fete the whales for their intelligence, beauty and place in the ecosystem through music, theater, film and more. Admittance is free.

Palumbi will give a talk focusing partly on whales then and now. "We kind of went through a bad patch where we ate them," said the scientist.

Then, he will pull some whale facts from his brand new book, "The Extreme Life of the Sea," which covers facts about the "fastests" and "deepests" of our ocean.

Besides Palumbi's lecture, you can come out and see a Humboldt squid and shark dissection, take part in beach clean-ups, listen to bands like Jonah and the Whale Watchers and Monterey High Jazz Band, check out the inaugural year for a local photo fundraiser, or create gyotaku — a Japanese fish print.

Whalefest is also a celebration of the impressive list of local and national organizations that help care for and educate about the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

Moss Landing Marine Labs, Surfrider Foundation, Pacific Grove Museum, the Otter Project, the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, BLUE Ocean Film Festival and Conservation Summit and a long list of others will participate.

Monterey has now been trademarked as the Whale Watching Capital of the World. Though whales can be seen off the coast of Monterey any time of the year, December through May marks the gray whale migration.

If you see a gray whale that seems to have migrated up onto the bike trail, it may belong to Save the Whales, which will get help from Monterey High School MAOS volunteers sporting a gray whale and a leatherback sea turtle costume to draw attention to festivities.

Save the Whales, based here in Monterey, will have a booth with lots of hands-on, materials to interact with, like real baleen and blubber, and their whale sound board.

Their program Whales on Wheels connects with 5,000 to 6,000 school kids each year via a kind of "mini-museum" and includes seven different programs, including one on noise pollution in the ocean where children in two groups — representing dolphins — do their best to talk to each other over musical instruments — representing pollution.

Though whales may not fall into the furry/cuddly category, the more you know, the easier it becomes to identify with and want to help them.

"(Whales) seem to exhibit the same empathy traits that we do," said Save the Whales co-founder Maris Sidenstecker II, whose evolution to marine biologist began with an organized campaign to save earthworms in the first grade.

And those traits don't end with others of their kind. There are reports of dolphins and whales helping humans that date back to the 18th century. (For human rescue stories, see <http://bit.ly/DolphinRescue>.)

The examples of admirable whale qualities are bountiful. Orcas stay in matriarchal families and never leave. If there is a danger to a sperm whale baby, the adults will crowd around it in a flower formation, their heads facing the young group member to protect it.

And there is much we still don't know. After whales began to be hunted in Monterey, they started swimming farther off shore. "How are they transmitting that (information)?" wondered Sidenstecker.

With less mystery and more encyclopedic facts comes historian and author, Tim Thomas who will give an abbreviated version of his walking tour during the festival.

"It's a social history, cultural history of the waterfront," he said. "The whole idea of it is to talk about the people who came before us."

He might point out the big iron eye hook you can still see at low tide on the beach beside the wharf — a leftover from the whaling days.

Since the blubber was what the whalers were mainly after, Thomas says, people are interested in what happened to the rest of the whale. They'd let the currents take the carcasses, which usually landed them on Del Monte Beach. From there, the grizzlies took care of them.

"Pop" Ernest Doelter, famous for his abalone steak and subsequent owner of the first restaurant on the wharf in 1919, had a hand in a revival of sorts for the Portuguese shore whalers in the 1920s. Said Thomas, "Those guys actually evolved into part of the tourist industry."

In the spring, hundreds of basking sharks would come to Monterey. Always enterprising, Doelter got the idea to bring hotel guests and fisherman out on the bay together.

The fisherman would entertain with stories and show the visitors how to throw harpoons to hit the sharks. The outing cost tourists 15 cents.

Today we prefer activities like ogling at the trail of evolution — the one that began on land.

"What I do find is that you show people a really nice photo of a whale's hand," began Palumbi. "It's amazing. It's incredible that that's all still in there," he said.

Though a Whalefest can't provide any qualitative data for his research, Palumbi is at ease discussing the potential for everyone leaving with "a warm glow." He says it's nice to be surrounded by people who care about the ocean.

"If it was a 'Shrimpfest,' you'd expect to eat shrimp," he noted.

Then again, sometimes, the more things change, the more they stay the same. "I think what most people don't realize about that wharf is that it was a tourist wharf from the beginning," said Thomas.

The Hotel Del Monte opened in 1880 and boasted a wooden walkway from its doors along the beach and all the way to Fisherman's Wharf where people could sail, fish or check out the Bay through a glass-bottom boat.

This weekend, those very same activities may be ones you choose in your exploration of Whalefest 2014.

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WHALE FESTIVAL

·What: Monterey Old Fisherman's Wharf Association presents the fourth annual Monterey Whalefest

·Where: On and around Old Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey

·When: 10a.m.-5p.m., Sat-Sun,