

There's an ocean of knowledge to be gleaned from Whalefest Monterey



Two Humpback whales lunge feed off Monastery Beach south of Carmel on Aug. 24. Vern Fisher — Monterey Herald

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Kids explore the inside of a 60-foot inflatable humpback whale during Whalefest Monterey in 2014. The whale is built by Monterey Academy of Oceanographic Science students. David Royal — Monterey Herald

If you go

What: Sixth annual Whalefest Monterey

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, Jan. 23-24

Where: Fisherman's Wharf and Custom House Plaza, Monterey

Cost: Free; whale-watching trips available for a fee

Information: montereywharf.com

Highlights

- Walk around inside a 60-foot model whale.
- Learn about underwater robotics by tinkering with ocean tech equipment.
- Learn the Japanese art of fish stenciling (gyoataku), historically done to record a catch, and whalers' art of scrimshaw, carving and decorating whalebone (soap is the stand-in for Whalefest purposes). Noon-4 p.m. in front of Abalonetti Bar and Grill.
- Abalone races coordinated by the Moss Landing Marine Labs with abalone donated by the Monterey Abalone Co. 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. near Nino's Wharfside restaurant. ("It doesn't take long; they're not snails," quips Whalefest founder Mary Alice Cerrito Ferris.)
- The Monterey Bay chapter of the American Cetacean Society's annual fundraising trip will leave at 8 a.m. Sunday from Princess Monterey Whalewatching (\$25; 831-373-4281, acsmb.org/events).
- Take historic walking tours of the wharf at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday and 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Sunday.

Monterey >> Whalefest Monterey, a two-day educational experience and celebration of the ocean and marine life, returns to Fisherman's Wharf for a sixth year this weekend.

The all-ages event offers interactive activities like art and robotics stations; animal encounters through whale-watching tours, squid dissection and abalone races; live music from the likes of Jonah and the Whalewatchers (reggae) and Nick Fettis and his Orca-stra (original compositions interlaced with humpback songs); and a symposium with marine scientists, researchers, authors and historians.

The undercurrent to all of it is the message that our oceans and the life within deserve to be protected.

"We want people to be so inspired when they learn something new that they walk away empowered," said founder and director Mary Alice Cerrito Fettis, citing a group of fifth-graders who last year were spurred to action in pushing for the removal of microbeads from beauty products.

Whalefest corresponds with the annual migration of the gray whale through Monterey Bay, and in the last week they've been visible from the back deck of the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

"Some years a lot of the whales cut right across Monterey Bay," said Jim Covell, a member of the guest experience staff at the aquarium. "This year we have a number who have taken what I call the scenic tour, hugging the coast."

Covel said the gray whale population is “pretty good” right now, with estimates in the 19,000 to 20,000 range.

But as the climate continues to change — especially in the arctic, where gray whales feed all summer long — the big picture is uncertain, he said.

That’s one of the topics reflected in the symposium, which has grown in size and diversity this year. Last year’s symposium had one theme: ocean currents, said Cerrito Fettis. This year’s symposium, held Saturday and Sunday at the Museum of Monterey, packs variety.

Saturday’s topics are heavily weighted toward marine life in the bay, with speakers talking not only about whales but leatherback sea turtles, elephant seals and other creatures. On Sunday, the focus is climate change and meteorological events like El Niño and their effects on whales. Other topics for the weekend include the story of the Western Flyer fishing vessel, efforts by boat pilots to avoid hitting whales and a history of our sardine fishery.

Sunday will also host a panel of people who were involved in [rescuing the minke whale](#) in Monterey Harbor last August.

“The minke rescue panel is basically nothing to do with the whale — although it’s everything to do with the whale,” said Cerrito Fettis. “It’s about how everyone came together so quickly on a Sunday night (to save the animal).”

Outside of the symposium, dozens of marine-oriented organizations and institutions will set up informational booths under the big tent covering Custom House Plaza, all in an effort to serve one of the event’s primary tenets.

“No matter what level of education — whether a Ph.D. or a 6-year-old — we want people to learn something new about saving our blue planet,” Cerrito Fettis said.