

The Whale and the Cherry Blossom Festival

Brenda Peterson

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By Brenda Peterson

This was Yoshiko and Masumi’s first trip from Japan to Mexico’s remote San Ignacio Lagoon to encounter what scientists call “The Friendly Whale Syndrome.” At last our plane descended toward the dirt landing strip bordering the lagoon’s turquoise waters and gentle pink salt mountains. Excitedly, this mother and daughter scanned below for the heart-shaped blows of the many mother-calf pairs of gray whales.

The Mexican government has shown considerable foresight in setting aside San Ignacio lagoon as El Vizcaino Biosphere, the first whale sanctuary in the world. This will help ensure the future health of this last population of healthy gray whales. And thanks to Mitsubishi—who decided not to build a salt factory on San Ignacio—this birthing lagoon is still pristine. Yoshiko and Masumi, along with their long-time friend Maureen and her teenage daughter Alexa, decided to have an international reunion here in the quiet tents and small boats of this faraway camp. Eighteen of us had all signed up with SummerTree Expeditions to have what we called a “pod” reunion this spring. Some of us have been visiting San Ignacio for many years to study this remarkable yearly ritual: Wild animals seeking physical contact with the very species who has twice brought gray whales to the brink of extinction.

Next morning, we floated in the skiff with our

boatman Renalfo. In the 1970s, his father, Francisco Mayoral, was the first man in the lagoon to touch these 45-foot whales, thus attracting scientists who still do not know why the “Friendlies” approach our boats of their own volition. Are they curious? The 70-year worldwide ban on gray whale hunting has allowed their population to return to what we hope are healthy numbers. Could this hunting ban also be the reason the whales here trust us? What would be possible if this moratorium, which Japan, Norway, and Russia defy by continuing to hunt whales, spanned another century?

Rocking in the lagoon, we scanned the horizon for the familiar blows of mother-calf pairs. All night we had listened to the whales breathing under a dark dome filled with more stars than many of us have seen in a lifetime. First, the bass blasts of the bull whales; then the long mezzo-soprano sigh of the mother whale; and almost in synch, the treble, brief blow of the baby.

“Whales at one o’clock!” Yoshiko happily called out as a mother-calf pair surfaced half a lagoon away from us.

Motoring parallel to the whales, Renalfo kept his steady eye on the mother-calf pair. Were they Friendlies? Would they approach us and seek our outstretched hands—here, where once Yankee whalers brutally harpooned calves to attract the loyal, and more lucrative, mothers? In the nineteenth-century whaling days in San Ignacio Lagoon, the mothers were so fiercely protective of their calves that they earned the

nickname “Devil Fish.” Over a hundred years later, we sit in a small 18-foot skiff, awaiting a visit from a 45-ton mother whale and her 1,500-plus-pound newborn.

Renalfo throttled back the motor, allowing only enough noise to let the whales know we were nearby, drifting apart, but alongside them, waiting hopefully. Not everyone here in these pristine lagoons will have a physical encounter with a wild whale. It will be the whale’s choice.

First Contact is a phrase usually meant for encountering extraterrestrials. But for those of us who keep our eyes and hopes focused on this majestic and wondrous blue planet, First Contact means the first time we humbly accept that we are not the only intelligent species, that we have much to learn from other animals, that we are not alone in this sea-encircled world. We stretch out our hands, our imaginations, and hope to meet the Other in the animal’s own element.

Over the years, we’ve noted that gray whales often approach boats in which people are singing. After all, acoustics are any whale’s main sense. It is how they navigate, find food, find each other, communicate. The gray whale has a marvelous sense of Earth’s electromagnetic fields. A sense of knowing exactly where they are.

“Let’s sing a Japanese song,” someone said, in honor of Yoshiko and Masumi’s “First Contact.”

Yoshiko, a lively woman in her mid-fifties, smiled at her daughter, who is a flight attendant for Japanese Airways, and they both nodded and together suggested, “Sakura!”

“This is our Japanese song of the cherry blossom festival that comes every spring,”

Yoshiko explained to us as she taught us the words and haunting melody of the song. “It’s also a lullaby a mother might sing to her child.”

A perfect song for a birthing lagoon, for mother-calf pairs. As we leaned over the boat, splashing with our hands to call the whales nearer, I realized that on our Pod trip, ten out of twenty of us were mother-child pairs. Our eldest was 84 and our youngest one year old. Masumi had been present when Maureen gave birth to Alexa—a water birth.

So here we were at another kind of water birth of newborn calves.

“Sakura, Sakuraaaaaaaa, Yayoi no sora wa....” we all sang out, our voices harmonizing. Cherry blossoms, Cherry Blossoms / as far as I can see...”

Suddenly, the mother-calf pair veered right toward us, as if hearing our song. “Keep singing!” Yoshiko encouraged.

Though we didn’t get all the Japanese lyrics at first, the melody was a universal language. Even the whales seemed to understand this was a lullaby between a mother and her newborn. With a mighty whoosh from her double blowhole, a rainbow prism of light and sweet mist, the mother surfaced, her huge snout mottled with white barnacles.

“Cherry blossoms!” I sang out. Those barnacles looked just like the luminous blooming flowers I see everywhere in Seattle—first signs of spring in my hometown.

Yoshiko nodded, smiling, “Sakura!”



Yoshiko sings to call the gray whales for First Contact. (photo: Robin Kobaly, SummerTree Institute)

We sang even stronger now as the mother whale turned on her side to study us with her great eye as big as a softball, and wide open. Looking up at these humans, what did she see? Why did she trust us, when humans still hunt grays up in the Arctic? One of the mother whales we saw this spring had a harpoon scar slashed along her side. And yet these whales are Friendly, approaching us to present their precious newborns.

“Coming up!” Renalfo cried out and we all scrambled to one side of the boat, singing at the top of our voices.

“Sakuraa... hana zakari.....!”



Mother-calf pair spyhops, approaching our boat. Baja, Mexico, spring 2005. (photo: Jose Sanchez, Instituto de SummerTree)

And then the mother whale did something I’ve not witnessed in the five years I’ve been visiting San Ignacio. She turned belly-up under our small boat, floating us all very gently on her belly. Her blowhole upside down and closed, she held her breath, as a huge pectoral fin lifted her baby up to our outstretched hands. Eye-to-eye with a newborn calf, we hushed, gazing into that dark, deep eye. Were we the first humans this calf had ever seen? Would we be the last? In this gray whale’s long life—some scientists say that grays can live up to 150 years—will this whale always remember us?

We will always remember her trust and tenderness, as she turned to let us scratch her tiny whiskers and smooth, new skin; so sensitive, like touching silk and cool melon.

“Keep singing,” Yoshiko called out, stroking the baby’s snout. “She likes it.”



Yoshiko and Masumi encounter their first mother gray whale. Baja, Mexico. (photo: Brenda Peterson)

The mother-calf liked our lullaby so much that for the rest of our expedition, everyone wanted to be in the same boat as Yoshiko and Masumi, because theirs was the most popular boat of all for whale encounters. Everyone learned to sing Sakura.

I could still hear the mesmerizing melody several weeks later when I read the astonishing news that during the Japanese cherry blossom festival that year, a single gray whale swam into Tokyo Bay. It was as if the gray whale showed up to attend the spring celebration of their annual Golden Week. Sakura, the cherry blossom festival.

“TV footage showed holidaymakers on nearby wharves cheering wildly as the whale came into sight and blew water high into the air,” reported the Mail & Guardian.

This Japanese cherry blossom festival from

March to May coincides with the birthing season and visit of the Friendly Whales in Baja, Mexico. Immediately by e-mail I sent the news report to Maureen who forwarded it to Yoshiko in Japan. I felt so happy to send this good news along.

The last e-mail I had sent to Yoshiko was about the Japanese announcing their plans to seek “broader and more comprehensive” research whaling in the Antarctic at the June meeting of the International Whaling Commission in Ulsan, Korea. Already Japan saddens the world by killing almost one thousand minke, sperm, sei, and rare Bryde’s whales in the northwestern Pacific under the label “research whaling.” Much of it ends up in Japanese meat markets. Under Japan’s expanded plan, their whalers will double their yearly catch of minke whales and begin hunting endangered humpback and fin whales.

“They do not tell us much about Japanese whaling in our newspapers,” Yoshiko wrote back. “They will not publish anything critical about our whaling industry. But we are telling everyone we know about the Friendly whales in Baja. We are speaking for the whales here in our country. And many Japanese are listening—especially the young people.”

In late spring of 2005, Japan did not succeed in influencing many smaller nations to overturn the worldwide hunting moratorium on gray whales, and so officially return to commercial whaling in this 21st century. But every year Japan, Norway, and other whaling nations lobby relentlessly to return to commercial hunting. If they succeed, what will become of this trust that has developed over the last 70 years in San Ignacio, and all along the West Coast migration path? Will our grandchildren ever again be able to encounter Friendly Whales? Or will that become another legend of interspecies trust—a long-lost time when the

bond between humans and animals was strong, respectful, and far-sighted?

When that lone gray whale showed up for the spring cherry blossom festival with the Japanese people, was it perhaps a sign? A plea? A Possibility?

The once plentiful Western Pacific, or Korean, population of gray whales is now almost extinct, down to 200 whales. There have been only 12 sightings of gray whales around Japan since the 1960s. What if Japan, like its multinational corporation of Mitsubishi, made another decision—a decision not to hunt? A decision for the future generations of people and whales together. Who knows what might happen if instead of seeing harpoons in gray whale mothers, we recognized the symbols of cherry blossoms—rebirth. Might more whales find their way back to the islands of Japan? Might there one day be Friendly Whales swimming in Japanese seas?

Less than a week after that solitary gray whale in Tokyo Harbor surprised Japanese celebrating their sakura Cherry Blossom Festival, the same whale was found dead.

Floating silently, the barnacle-mottled body was entangled in a fishing net near the town of Tomiyama. How did the whale die? Perhaps she was drowned by the fishing net or had been struck by the crush of harbor vessels before drifting into the net. It is a mystery.

But here is the biggest mystery of all: How can a nation that rushes to welcome and cheer a rare, visiting gray whale in Tokyo Harbor also at the same time begin serving “whale burgers” to their schoolchildren? How can a nation that so prides itself on culture, not also recognize the culture of cetaceans? Scientists have now documented that whales and dolphins have

unique cultures: humpbacks pass down songs from their elders to their young; dolphins use sponges as tools; gray whales, the elder of all whales, migrate 10,000 miles round-trip from Baja to Alaska, following the complicated electro-magnetic grids under our seas. And most poignant of all, the Friendly Whales in Baja are increasing in numbers every year, this trusting behavior passed down generations.

It is humans who are not adapting to a changing and more threatened whale, a compromised and often fathomless ocean. It is humans who are the animal who must evolve if we are to survive within the healthy web of all creatures. Humans who must find the humility in the “humus,” or common matter, of our names.

“All things are connected,” said the great Chief Seattle whose birthplace is across the Salish Sea from my home, “like the blood that unites one family. All things are connected.”

Is there a connection between a gray whale mother and calf who chose Yoshiko and Masumi singing a Japanese folk song as their favorite boat of the season—and the fact that a single gray whale visited Tokyo during their cherry blossom festival?

I reflect upon all of this as I take my daily walks, strolling every spring past the beautiful Japanese ornamental trees in my neighborhood where the wind steals away the last of the luminous flowers. A blizzard of blossoms. A lone whale visits Japan. Sakura.

Brenda Peterson is the author of fifteen books, including a New York Times Notable Book of the Year, [Duck and Cover](#); the memoir [Build Me An Ark: A Life with Animals](#) (W.W. Norton), just out in Chinese; and a recent National Geographic Book with co-author Linda Hogan,



[Sightings: The Gray Whale's Mysterious Journey.](#)

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