A Whale of a Time

By Thomas Slatter, SPES Communications Volunteer

Walking along the Stanley Park seawall in the autumnal air, eeking the most out of our fall sunshine, some of you may have been fortunate enough to hear a most unfamiliar sound: a great rushing gust of air blowing up from the ocean followed by the excited cries of people as they are graced by the magnificent presence of a grey whale.

As many of you may be aware, Vancouverites have been lucky lately to witness the rare event of grey whales feeding along the city’s shores, an event that historically would have been a much more frequent occurrence. Both permanent populations and migratory pods of grey whales travelling on their incredible migration route along the west coast of North America have enjoyed the lush food resources of our coastline. However, due to overhunting in the past 150 years (from the early 1800s to 1972) northwestern populations declined to the point where they were no longer an annual sighting, becoming the rare and extraordinary sight that they are today.

There is some very happy news though, and cetacean lovers, scientists and the general public can rejoice! The recent and more frequent sightings of grey whales may well be an indicator that population numbers have risen to a point where the whales are seeking further feeding grounds and are reclaiming the sandy shores around English Bay, Coal Harbor and the Burrard Inlet. Being baleen whales, greys search for sandy coastlines to sift sediments for food (worms, mollusks and other invertebrates). Our coast here has gone without a whale’s presence for so long that they are now clearing out shop and leaving no sand-bank unturned.

The Vancouver Aquarium warns, however, that the presence of the whales this close to the city is a delicate matter. Grey whales do not like to be disturbed during feeding, and while one person grabbing a selfie from a kayak may not seem to bother it, compound that over a day (or several weeks) and the whale will soon feel like an exhausted celebrity. As soon as the annoyance of boats and paddle-boarders outweighs the benefit of being one of the only whales in this harbour, whale ‘753’ (the name given to Vancouver’s most regularly visiting grey whale by the BC Cetacean Sightings Network) and its friends will turn around and head back out. If we want to see 753 and company annually, it is best to leave them alone and photograph the whales from a safe distance of over 100 meters away. Anybody observing people approaching the whale within the 100 metre limit can alert the Department of Fisheries and Oceans’ *Observe and Report* line at 1-800-465-4336. Messages are relayed to DFO officers in the field who can investigate. Photos taken from the shore or a safe distance are encouraged and are incredibly useful to the [BC Cetacean Sightings Network](http://www.vanaqua.org/act/direct-action/bc-cetaceans-sighting-network), who use data gathered through public sightings to help identify individual whales and their feeding routes.

Does the return of the grey whale herald cleaner waters where it is feeding? Whales like the humpback and orca have returned in numbers to Howe Sound; their populations were decimated by factors such as bio-accumulated heavy metal poisoning during the mining industry boom. However, with grey whales it is harder to pinpoint a correlation. The whales may just be eating indiscriminately and only time will tell if feeding in False Creek (which is identified as unhealthy) and elsewhere will have an effect on the whales' health.

What their reemergence definitely does tell us, though, is that the sighting of whales in their natural habitat is something we all want and enjoy thoroughly. Seeing a whale in the wild is an incredible, awe-inspiring opportunity and one that has the potential to be right on our doorstep. If we want whale sightings to become a recurring event and a highlight of Vancouver, we have to be stringent and strict in monitoring and caring for the ocean around the city, and treat the whales that visit with our utmost reverence and respect.

Special thanks to Tessa Danelesko, Coordinator of the Vancouver Aquarium’s [BC Cetaceans Sightings Network](http://www.vanaqua.org/act/direct-action/bc-cetaceans-sighting-network), for providing information for this article.