

Alaska Whale Foundation  
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October 31, 2023

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Conru,

We are immensely grateful for your support of Alaska Whale Foundation's Fall 2023 Humpback Whale Health Survey. We're writing this letter aboard the Endeavour as we cruise into Portage Bay bound for Petersburg, where we will culminate our nine day research expedition tomorrow. We complete our journey thrilled with all that your backing and our time aboard Endeavour has facilitated.

On the 22nd of October, we embarked on a collaborative expedition including the Alaska Whale Foundation (AWF), the Marine Mammal Research Program (MMRP) at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, and Alaska Endeavour towards assessing the health of Alaska's humpback whales. Each day, our team of four researchers loaded into a zodiac with drones, camera, and data sheets in hand to collect abundance, body condition and identification data on foraging humpback whales. These data are particularly valuable at this time of year since it is a time when the whales are preparing to migrate to their Hawai'ian breeding ground. Having fed all summer, they are at their healthiest (fattest!), which provides a striking contrast to when we see them again in the spring after they've fasted for several months. By comparing their body condition before and after this fasting period, which we measure non-invasively using customized drones, we are able to estimate how much energy it takes – and therefore how much food they need to eat – to travel south to breed. This in turn provides crucial insight into how climate change impacts oceanic food availability and ultimately the well-being of humpback whales.

At the end of the day, we'd return to the Endeavour as daylight hours waned (approximately 4 p.m. during Fall in Southeast Alaska) to a hot pot of coffee and to gather around the cozy salon to pour over data, review some of the more intriguing results and brainstorm future research endeavors. As well, we could run all of our photo-identification images – pictures of each whale's unique 'fluke print' – through happywhale.com. This incredible citizen science website uses a facial recognition algorithm to almost instantly identify each whale we saw, allowing us to add them to our 30-year sighting history database. It is especially rewarding when you realize you were surrounded by so many well known and beloved individual whales.

Thanks to your generous contribution, we were able to:

- Collect body condition and photo identification data on approximately 170 unique individual whales.. (Before arriving, we had agreed that anything over 30 whales would be a success!)
- Gather information about 4 unique mother-calf pairs, allowing us to better understand reproductive health and energetics of females and calves linked to our data regarding their well-being and activities in Hawaii.

- Observe 'Old Timer', marking a new record for the longest-resighting of any humpback whale on the planet! Old Timer was first observed in 1972, and is the oldest known humpback whale (age estimated at 60+ years old).
- Reacquaint with 'Manunauna', a whale last seen entangled in fishing gear in July of this year. Previously, NOAA's Large Whale Response Network and AWF personnel affixed satellite telemetry to Manunauna, a well-known adult male humpback who often feeds near-shore in the Juneau area. While the entangling lines and buoys were found free-floating later that month, Manunauna had not been seen since so we were concerned that he did not survive the entanglement, so it was especially encouraging to find him in good condition during this trip.
- Foster opportunities for MMRP graduate student mentorship, training, and growth.
- Build community and collectively brainstorm exciting new unified directions for AWF, MMRP, and Alaska Endeavour

To say this expedition was a success does not truly capture how incredible it was – encapsulating exceptional research output, beautiful weather, an abundance of whale and other wildlife sightings, the development of new enduring and meaningful friendships, collaborations, and exciting future plans. As we end our expedition, we are left reinvigorated in our whale research and conservation efforts, inspired by your pivotal support, and excited for all to come.

Sincerely,



**Andy Szabo, PhD**

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