

Sonia Kausele

Sciences Po – Paris, Campus of Menton student

for TAF The Animal Fund -20.03.2025

## Whale-watching in Baja California.



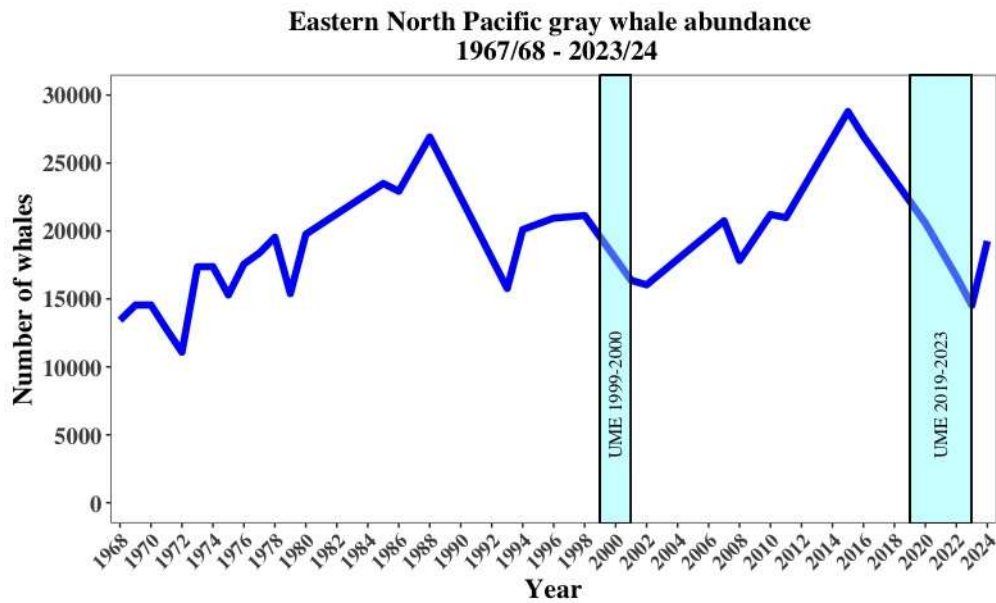
Credit: TAF/2025

### **GREY WHALES.**

**Grey Whales** (*Eschrichtius robustus*) are large baleen whales. They are notable for their remarkable annual migration, traveling up to 20,000 kilometers (12,400 miles) between feeding grounds in colder waters and breeding grounds in warmer areas, one of the longest migrations of any mammal.

#### **Key Characteristics:**

- **Size:** Approximately 12-15 meters in length, weighing up to 36 tons.
- **Diet:** Primarily benthic feeders, they consume small invertebrates such as amphipods by filtering sediment from the sea floor.
- **Behavior:** Known for their curiosity and relatively friendly interaction with humans, especially in breeding lagoons where whale watching is popular.
- **Population:** Grey whales exist in two primary populations - Eastern North Pacific Population and Western North Pacific Population. There are approximately 20,000 Grey whales in the world.



Eastern North Pacific Gray Whale abundance from 1967/168 to 2023/24. Credit: NOAA Fisheries.

## GREY WHALES IN BAJA CALIFORNIA.

In this report, we will focus on the specific situation of grey whales in Baja California.

Baja California, Mexico, is one of the most important locations for Gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*), particularly for their annual breeding and calving season.

Every year, thousands of eastern North Pacific Gray whales migrate approximately 10,000 – 14,000 miles from their feeding grounds in the cold Arctic to the warm, shallow lagoons of Baja California. This migration is one of the longest undertaken by any mammal.



## Key Breeding and Calving Lagoons in Baja California:

1. **Laguna San Ignacio** – A protected UNESCO World Heritage Site, known for whale-watching encounters.
2. **Bahía Magdalena** – A crucial resting and breeding ground.
3. **Laguna Ojo de Liebre** - A crucial resting and breeding ground.
4. **Cabo San Lucas** – An important migratory stop and whale-watching hotspot, on the way of whales to the lagoons.



Migration path to San Ignacio Lagoon. Credit: Baja Ecotours

## Why Baja California is Important for Grey Whales:

- First of all, it is safe environment, cause the lagoons provide warm, shallow, and predator-free waters, ideal for giving birth and nursing calves.
- The whales can benefit from nutrient-rich water filled with plankton.
- Further, it becomes a mating ground: Whales gather here to mate or breed before returning north.

## Whale Watching:

All this makes Baja California a popular place for a Whale Watching Tourism. This region is a hotspot for eco-tourism, allowing visitors to experience close-up encounters with Grey whales.

Whale watching has grown into a multi-billion-dollar industry, attracting millions of tourists each year who seek the thrill of seeing whales up close in their natural habitat.

It is particularly popular in places like Baja California, Mexico, where Grey whales migrate each year to breed and give birth. The spectacle of these massive creatures surfacing and interacting with boats has made whale watching one of the fastest-growing sectors of ecotourism.

At first glance, whale watching appears to be a harmless, even beneficial activity.

It provides economic benefits to coastal communities, offers an alternative to whaling, and raises awareness about marine conservation.

Many operators claim their tours are eco-friendly, allowing people to connect with nature and fostering a sense of responsibility for protecting whales.

However, a closer examination reveals that whale watching is not as harmless as it seems—and in some cases, it is actively harming the very whales it claims to protect.

### **The Hidden Costs of Whale Watching.**

As whale watching increases in popularity, so does its impact on whale populations, particularly in breeding and calving areas like Baja California's lagoons. These lagoons are crucial for Grey whales, providing safe, warm waters where they can give birth and nurse their calves. However, instead of being a place of refuge, these areas are now filled with boats, tourists, and constant human disturbance.

- The problem is not just the presence of boats—it's their behavior.
- Many tour operators compete for close encounters, often getting too close to the whales, surrounding them, or chasing them to entertain tourists. This can be extremely stressful, especially for mothers with newborn calves, who need calm, undisturbed waters to nurse and gain strength for the long migration north. Instead, they are repeatedly approached by boats, disrupting essential behaviors like feeding, resting, and bonding with their young.
- Scientific studies have shown that persistent boat traffic alters whale behavior. Whales exposed to constant human presence tend to dive deeper, swim faster, and even avoid key habitats altogether. In extreme cases, this can lead to physical exhaustion, decreased reproductive success, and even increased calf mortality.

### **A Profiteering Industry Masquerading as Conservation**

Despite its branding as an "eco-friendly" activity, the whale-watching industry prioritizes profit over whale welfare. Many companies advertise "ethical" or "responsible" tours yet still engage in practices that stress and disturb whales. The industry is poorly regulated in many places, allowing hundreds of boats to flood calving lagoons during peak season, with little oversight. Some operators even market encounters where tourists can touch or interact with Grey whales, further reinforcing the idea that these animals exist for human entertainment rather than as wild creatures deserving of respect.

Worse still, whale-watching regulations are often weak and poorly enforced. While some countries impose strict guidelines—such as minimum approach distances and limited boat numbers—many areas lack the political will or resources to ensure compliance. This means that, in many cases, whale watching is nothing more than a legal form of harassment, disguised as conservation.

## **The Bigger Picture: A Species Under Threat**

Grey whales are already facing multiple existential threats, from climate change and food shortages to entanglements in fishing gear and ship strikes. The last thing they need is relentless human interference in their most critical habitats.

Despite these alarming trends, the whale-watching industry continues to expand, further exploiting Grey whales for profit. If this trend continues unchecked, we may witness a slow but steady decline of a species that was once considered a conservation success story.

### **Observation:**

A group from **TAF- The Animal Fund** visited key places of breeding and calving of the Grey whales - Laguna San Ignacio, Bahía Magdalena and Cabo San Lucas.

There were observed several serious issues - In Laguna San Ignacio, excessive boat traffic (16 boats at a time) and non-stop tours from 8 AM to 5 PM create constant stress for breeding whales, with some captains ignoring ethical guidelines.

Laguna Magdalena suffers from over-tourism and overfishing, with little regulation enforcement.

Cabo Pulmo and La Ventana, while rich in marine biodiversity, face risks from unpredictable weather and human interference.

Loreto, a critical habitat for blue whales, is seeing an increase in boat traffic, disrupting feeding and migration patterns.

Cabo San Lucas, the worst offender, is a chaotic, over-commercialized hub where boats frequently violate distance rules, harass whales, and exploit loopholes. The warming waters have drawn more whales closer to shore, making them easy targets for reckless tourism, increasing calf vulnerability to both boats and predators like orcas. With possible corruption and powerful individuals blocking regulatory change, led by desire of economical profit from this tourist industry, this unchecked expansion continues to put whales at severe risk of displacement, stress, and long-term population decline.

### **Whale Watching: Conservation or Spectacle?**

This observation shows us the reality - whale watching, in its current form, is not just about observing whales; it is about profiting from their exploitation. If we continue treating these animals as tourist attractions rather than as wild creatures that need protection, we will be responsible for their decline, suffering, and potential extinction.

We must stop pretending that watching whales is the same as protecting them. If we truly care about Grey whales, we must demand an end to harmful, irresponsible whale-watching practices—before it's too late.

## **What Needs to Change? A Call for Real Protection, Not Just Profit**

If whale watching is to be truly sustainable, the industry must undergo significant reform to ensure that conservation, not entertainment, comes first. The current state of whale watching in Baja California demonstrates that excessive tourism, lack of enforcement, and profit-driven exploitation are actively harming Grey whales and other marine species. Immediate action is needed to reverse this damage before these majestic creatures are driven away from their critical breeding and feeding grounds—or worse, pushed toward population decline.

### **Stronger Regulations: Enforceable Limits and Accountability**

The whale-watching industry is operating with weak, poorly enforced regulations, allowing an excessive number of boats and unethical operators to disrupt whales without consequences.

- Reduce the number of boats allowed near whales: The current limit of 16 boats at a time (e.g., in Laguna San Ignacio) is excessive and needs to be reduced drastically. In sensitive areas, only a few boats should be allowed per time slot to prevent overcrowding.
- Strict distance enforcement: While some guidelines require a minimum 18-meter distance, they are widely ignored. 18 meters is also well under the standard of 100 meter. Regulations must be actively monitored and enforced, with harsh penalties for violators.
- Create whale-watching permits that are truly monitored: Some boat operators exploit loopholes, claiming they are not officially “whale watching” to avoid restrictions. Enforcement authorities must actively patrol and fine violators to deter illegal practices.
- Stronger local and federal oversight: Whale-watching regulations should be managed by independent marine conservation organizations, not just local business interests that prioritize profit over protection.

***Without proper enforcement, so-called "rules" are meaningless, and whales will continue to be harassed, stressed, and displaced.***

### **Silent, Low-Impact Tourism: Reducing Noise and Stress on Whales**

- Current gas-powered, high-speed boats create excessive noise pollution, disturbing whale communication and increasing stress. The industry must transition to low-impact, whale-friendly alternatives:
- Electric, silent boats should become the standard: Unlike loud, gas-powered engines, electric boats reduce underwater noise, allowing whales to navigate and communicate naturally without artificial disturbances.
- Speed limits should be strictly enforced: Fast-moving boats disorient and startle whales, leading to erratic behavior and even injuries. Enforcing low-speed zones will reduce stress and minimize accidental boat strikes.

- Ban sonar and other disruptive technologies: Some boats use sonar and depth finders that interfere with whale echolocation. These should be strictly regulated or banned in whale-watching areas.
- Limit engine use in sensitive areas: Instead of continuously running motors, boats should cut engines or use low-speed electric propulsion when near whales, minimizing intrusion.

Transitioning to low-impact tourism would dramatically reduce stress on whales, allowing them to rest, nurse, and migrate without constant human disruption.

### **Tourist Accountability: Responsible Choices for Ethical Experiences**

Whale-watching tourists hold power—they can choose ethical operators or unintentionally support exploitative tours that harm the very whales they claim to admire. Greater awareness and responsibility are necessary:

- Educate tourists before they book: Many visitors don't realize they are harming whales by choosing unethical tours. Operators must inform guests about sustainable whale watching, including why whales should not be chased, surrounded, or approached too closely.
- Speak up and report violations: If tourists witness boats harassing whales, they should report it immediately to local conservation groups or authorities. Reviews, complaints, and legal actions can pressure companies to improve their practices.

***Without tourist accountability, exploitative businesses will continue prioritizing profits over whale welfare. Visitors must be active participants in conservation—not passive contributors to exploitation.***

### **Sanctuary Protection: Establishing True Safe Zones for Whales**

While some areas are technically designated as whale sanctuaries, boats are still allowed to enter, making the protection meaningless. Whales need true, undisturbed sanctuary zones where they can breed, nurse, and rest without human interference:

- Completely ban boats in critical breeding and calving areas: Mothers and calves need protected waters free from constant boat traffic. Instead of limiting the number of boats, a complete ban during peak breeding seasons (January–April) is needed in specific, high-priority areas.
- Create buffer zones around protected areas: Even if boats stay out of sanctuaries, they should not be allowed to linger right at the boundary, as this still disrupts whales. Larger exclusion zones should be enforced to create a true safe haven.
- Use drones or land-based viewing for scientific observation: Instead of sending boats into protected areas, researchers and tourists can observe whales from a safe distance using technology, reducing direct human impact while still allowing study and appreciation.

- Legal protections should be expanded and enforced: Many so-called “protected” areas are only protected on paper, with no active monitoring or enforcement. Governments must implement severe penalties for any tour operators violating sanctuary protections.

Without strictly enforced whale sanctuaries, Grey whales will continue to suffer from constant human intrusion, pushing them to seek alternative, less suitable breeding areas—or worse, leading to long-term population decline.

### **Real Protection Requires Real Action.**

Whale watching, in its current form, is not about conservation—it is about exploitation. Without immediate and strict regulatory changes, Grey whales will continue to be harassed, stressed, and displaced for the sake of tourism dollars.

This issue cannot be ignored any longer. Stronger regulations, low-impact tourism, responsible tourist choices, and true sanctuary protection are urgent and necessary to ensure that whale watching becomes a conservation tool rather than a commercial threat.

The question remains: Will we take real action to protect these whales, or will we watch them suffer in the name of entertainment? The future of whale watching—and the survival of Grey whales—depends on what we choose to do next.



Credit: TAF/ 2025