

The following is an article from Park Ranger George D. Herring of the Cabrillo National Park ranger service.

How come we don't see as many whales as we used to?

At the whale overlook (Cabrillo National Park), rangers hear it all the time: How come we don't see as many whales as we used to? Many visitors remember seeing more gray whales from Cabrillo National Monument during the 1970s. Are they seeing fewer whales? The answer is yes, despite an overall increase in the gray whale population. Do we know why? No, but researchers are trying to find out.

Biology students under the guidance of Dr. Jim Sumich, a whale biologist with Grossmont College in San Diego County, observe the annual winter gray whale migration from Cabrillo N.M. Each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning during the season (December -- February) you may see these diligent biologists at the whale overlook patiently recording the direction, numbers, and behavior, of the passing whales.

So what did we learn? Gray whale census counts by the National Marine Fisheries Service from Cabrillo N.M. in 1979 did report more whales -- up to 40 whales in one hour during the mid-January migration peak. Today only about eight whales are visible each hour. Curiously, this drop in shore sightings coincides with a dramatic increase in the overall population of gray whales. In 1979, 15,000 gray whales were estimated to exist. Today that number is close to 27,000. A large percentage of whales in recent years, about 65% in 1993-94, migrate too far off the Southern California coast for watchers to see from shore. This does not seem to have occurred in the late 1970s.

Some San Diegans believe this is because the animals are being harassed by a growing number of boaters in the waters off San Diego, particularly whale-watching boats. Sumich, however, believes many reasons could account for the whales' behavior, including water quality changes, military and commercial boat activity, natural shifts in migration routes, or all of the above. Nevertheless he believes that at least part of the reason is whale watching boats. Of particular impact, he feels, is the increasing number of private vessels hoping to get a close look. Federal law does not allow boaters to move within one hundred yards of whales (unless the animal moves closer on its own), but the rule is ignored by some boat captains. From the whale overlook it is not uncommon to see a whale being pursued by a dozen or more boats on a busy weekend, or to see whales take evasive action to avoid boats.

Are the boats responsible for us seeing fewer whales today than fifteen years ago? Only the whales know for sure. In the 1976 gray whale census report, referring to San Diego, Dale W. Rice wrote that, The marked decline in the Point Loma counts (of Gray Whales) in the late 1960s was thought to be due to harassment of the whales by increasing boat traffic, causing them to migrate farther offshore. Even considering the better weather [in 1976], the [higher than average] count at Point Loma this year is unexpected. This seems to indicate that the whales have migrated far off shore in the past too. If this is so, perhaps we will see 40 whales an hour again soon!