

International Year of Ecotourism



JIM KING

On the Road to Guerrero Negro

We were up and out in the predawn dark onto a humming San Diego freeway, bound for central Baja California and worried about obtaining a tourist card at the border at 6:00 a.m.—they're now required for trips beyond the border cities, a requirement enforced at checkpoints all along the

peninsula by soldiers with rifles. At the San Ysidro Gate we were shuffled among

various offices for 30 minutes until, cards in hand, we were free to hit the road, passing long lines of Mexican commuters going to work in San Diego.

I was traveling with friends to see gray whales halfway down the Baja California peninsula, but it was the road trip, more than the destination, that had prompted me to come. I was looking forward to camping in the desert in winter, and seeing something of Mexican culture, which is such a vital part of our own culture here in California Alta. I was also curious about the landscape. Maps show mountains that rise from the sea, natural harbors, and ruins of old settlements. Although I had been working for years in the San Diego border area, I had never been beyond Tijuana and Ensenada. The rest of the 800-mile-long peninsula was terra incognita to me. Our five-day journey would add a thousand miles to the 330,000 already recorded on my friend's old Montero.

Our destination was Laguna Ojo de Liebre (Eye of the Hare Lagoon), one of several Mexican nurseries for the gray whale and site of a simple ecotourist camp. It's some 440 miles from San Diego—one long

day's drive—in the state of Baja California Sur. Known to most norteamericanos as Scammon's Lagoon, it is part of a large estuary that opens to a great arm of the Pacific, the Bahía de Sebastian Vizcaíno. Of the estimated 25,000 gray whales that migrate along the West Coast, some 900 were believed to be in residence here this February, including lots of moms and calves.

Some in our group slept most of the way, but I kept my eye on the road. Beyond Tijuana's buzz, a limited-access toll highway serves a jumble of development southward almost to Ensenada. The coastal terraces are filling up with small towns and suburban enclaves, including lots of modest retirement homes inhabited by U.S. citizens. Lobster restaurants compete for billboard space with real estate.

On one ocean-facing ridge stands a string of ramshackle houses, some made of discarded plywood and sticks, all with bright green gardens and pastures. They speak of another world, one of making do with limited means. Our driver, an archaeologist who has spent much time in this region, pointed out that the greenbelt parallels the open wastewater canal that traverses the ridge above the highway and leads to the regional treatment plant. Local residents are irrigating crops and grazing land with Tijuana wastewater!

Just north of Ensenada, a steep mountain ridge sweeps down to the sea at El Mirador, toward Todos Santos Bay and Punta Banda. The cliffs, the panorama, and a rustic beach camp all hint at the majesty farther south. There has been a surge of population in the Ensenada area since I visited just four years ago. By this time we were moving through

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Herring gull

BOB GARRISON

Ecotourism and Marine Mammals —Too Much of a Good Thing?

dense morning traffic. San Diegans come by the busload to sample ceviche, mariscos, margaritas, and local arts and crafts.

South of town Highway 1 narrows, and we began to pass parched ranchland and hardscrabble rural settlements. At San Telmo a bedraggled sign by a rutted road announces the Parque Nacional Sierra San Pedro Mártir some 40 miles to the east. Picacho del Diablo, one of Baja California's several "sky islands," is in this park. On this 10,154-foot peak isolated flora and fauna have formed distinct ecological communities at various elevations. Aspen and pine grow here, far from others of their kind. I

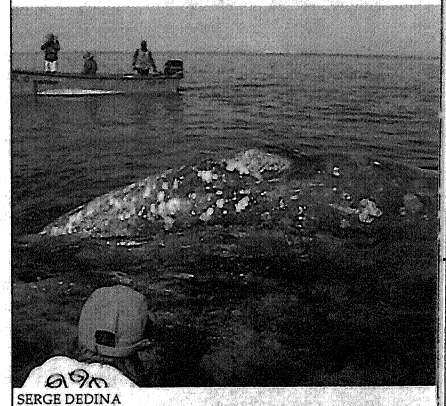
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Marine mammals enjoy more protection in U.S. territorial waters than anywhere else in the world—but that may not be enough protection as ecotourism begins to touch these creatures in ways never considered when the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972 was enacted. That legislation brought an end to commercial whaling

in U.S. waters and set the framework for the laws and guidelines that protect marine mammals today. At that time, whale watching and ecotourism were just beginning. Today, whale and dolphin watching alone has grown to a \$1 billion industry involving more than 80 countries and territories and over nine million participants annually.

Wildlife viewing and ecotourism could play an important part in the work of providing long-term protection for the world's wildlife and wild places. The National Marine Fisheries Service, which implements the MMPA, takes its job very seriously. Yet some disturbing trends are forcing regulatory agencies, the tourism industry, and ecotourists themselves to

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SERGE DEDINA

Above: A friendly gray whale in San Ignacio Lagoon, Baja California

Below: Bottlenosed dolphins play in Bahía de los Angeles, Baja California, where a major development is planned.



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BIRDS, WHALES, AND WETLANDS

Wildlife Festivals through March 2003

Morro Bay Winter Bird Festival, January 17–20, 2003, Morro Bay; (800) 231-0592 or www.morro-bay.net/birds. See some of the 200-plus bird species in this outstanding birding area on the Pacific Flyway.

Cabrillo National Monument Whale Watch Weekend, January 20–21, Point Loma, San Diego; (619) 557-5450 or www.nps.gov/cabr. Speakers, exhibits, presentations, and festivities at an enclosed whale-watching station.

Northern San Francisco Bay Flyway Festival, January 24–26, Mare Island, Vallejo; (707) 557-9816 or www.sfbayflywayfestival.com. Celebrate the annual return of a million shorebirds and hundreds of thousands of waterfowl that migrate through or winter in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Snow Goose Festival, January 25–26, Chico Masonic Center, Chico; (800) 852-8570 or www.chicochamber.com. View flocks of lesser snow geese and other waterfowl that winter in Central Valley wetlands. Discover this unique habitat and its varied wildlife through workshops and field trips led by birding experts, educators, and ecologists.

San Diego Bird Festival, February 6–9, San Diego; (619) 516-0139 or www.sandiegonaaturefestivals.org. Celebrate southern California's diverse habitats and wildlife with field trips to see more than 170 pelagic bird species and rare coastal sage scrub habitat.

California Duck Days, February 14–16, Veterans Memorial Center, Davis; (530) 758-1286 or www.duckdays.org. Experience the sights and sounds of 10,000 snow geese in the Central Valley through over 40 field trips and activities.

Salton Sea International Birding Festival, February 14–17, Barbara Worth Country Club, Holtville; (760) 344-5FLY or www.imperialcounty.com/birdfest. Learn about the Salton Sea and its arid habitats that host more than 100 bird species.

Bald Eagle Conference and Festival, February 14–16, Oregon Institute of Technology, Klamath Falls, Oregon; (800) 445-6728 or www.eaglecon.org. Celebrate the largest concentration of wintering bald eagles in the lower 48 states. Workshops, speakers and field trips to Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuge, Lava Beds National Park, and Crater Lake National Park.

WhaleFest, February 22, Ventura; (800) 333-2989 or www.ventura-usa.com. Educational booths, presentations, Chumash Indian cultural displays, art work, and marine life touch tank make this celebration of the gray whales' winter migration a family event.

Mendocino Whale Festival, March 1–2, Mendocino; (800) 726-2780 or www.mendocinocoast2.com. Excellent opportunities to watch whales traveling south to their mating and calving lagoons in Mexico.

Wild on Wetlands Weekend, March 8–9, Los Banos; (800) 336-6354 or www.losbanos.com/wow.htm. Discover this Grassland Ecological Area in the Central Valley and view many migrating bird species as well as rare vernal pool plants.

Celebration of the Whales, January–March, Channel Island Harbor; (800) 269-6273 or www.oxnardtourism.com/whatsnewwhales.html. An eight-week celebration of the gray whale migration features daily excursions and activities for all ages, culminating in a Sunday festival in March.

Fort Bragg Whale Festival, March 15–16, Fort Bragg; (800) 726-2780 or www.mendocinocoast.com. Lighthouse tours and excellent whale-watching opportunities.

Santa Barbara Whale Festival, March 28–30, Santa Barbara; (805) 897-3187 or www.sbwhalefestival.com/whale. Learn about the 27 species of cetaceans that travel through the Santa Barbara Channel. Enjoy food, music, and hands-on activities.

Below: J. Nichols of Earthwatch Institute holding a black sea turtle, Baja California

GUERRERO NEGRO *continued from page 29*

looked carefully at the junction, as I intend to go up this mountain someday. My guide commented that he and the Montero had been there, and that the ascent is not for the faint of heart.

Onward Highway 1 leads to the Valle de San Quintín, where many immigrants from the mainland have recently settled and developed a substantial agricultural community, irrigating crops with water drawn from the local aquifer. Alas, I've since learned that saltwater is now invading the groundwater here and that these settlers' dreams may vanish soon.

South of San Quintín, the familiar coastal sage landscape of our southern counties and northern Baja California yields to the sere lands of the Vizcaíno desert. Without roadside call boxes and short on gas stations or cafés, the road is empty for mile upon mile. Although the trans-peninsula highway is relatively gentle on tires, the side roads still provide a true "Baja road test," and tire troubles remain a big part of the Baja California experience. Where there are settlements there are lanteras (tire shops). At a few crossroads, gas is sold from five-gallon containers by enterprising locals aware that people will wander too far off-track and miscalculate their fuel capacity. At the highway junction for Bahía de los Angeles gas is dispensed this way at an abandoned PEMEX station and restaurant. The desert wind whistles through its empty shell.

Too far south for our Alaska-born winter rains and out of range for most of the southern monsoon, the Vizcaíno desert is dry, but this year it is bone dry. Slope, aspect, elevation, and proximity to the



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ocean mean everything here, where nature surprises us with exotic plants including elephant trees, giant cardon cactus (similar to Arizona's saguaro), and a distinctly blue fan palm in the occasional riparian canyon. But these are the exception along this long desert highway.

Stir-crazy and bent to the shape of the seats, we arrived at Guerrero Negro's army checkpoint just as the sun was setting. Our tourist cards got us through inspection, and soon we were setting up camp in the breezy night. The total blackness beyond concealed the austerity of the place, pressed hard between ocean and desert.

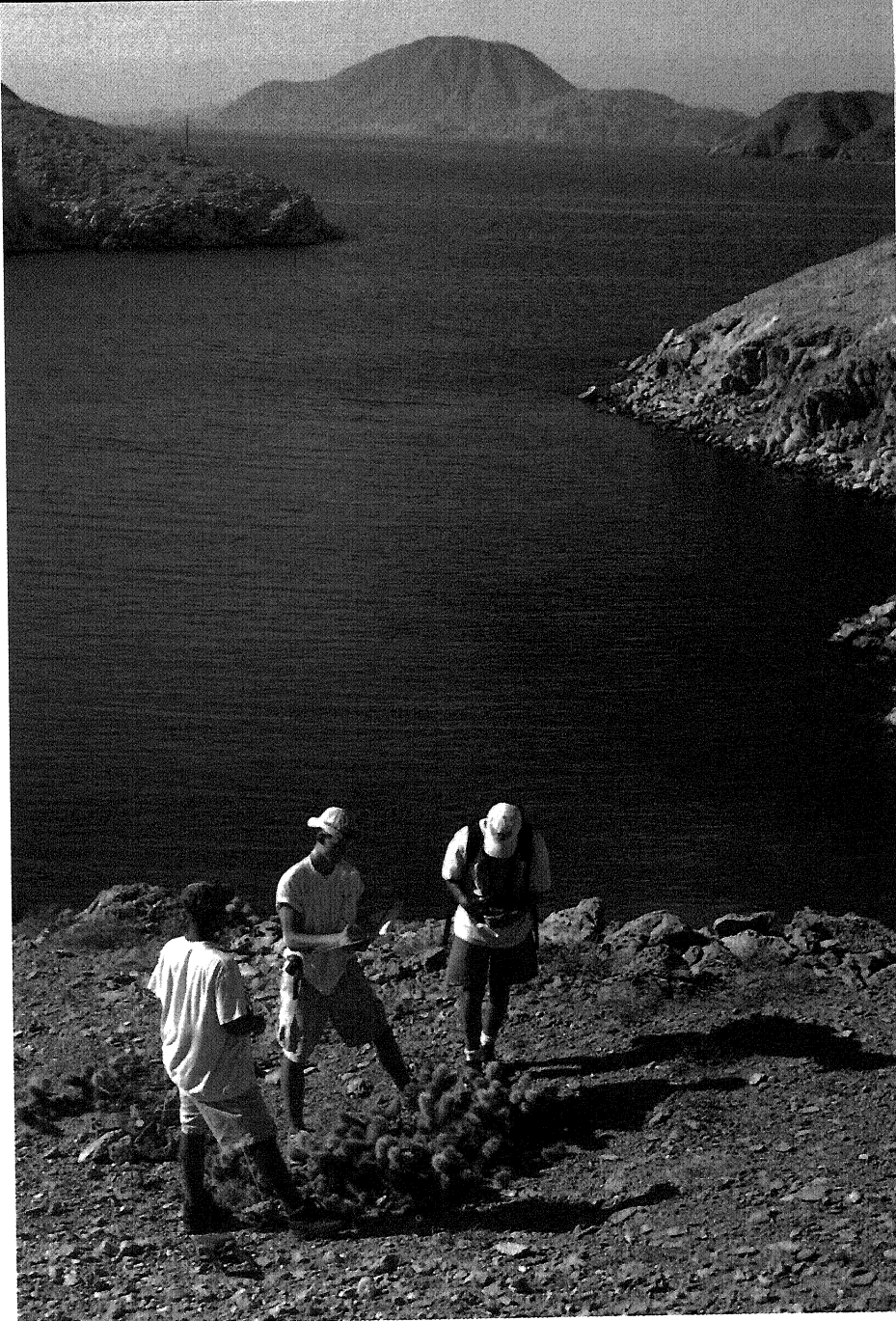
Morning light revealed the vast landscape, and the largest estuary south of San Francisco Bay. Before us lay mile upon mile of calm open water, the opposite shoreline backed by hazy mountains. Hundreds of shorebirds were wandering the beach flats, and far out over the water we saw the unmistakable spray of spouting whales. To our delight, there was a café at the whale camp serving tasty Mexican dishes and a wide selection of Mexican beers.

Whales jump and dive in the shallow waters of Ojo de Liebre, breaching the surface then plunging down, down. You have to get out on the water for a good look at them. We went out in a twelve-person skiff (*panga*), and weren't disappointed. Close encounters with mothers and calves brought predictable glee. It was thrilling to be out in a boat in the fresh wind near these great creatures of the sea. Except for the salt works and tourist camp behind us, all views were of wild seascape, desert, and mountains. Giant dunes forty to fifty feet high line the lonesome beach, their sandy tops in constant motion as they guard the estuary from northwesterly gales. And such whales, these big grays! They paid us little mind. To me this was ecotourism at its best.

In the afternoon we left the camp to tour the area. Guerrero Negro is a desert outpost, a company town for the giant industrial salt works and, ironically, the tourist center for the Vizcaíno Desert Biosphere Reserve. It has the feel of an authentic workaday town—there's nothing touristy about it. Most everyone works in salt. Beyond the town and saltworks are only desert and vast undisturbed coastal wetlands. Laguna Ojo de Liebre lies to the west and south, and to the north are the pristine salt marshes of Estero de San José and Laguna Manuela. A road leads far out into the Estero to an abandoned wharf and lighthouse. Here we saw huge congrega-

tions of willets and marbled godwits huddled against the wind, and other birds seldom seen up north, like the reddish egret and little blue heron.

I visit the wild places that remain on the planet with every opportunity, for solace and inspiration. Just as we've sacrificed wilderness to build our great cities and farms, so goes much of the world. Humans are certainly encroaching on the wildness of Baja California too. The salt works at Laguna Ojo de Liebre are massive; I'm saddened to think what was lost there. A similar salt works was proposed for the next lagoon south, Laguna San Ignacio, by Mitsubishi Corporation and the Mexican government. That proposal was defeated by a



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A team of scientists from Earth-watch Institute surveyed spider populations at Bahía de los Angeles, 1997.

Escalera Ecológica?

As the Escalera Náutica moves ahead, a competing vision for this fragile and wondrous peninsula has been offered by Mexican poet Homero Aridjis and geographer Serge

Dedina, director of Wildcoast, a binational group based in San Diego. They propose an alternative, Escalera Ecológica, to sustain natural ecosystems while improving the lives of local people.

"The Escalera Náutica represents 1950s thinking rather than 21st-century needs," Dedina argues. "It's a concept developed in Mexico City, without regard to local communities or natural resources." The alternative Wildcoast envisions would support ecotourism, sport fishing, and sustainable commercial fishing and would link the peninsula's protected areas with local, national, and international outfitters. "People in the U.S. love Baja California because it's rustic adventure land. Many people are willing to pay a lot to experience this," Dedina contends.

Campers, hikers, birders, whale watchers, surfers, mountain climbers, rock hounds, desert rats, and other low-impact tourists are in Baja California now. Yet aside from the green patrol (roving assistance units that ply the peninsula's highway looking for travelers in distress), it seems the government hasn't done much to bolster the existing tourist economy. There are few signs to help tourists, and information on where and how they might spend their dollars is skimpy too. It should be noted that "community development"—roads, sewage systems, solid waste management—enhances tourism too.

—JK

Ernesto C. Enkerlin Hoeflich, president of the National Commission for Protected Areas of Mexico, said in late October that the location of all but "three or four" of the proposed Escalera Náutica developments was "not written in stone" and that the government is now "paying more attention to ecological considerations." Efforts are under way to shift the complex in the works for Bahía de los Angeles. "We do see a benefit to Escalera Náutica—if it's done right," he added. "It's an opportunity to regulate tourism and development."

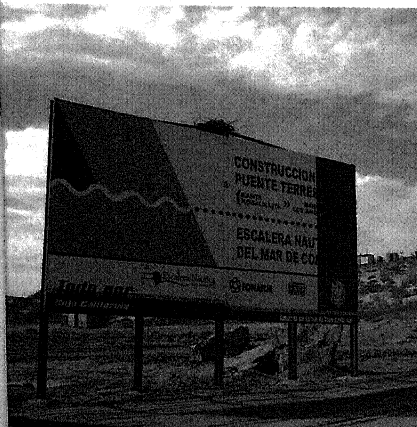
coalition of local fishermen and Mexican and international environmental organizations (see *Coast & Ocean*, Summer 1997). That Herculean battle already stands as a landmark victory for the Mexican environment. Will San Ignacio be a model for other successful environmental protection efforts?

Unavoidably, we turned toward home after only four days in Baja California. Another long day's journey and we were back in San Diego, where there is now discussion of the Mexican government's new plans for developing Baja California tourism: the Escalera Náutica (Nautical Stairway), a series of 22 ports and marinas designed for the Yankee mariner, complete with hotels and golf courses, to be built on both the Pacific and the Gulf of California coasts of the peninsula. Private investment is expected to lead the way.

Now we understood the "Escalera Náutica" signs that had mystified us along the highway, and the ominous sight of a barge working offshore during a side trip to the remote coastal hamlet of Santa Rosalillita. Construction had already begun. At Bahía de los Angeles, a pristine and spectacular bay where sea turtles come to lay their eggs, a permit for dredging and filling the wetlands has already been issued (see sidebar).

This big-scale development will inevitably destroy much of what my friends and I came for. And what would it do to the local people, I wondered, thinking of the communities near Acapulco and Cancún, which are struggling with pollution, shrinking water supplies, and other side effects of megatourism. On the long trip home I was inspired by what I had seen. Now I wonder about my next trip to Baja California and what I might find there. ■

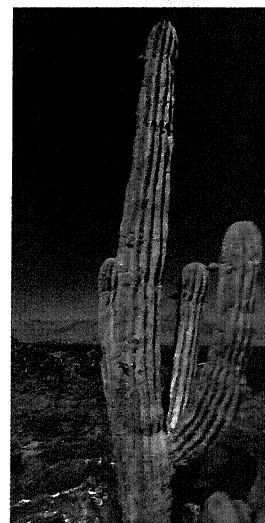
Jim King, a project manager for the Coastal Conservancy, works in San Diego County's Tijuana Estuary and adjoining border communities.



SERGE DEDINA

Above: Escalera Náutica construction site near Santa Rosalillita

Right: Cardon cactus



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ask whether ecotourism can be sustained at current levels without harming marine mammal populations. While it is currently unlawful to harass or feed marine mammals in the wild, that is not the only way animals living in coastal waters and on nearshore islands are adversely affected by friendly human visitors. For example:

- Sea kayaking, a popular activity along the California coast, may seem environmentally friendly, but harbor seals that rest on nearshore rocks, sandbars, and islands are sensitive to disturbance and will abandon their haulouts when kayakers approach within 50–120 meters. At one haulout alone, roughly one-third of all kayakers flushed seals.
- Guidelines for tour boats operating in U.S. waters help protect California gray whales from close encounters, but in their calving lagoons in Baja California tour boats frequently get close enough to allow people to touch the animals without violating any federal laws. Some guides and tour operators keep self-imposed limits on their distances from the whales, but most are more interested in pleasing their clients than protecting the whales.
- In Hawaii, groups of spinner dolphins enter shallow bays during the day to rest, socialize, nurse their young, and avoid predators. A growing number of people interested in swimming with wild dolphins converge on these resting areas. While it is illegal to have any interaction with spinner dolphins, limited law-enforcement presence and growing demand are reducing the dolphins' use of these resting areas.
- Pods of orcas living along the south coast of British Columbia and around Washington's San Juan Islands have attracted whale watchers (some 81,000 in 1997, paying \$4 million). Scientists have noted such a significant decline in the region's orca populations in recent years that they have petitioned to have the orcas listed under the Endangered Species Act. While they are still studying the causes of the population decline, some fear increased boat traffic could be a contributing factor.

We face challenges when trying to connect people with wildlife, and these require improved coordination and communication between agencies and countries, more research on the impacts of ecotourism, stronger guidelines and regulations, and



ALAN JUSTICE

most importantly, education of people who come in close contact with marine mammals. In the end, the cumulative impact of many individual actions, expenditures, and votes can help raise the bar on optimum practices for the industry as a whole. ■

Bob Garrison owns a nature tourism planning firm based in Sacramento. He was previously responsible for wildlife viewing programs and aquatic education in the Department of Fish and Game. He may be contacted at rwg@inreach.com.

A gray whale in San Francisco Bay, seen from the Dumbarton Bridge

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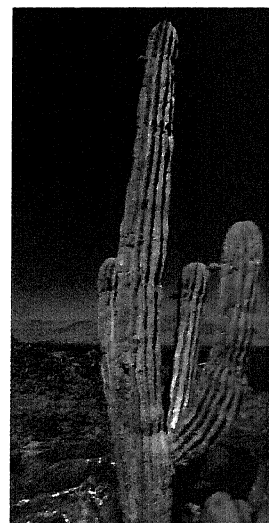
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