

Press Release (For Immediate Release)

October 18, 2013

Whales of Potosi Research Project Meets with Officials and Tour Guides in Barra de Potosi and Zihuatanejo.

Katherina Audley, founder and director of the Whales of Potosi Research Project visited Zihuatanejo and Barra de Potosi on October 8-15, 2013 to introduce the project locally and make plans for the season.

Objectives were to:

- Meet and talk with as many people as possible about the project
- Hire 2-3 great boat operators to work the whale survey for 10 weeks (from January 2 – March 15, 2014)
- Make a presentation of the project in Zihuatanejo to the authorities and tour operators who would be most interested and instrumental in getting involved with the project and to gauge interest for its future growth potential.
- Plan the gear and my accommodations needed for the winter
- Generate awareness, interest and excitement about the project in Barra de Potosi, the communities along Playa Blanca, Zihuatanejo and Ixtapa.

All of these goals were successfully accomplished.

Enthusiasm for the project in Barra de Potosi was genuinely strong and the people who already have shown interest in developing ecotourism there and being tour guides showed up to the meeting and were very grateful and interested in being involved this winter.

About 25 people attended the Zihuatanejo meeting, held at the city hall on October 14, 2013. The meeting was coordinated and hosted by Pablo Mendizabel of Biotropicos, A.C. Attendants included officials from the local marines, the director of tourism in Zihuatanejo, the director of local ecology, a handful of certified tour guides, the director of the fisheries, local biologists and local environmentalists and governmental authorities who are working to protect and promote the region. The interest level among attendees was high and they were keen to learn more about the humpback whales which visit the region, generate awareness about safe whale watch practices and become certified as responsible whale watch guides.

Based on the guidance and suggestions of Pablo Mendizabal, the head of Biotropicos, A.C., Laurel Patrick of El Refugio de Potosi the name of the project has been changed from the Whales of Potosi Research Project to The Whales of Guerrero Research Project. The reason for this change is that Guerrero is the name of the state within which Playa Blanca, Zihutanejo and Ixtapa reside. Had we kept the name Whales of Potosi Research Project, the tour guides and officials in Zihuatanejo, would have likely assumed the project was only meant to support informed, responsible whale watching in Barra de Potosi. Given that sport fishermen and tour guides already travel to the Bahia de Potosi (also known as Bahia de Petatlan), it is important that they are given the opportunity to learn about our whales, to know about our project progress and are well informed about how to manage their boats responsible when sharing the water with them.

We held numerous meetings with individuals and groups in Barra de Potosi. Laurel Patrick generously offered the project the full time assistance of a woman named Marbella, who has been working at El Refugio de Potosi for four years. Marbella is from Los Farallones, a tiny village up the road, knows everyone in town and is a part of the beach community. Her translation help, cultural mediation, and ability to lead me right to the people whose opinions and interest in the project would matter the most were invaluable to the success of the project. Based on the way the fishing cooperatives work in Barra de Potosi, we determined that it would be best to hire one person full-time for the entire season instead of splitting up the boat operator duties between multiple people, and inviting all fishermen and tour guides who are interested in learning about our whales and responsible boat management to come on board with us during our research as much as they are able to this season. We hired a man named Arturo Mellin. Arturo has participated in El Refugio conservation work in the past and comes recommended as someone with a consistent interest in ecotourism, and as someone who the project can count on to show up every day. Arturo's back up person will be Juan Manuel Bello Benitez if he is unable to help with the research on any given day.

Next steps, the entire Barra de Potosi-based fishermen's and tourism coop is meeting on November 1. They are very interested in attending a workshop, especially one in which Isayee, the fisherman turned whale guide from Puerto Vallarta will facilitate. After the November 1 meeting, they will give us a solid number of people who are committed to attending the safe whale watch workshops in January. We are guessing we will have a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 15

fishermen/guide participants in this first round of workshops in January. Based on its success, and our work this season, we hope that the knowledge and awareness about whales and the regulations surrounding them, will spread orally throughout the village and am dedicated to remaining available to field any questions and support anyone in the village with an interest in learning more about whales and safe whale watching.

Katherina Audley will meet with Deep Blue Conservancy over the next few days to plan our workshops both in Barra de Potosi and Zihuatanejo to discuss the cost and time needed to run a whale watch certification program the first week of January. Pablo Mendizabal is going to learn how to teach the whale watch certification program so that people can continue to learn the official regulations and best practices of whale watching on an ongoing basis for years to come.

Please visit the project website, <http://www.whalesinmexico.com> to find out how to support and get involved in the project.

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