

Tides of time

Located on the Baja peninsula in Mexico, the Whale Sanctuary of El Vizcaino is a Unesco World Heritage marine site for gray whales on their annual migrations. Unesco worked with the Mexican government to halt planned expansion of saltworks in the area to preserve fragile ecosystems

A gray whale calf.



SPOTLIGHT | Working together for conservation

Whale Sanctuary of El Vizcaino: Unesco helped stop the expansion of salt facilities near the site

The word “sanctuary” says it all: The Whale Sanctuary of El Vizcaino in Mexico is a haven for Pacific gray whales. Every winter, the whales seek shelter here to calve, after traveling down from the Bering Sea, past Alaska, along the west coasts of Canada and the United States. They finally stop to rest in El Vizcaino, located halfway down the Baja California peninsula.

Gray whales once roamed the Atlantic, too, before being hunted to extinction in the 1800s. Atlantic whaling fleets sailed into the Pacific to continue stalking them there. Fortunately, whaling became uneconomical before the Pacific population was also driven to extinction. Today, in part thanks to the El Vizcaino sanctuary, the gray whales are coming back. Yet if the whale population is growing (one source says they now number up to 22,000), El Vizcaino remains a fragile site. One big issue has been salt production in the area.

Mexico created its first whale sanctuary in Laguna Ojo de Liebre in 1972. The Mexican authorities nominated the encompassing region of El Vizcaino — named after the 17th-century Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino, who surveyed the Pacific Coast — as a World Heritage site in 1993. Yet there are large salt-making facilities in the area, producing some seven million tons of

salt annually. While governments are free to propose sites to be considered for inscription on the Unesco World Heritage List, sites must meet its stringent criteria.

Recalls Unesco Program Specialist Marc Patry: “We sent out, as we usually do, our team of experts to evaluate the proposal for El Vizcaino. They had a good look at the whales and at the site — which also has desert ecosystems — and looked at the facilities for producing salt. They concluded that the existing facilities were not the source of a major problem. In fact, they did not affect the value of the site at all. The desert ecosystems were not affected, nor were the bighorn sheep populations. Therefore, they had no objections to having the site inscribed as it was.”

Five years later, however, the World Heritage Centre began receiving messages from visitors to El Vizcaino and from other parties. They were concerned that the Mexican government was considering doubling the size of the salt facilities, which would likely threaten the surrounding ecosystems.

El Vizcaino boasts two lagoons that make up one of only four of the world’s calving areas for the gray whale. The sanctuary

is, naturally, a high priority for conservationists. In partnership with the Mexican government, a Japanese corporation was seeking to expand the salt facilities and wanted to pump 6,000 gallons (22,712 liters) of water per second from one of the lagoons and flood more than 100 square kilometers (around 40 square miles) of adjacent land to create evaporation ponds.

The issue was gathering public attention, both in Mexico and at the World Heritage Centre itself, where Unesco received a petition — signed by 30,000 people — condemning the expansion plans. “This is a big deal,” says Patry. “We don’t receive this all the time.” So Unesco approached the Mexican authorities, who invited the Paris-based organization to inspect the site again. “That’s already a sign of great cooperation between a country and Unesco’s World Heritage Centre,” says Patry.

In August 1999, the World Heritage Committee sent its second mission to El Vizcaino, which again concluded that the existing saltworks had no impact on the site. “But,” explains Patry, “they declared that doubling the size of the facilities would likely

cause problems down the line — pollution, infrastructure development and increased population — that could seriously affect the values of the site, whale-breeding and the rest.” Salt mining, whose byproducts can create high amounts of brine in nearby land and water, has been linked to the death of threatened species, such as marine turtles, which are protected at El Vizcaino.

Based on the World Heritage Committee’s new findings, the Mexican government decided to scrap the expansion project. This is one example of how the World Heritage Committee can act as a neutral party when analyzing a site’s situation. “Often a country will welcome that,” says Patry, “because a country’s national authorities are not necessarily in agreement on how things should proceed.” In the case of El Vizcaino, the presence of a major foreign and private-sector industrial venture near a World Heritage

site had become an apple of discord within Mexico’s different federal branches.

Explains Patry: “Within a national government there are different agencies. There’s the ministry of environment, the ministry of economic development, the ministry of industry, the ministry of parks. Each tends to have a different agenda. It’s the government’s job to come to terms with the different interests within the national policy debate and move on a project.” In this case, Unesco’s involvement furnished the government with fresh input and an outside perspective. The result was a decision to support conservation of the site, instead of doubling the industrial footprint. Says Patry: “Unesco’s recommendations helped sway the balance in a national debate on what to do with this particular proposal. In that sense, we helped protect the integrity and the long-term conservation of the site.” ■

Inscribing a Heritage site

Any site must undergo a nomination process before it can be considered for inscription by Unesco’s World Heritage Committee. Sites can be proposed for inscription only by the country in which the property is located.

Two conservation groups — Icomos (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) — act as advisory bodies for nominations. Based on their recommendations, if the World Heritage Committee decides that a site meets at least one of the 10 criteria for selection, the property is inscribed on the World Heritage List. Today there are 878 sites in 145 countries. Visit <http://whc.unesco.org>

EXPLORING | Marine life and a desert ecosystem

Winter is the season for whale-watching, with respect

The marathon migration of Pacific gray whales from Alaska to Mexico lasts from two to three months. Their southern destination, the coastal waters of Baja California, is where they mate, calve and nurse their newborns before beginning the return journey. The round-trip voyage of approximately 16,000 to 22,000 kilometers, or some 9,942 to 13,670 miles, is believed to be the longest yearly migration of any mammal, according to worldheritagesite.org.

Whale-watchers can spot the mammals en route in Alaska, Canada and California. Yet at the Whale Sanctuary of El Vizcaino, halfway down the Baja peninsula, whale-watching is the main activity from December to April. Tens of thousands of whale-watchers come to the site every year to see these huge creatures, whose length can reach up to 46 feet (14 meters) and whose average weight is between 30 and 40 tons.

The Unesco World Heritage nomination report for El Vizcaino explains that the sanctuary’s principal areas, the two coastal lagoons of Ojo de Liebre and San Ignacio, produce half the world’s gray whale calves born every year.

The lagoons are also reproduction sites for the harbor seal, the California sea lion, the northern elephant seal and the blue whale, and they harbor four species of the



Whales courting in Laguna San Ignacio.

endangered marine turtle, which is also protected by the World Heritage site.

Watching whales is popular around the world, from Australia to Puerto Rico. Most often, as in the El Vizcaino sanctuary, the activity is boat-based. But in all whale-watching areas, even where one can view whales from distant cliffs, these pursuits are closely monitored. Before the 1990s, whale-watching in El Vizcaino was not controlled. But according to the 2008 report “The State of Whale-Watching in Latin America,” prepared by the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society and the International Fund for Animal Welfare, El Vizcaino’s status as a Marine Protected Area (established in 1972), then as a World Heritage site, helped spur laws to monitor boat traffic and fishing in the lagoons. Its status also helped in

closing some sensitive whale habitats to tourism and led to regulations that help keep the sanctuary free from pollution and industrial impact.

Rules adopted in El Vizcaino stipulate that whale-watching must take place only in designated areas — where less breeding or calving occurs. Management of the site has made El Vizcaino an example to other whale-watching sites in Latin America and abroad. On the Web site www.worldheritagesite.org, where visitors share their experiences of trips to World Heritage areas, Kelly Henry of the United States says of El Vizcaino: “The boats quickly find the whales, who are seemingly everywhere you look. They come right up to the boats and sometimes nudge them. The moms and babies swim together, and you will assuredly see them jumping (breaching), diving and generally playing.”

Though the El Vizcaino sanctuary is known for its whales, the 370,950-hectare (916,637 acre) site is also an intact desert ecosystem, with a large population of bighorn sheep. And settlements date back thousands of years as evidenced by ancient ruins and some 200 caves with prehistoric paintings of men, whales and other animals from antelopes to birds, turtles and snakes. Some pictographs are 10,000 years old, of high quality and well preserved. ■

Jaeger-LeCoultre creates a commemorative Tides of Time watch

To symbolize its commitment to the Tides of Time partnership with Unesco, Jaeger-LeCoultre chose to create a commemorative watch.

Called the Master Compressor Extreme W-Alarm Tides of Time, it will be produced in a limited series of 550, in two versions: 350 will be made in grade-five titanium and 200 will be manufactured in 18-karat pink gold and grade-five titanium. All will feature two Jaeger-LeCoultre

trademarks — an underwater alarm and a 24-hour time-zone dial — as well as the name of three World Heritage marine sites: the Galápagos, Tubbatana and Scandola (for the Gulf of Porto). The symbolism is strong: In 1959, the manufacturer entered the diving world, presenting the first automatic alarm movement with the emblematic Memovox Deep Sea. The alarm is also a metaphor for warning people that protecting the ocean is

crucial. Color was important, too. Says Janek Deleskiewicz, Jaeger-LeCoultre’s artistic director: “Our entire diving-watch line has been developed around the color blue, which is significant for divers and symbolic of the oceans.” It also pays homage to the marine sites.

A Tides of Time watch will be auctioned in February, with the proceeds going to Unesco’s World Heritage marine site program.

Tides of time: Whale Sanctuary of El Vizcaino did not involve the reporting or editorial departments of the IHT. It is the seventh of a series on Unesco’s World Heritage marine sites. The next installment, on the Ujung Kulon National Park, will be published on Feb. 13. The series is a partnership among Jaeger-LeCoultre, Unesco’s World Heritage Centre and the International Herald Tribune. Text by JOSHUA JAMPOL. For information on the IHT Advertising Supplements program: www.ihinfo.com/pages/advertising



MASTER COMPRESSOR EXTREME W-ALARM «TIDES OF TIME»