

From Devil-Fish to Friendly Whale?

Encountering Gray Whales on the California Coast

INTRODUCTION

Throughout most of their migration, Eastern North Pacific gray whales are rather boring in comparison to their more gregarious relatives. They do not sing, and they rarely breach or splash their fins during their slow and steady annual journey along the North American Pacific coastline from Mexico through the Bering Strait. Some biologists describe these quiet creatures as, aesthetically, an ‘acquired taste’.¹ They hug the coast, briefly showing a mottled back or their distinctive heart-shaped blow, before disappearing into murky waters, perhaps camouflaged by dense kelp forests.

Yet, despite this reputation as more mundane whales, gray whales are also famous for perhaps the most spectacular behaviour of all: their apparently curious acceptance of human proximity and/or contact called ‘friendly whale’ phenomenon.² Since the 1970s, gray whales have become known for approaching small boats and even allowing people to touch them in the lagoons in Baja California Sur (BCS), Mexico.³

I first heard of these friendly whales on a boat off California’s central coast. A white geyser spurted out of the glassy water, soon followed by another spout, the crest of a barnacled

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¹ H. Whitehead and L. Rendell, *The Cultural Lives of Whales and Dolphins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.67.

² I use ‘friendly’ because it is the common descriptor. I do not endorse (or condemn) it or assess the ethics of touching whales.

³ Baja California Sur (BCS) is often called ‘Baja’ by people from BCS and beyond. ‘Baja California’ is the state north of BCS.

back and just a hint of a fluke. We got a few glimpses before the whales dove into the depths. The only sign of our sudden encounter with these leviathans was their footprint — a flat spot left on the water's surface after a whale descends. After the whales dove, a crewmember of the whale-watching boat discussed gray whales' natural history. The crewmember said the whales we had just seen were on their way to their calving lagoons in Baja. While waiting to see if the whales might resurface, the crewmember spoke of how here, in US waters, we had to stay 100 yards away from whales. But, if you went to Baja, you could touch them; gray whales let people pet them there and they are known as the friendly whales. What made this even more remarkable, they explained, was that during the era of whaling, gray whales were known as devil-fish. What was once the devil-fish is now the friendly whale.

How did the devil-fish become the friendly whale? Perhaps more importantly: how did the story of the devil-fish transforming into the friendly whale come to have such cultural significance? I aimed to establish, using historical evidence, precisely *when* the devil-fish became the friendly whale. I anticipated I likely would find two different and potentially conflicting timelines: first, when gray whales began changing their behaviour, and second, when human observers began perceiving and representing this behavioural change. What I found, however, was that the historical record was far more complicated than the devil-fish and friendly whale dichotomy, with broader implications for environmental memory and storytelling.

In this article, I move away from whales in the water to whales in archives. Journeying through historical materials surrounding the transformation from devil-fish to friendly whale — and this narrative's evolution — I show where and how elements of the standard narrative emerged. Gray whales, like many animals, are not just encountered at sea, but *through stories*. These stories circulate through historical materials, from newspapers to scientific publications

and more. They create an affective milieu, even a mystique, surrounding gray whales, which weaves through broader discussions of gray whale science, conservation and tourism.

In these primary sites of narration – English-language, US-based travel writing, memoirs, expedition reporting, tourism advertising, scientific publications and print media and other forms of journalism – the devil-fish to friendly whale narrative emerged from the 1970s onwards.⁴ To mirror the sources described as the dominant and/or standard narrative of gray whale histories, this article’s archival research focuses on similar published, public sources from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries (approximately 1850 to 1965). This methodological choice necessarily excludes alternative perspectives and narratives (particularly those of Spanish language and Indigenous sources) but does so in an attempt to unravel dominant narratives.

By focusing on the role of narratives in gray whale histories, I bring the narrower material discussed into conversation with broader literatures of more-than-human and animal histories.⁵ A key challenge here is the role of animal subjects and agents.⁶ As Erica Fudge notes, a constant question is: how do we write histories that acknowledge animals’ agency as *actors* if

⁴ The standard narrative largely has gone unquestioned in English-language research. Narrative examples include: M.A. Gilders, *Reflections of a Whale-Watcher* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); R. Nickerson, ‘Getting Up Close in Baja’, *New York Times*, 8 Nov. 1987 <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/08/travel/getting-up-close-in-baja.html> (accessed 30 May 2022); B. Peterson and L. Hogan, *Sightings: The Gray Whale's Mysterious Journey* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2003); D. Russell, *Eye of the Whale: Epic Passage from Baja to Siberia* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); C. Siebert, ‘Watching Whales Watching Us’, *New York Times*, 8 July 2009 <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/12/magazine/12whales-t.html> (accessed 30 May 2022); S.L. Swartz and M.L. Jones, ‘Gray Whales At Play in Baja’s San Ignacio Lagoon’, *National Geographic* **171**(6) (1987): 754-771; D. Thompson, *Whales: Touching the Mystery* (Tillamook: NewSage Press, 2006); Pachico’s Eco Tours (2014) <http://pachicosecotours.com/About.htm> (accessed 30 May 2022). Precursors include: W. Marx, “‘the Scene Of Slaughter Was Exceedingly Picturesque’”, *American Heritage*, **20** (June 1969): 66; W. Marx, *The Frail Ocean* (New York: Sierra Club-Ballantine, 1967), pp.111-128; T.J. Walker, ‘The California Gray Whale Comes Back’, *National Geographic* **139**(3) (1971): 394-415. A recent memoir uses and departs from this narrative: D. Cunningham, *Soundings: Journeys in the Company of Whales* (London: Virago Press, 2022).

⁵ On narrative and environmental humanities methods, see: W. Cronon, ‘A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative’, *The Journal of American History* **78**(4) (1992): 1347–1376; T. van Dooren and D.B. Rose, ‘Lively ethnography: Storying animist worlds’, *Environmental Humanities* **8**(1) (2016): 77-94.

⁶ P. Howell, ‘Animals, Agency, and History’, in H. Kean and P. Howell (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018): pp.197-221.

they do not leave behind records?⁷ Responses include observing that animals *do* leave behind materials we might call ‘archives’ if we broaden our definitions and that animals necessarily shape those archives and historical processes typically seen as purely human affairs.⁸ Animals need not *intentionally* aim to change their own representations to participate in shaping them; historians increasingly view these representation as not solely human creations. More-than-human histories acknowledge humans are never isolated agents; social and ecological histories always are entangled, involving actors and agencies beyond the anthropogenic.⁹ This growing subfield takes as a baseline the possibility of seeing animals as historical and archival agents intervening in their own trajectories *and* representations. Although I do not claim to be able to access or interpret whales’ perspectives, I take whales seriously as among the many historical actors shaping narrative production and scientific (and non-scientific) categorisation.¹⁰ By contributing to the growing literature of more-than-human histories alongside oceanic history and histories of science, I also seek to bring whales back into their own histories.¹¹ Like much of

⁷ E. Fudge, ‘What was it like to be a cow? History and animal studies’, in L. Kalof (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies* (Oxon: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp.258-278.

⁸ E. Benson, ‘Animal Writes: Historiography, Disciplinarity, and the Animal Trace’, in L. Kalof and G.M. Montgomery (eds) *Making Animal Meaning* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), pp.3-16. Historical writing on nonhuman agency includes: K. Jones, ‘Restor(y)ing the “fierce green fire”: animal agency, wolf conservation and environmental memory in Yellowstone National Park’, *British Journal for the History of Science: Themes* **2** (2017): 151-168; H. Lorimer, ‘Herding memories of humans and animals’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **24**(4) (2006): 497-518; M. Rangarajan, ‘Animals With Rich Histories: The Case of the Lions of Gir Forest, Gujarat, India’, *History and Theory* **52** (2013): 109-127; J. Saha, *Colonizing Animals: Interspecies Empire in Myanmar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); S. Wilcox and S. Rutherford (eds) *Historical Animal Geographies* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018).

⁹ E. O’Gorman and A. Gaynor, ‘More-Than-Human Histories’, *Environmental History* **25**(4) (2020): 711-735.

¹⁰ Historians of science and of environmental history have long noted that scientific categories, taxonomies and labels are never neutral or natural, but rather socially, politically and historically shaped phenomena. See: P. Alagona, ‘Species Complex: Classification and Conservation in American Environmental History’, *Isis* **107**(4) (2016): 738-776; E. Hennessy, ‘Saving Species: The Co-Evolution of Tortoise Taxonomy and Conservation in the Galápagos Islands’, *Environmental History* **25**(2) (2020): 263-286.

¹¹ Relevant work broadly bridging history of science and ocean history, particularly in American and European contexts, includes: A. Adler, *Neptune’s Laboratory: Fantasy, Fear, and Science at Sea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019); H.M. Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean: The Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

the archival material available on whales, histories of whales too often render their own subjects as background objects.¹²

THE STANDARD NARRATIVE: FROM DEVIL-FISH TO FRIENDLY WHALE

Before detailing the complicating historical evidence, it is necessary to establish what I am calling the standard or dominant narrative of gray whale history, which this article critiques. This narrative can be summarised as:

1. Gray whales began being hunted in the mid-nineteenth century, when whalers called them ‘devil-fish’. This nickname referenced the whales’ ferocious reputation, particularly for mothers defending calves in lagoons.
2. After intensive commercial whaling, gray whales were on the brink of extinction by the early twentieth century.
3. Conservation regulations were established to protect gray whales in the mid-twentieth century, and the species began to recover.
4. In the early 1970s, a fisherman, Francisco ‘Pachico’ Mayoral experienced the first known friendly whale encounter when a gray whale approached his panga (small boat) in Laguna San Ignacio.¹³ He was afraid, for he had heard the tales of the devil-fish, but he quickly realised the whale did not mean him any harm, and he eventually reached out and touched it. Following this encounter, he started the gray whale-watching industry in BCS. The devil-fish had become the friendly whale.¹⁴

¹² For example, D.G. Burnett’s *The Sounding of the Whale: Science and Cetaceans in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), admits remarkably little interest in whales themselves. Notable exceptions to tendencies to render whales as objects rather than subjects/agents include: D. Degroot, ‘Blood and Bone, Tears and Oil: Climate Change, Whaling, and Conflict in the Seventeenth-Century Arctic’, *The American Historical Review* **127**(1) (2022): 62-99; B. Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York: WW Norton & Co., 2019); R.T. Jones, ‘A Whale of a Difference: Southern Right Whale Culture and the Tasman World’s Living Terrain of Encounter’, *Environment and History* **25**(2) (2019): 185-218.

¹³ Some credit US scientists with the first documented encounter instead of Mayoral (J. Colby, ‘Searching for Gigi: Captivity, Culture, and the Pacific Coast’s Embrace of Gray Whales’, in R.T. Jones and A. Wanhalla [eds] ‘New Histories of Pacific Whaling’, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* **6** [2019]: 49-53; S. Dedina, *Saving the Gray Whale: People, Politics, and Place in Baja California* [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000], p.18; Nickerson, ‘Getting Up Close’; Swartz and Jones, ‘Gray Whales At Play’). This erasure is significant, for scientists knew about friendly whales *because* of Mayoral’s encounter. Partly based on this scientific discovery timeline, Colby suggests captive gray whale calf ‘Gigi’ influenced both gray whale culture and scientific perceptions (pp.52-53).

¹⁴ See footnote 4.

In this version, gray whales represent an extreme manifestation of broader shifting public opinion about whales. Whales emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s as charismatic symbols of environmentalist concerns. Growing knowledge of whales from scientific research, particularly around cetacean cognition, followed by the ‘save the whales’ movement in the mid-to late twentieth century, catalysed the rise of whales as sentient figureheads of mainstream Western environmentalism.¹⁵ Gray whales, through their transition from devil-fish to friendly whale, and as an oft-pointed-to example of a conservation ‘success story’, offered an appealing story within this broader context of cetacean symbolism and nostalgia.¹⁶

Part of the story’s appeal is the opportunity it offers for human redemption. Religious and spiritual language infuses late twentieth and early twenty-first century narrations of gray whale history. The whale’s transformation from devilish to angelic takes on significance beyond the ecological or ethological. Many use metaphors and imagery from Catholicism to describe their encounters with friendly whales; being splashed by whales’ blows becomes ‘baptism by whale’, whilst touching whales’ barnacled skin seems akin to touching the relics of saints.¹⁷ These spiritual and religious descriptions feed into one of the most common explanations for the transition from devil-fish to friendly whale offered by observers, particularly travel writers and

¹⁵ A partial bibliography of broader whale history includes: Burnett, *Sounding of Whale*; Jones and Wanhalla, ‘New Histories of Pacific Whaling’; K. Oslund, ‘Protecting Fat Mammals or Carnivorous Humans? Towards an Environmental History of Whales’, *Historical Social Research* 29(3) (2004): 63-81; N. Shoemaker, *Living with Whales: Documents and Oral Histories of Native New England Whaling History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014); F. Zelko, *Make it a Green Peace! The Rise of a Countercultural Environmentalism* (Oxon: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ For ‘conservation success story’ rhetoric, see, e.g., NOAA Fisheries, ‘Gray Whales in the Eastern North Pacific’, 1 February 2021, <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/west-coast/science-data/gray-whales-eastern-north-pacific> (accessed 31 May 2022).

¹⁷ K. McCaffrey, ‘Baptism By Whale,’ *Women’s Adventure Magazine*, 17 March 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150320012241/http://www.womensadventuremagazine.com/blog/baptism-by-whale/> (accessed 7 March 2022); Thompson, *Touching Whales*, p.22. Burnett discusses cetacean-human touch, spiritualism and sentience in the 1960s-70s, focusing on dolphins and sperm whales (*Sounding of Whale*, pp.517-645).

journalists: forgiveness for guilty inherited histories of whaling.¹⁸ The devil-fish to friendly whale narrative, then, represents a powerful manifestation of environmental memory, and these remembering processes are inextricable from broader politics of (imperialist) nostalgia.¹⁹

A closer analysis of gray whales' historical trajectories suggests the appealingly clean, linear transition from devil-fish to friendly whale *never* occurred. People along the California coast encountered gentle giants when they were supposed only to have been monsters and devil-fish after they were supposed to have become placid.²⁰ Historical evidence shows 'friendly whales' appearing far earlier than the standard timeline, and devil-fishes persisting far later. Throughout the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, devil-fishes, friendly whales, and other behaviours and encounters coexisted. Encounters with gray whales were (and continue to be) complex, multispecies co-productions. Moreover, remembering these encounters has long been bound up in broader structures and processes of nostalgia in remembering and invoking American environmental pasts.

Analysing representations and remembrances, and the different version of events that emerges, I aim to illuminate the wider implications for the role of memory, multispecies co-production and nonhuman agency in shaping a compelling case study of a conservation success story. For those who study or care specifically about gray whales, this narrative revision might be interesting enough, but there is broader significance. As Peter Alagona argues, policy debates

¹⁸ On gray whale conservation and scientific research history, see: Dedina, *Saving Gray Whale*; L. Fleischer, *La Ballena Gris: Mexicana Por Nacimiento* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002). Scientists less often use the language of forgiveness or friendliness. There is surprisingly little published scientific literature about the phenomenon.

¹⁹ R. Rosaldo, 'Imperialist Nostalgia', *Representations* 26 (1989): 107-122.

²⁰ I use 'California' cautiously, as this is a contested and complicated cartography that includes the Baja peninsula (for more detail, see: V. Castillo-Muñoz, *The Other California: Land, Identity, and Politics on the Mexican Borderlands* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016]).

about endangered species are about more than those species; so too, I contend, are their stories.²¹ Re-examining a particular story not just about how past animals behaved but how past people interpreted, categorised and acted upon that behaviour shows how common narrations of such histories can obscure the complexity of those relations. Instead of binary understandings – yearning for a simpler, harmonious past or viewing earlier human encounters as purely negative – gray whales’ stories can offer a more complex set of relationships. It is these past, present and future relationships – knotty, contradictory, confusing – with which historians and broader publics must grapple as ‘we’ navigate the Anthropocene(s).

SAGACIOUS AND PITIFUL DEVIL-FISH: MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

Early descriptions of Eastern North Pacific gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) in English-language sources began in the mid-nineteenth century. Gray whales were already extinct in the Atlantic by the eighteenth century. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, despite longstanding Indigenous hunting, colonists on the North American Pacific Coast largely did not exploit gray whales. Following US westward expansion and acquisition of what is currently the state of California in 1848, Yankee whaling enterprises proliferated along both the US and Mexican California coastlines.²² One prominent San Francisco-based whaling captain was Charles Melville Scammon. Known for purportedly discovering gray whales’ use of a lagoon in BCS and spearheading commercial harvesting there in 1856 (following earlier Yankee whaling in another lagoon from the 1845-1846 season), Scammon is an infamous figure. He was

²¹ P. Alagona, *After the Grizzly: Endangered Species and the Politics of Place in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

²² On BCS commercial whaling history, see: Dedina, *Saving Gray Whale*, pp.19-27; D.A. Henderson, *Men and Whales in Scammon’s Lagoon* (Los Angeles: Dawson’s Book Shop, 1972); D. Iglar, *The Great Ocean: Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.99-128; R.R. Reeves, T.D. Smith, J.N. Lund, S.A. Lebo and E.A. Josephson, ‘Nineteenth-century Ship-based Catches of Gray Whales, *Eschrichtius robustus*, in the Eastern North Pacific’, *Marine Fisheries Review* **72**(1) (2010): 26-65.

responsible at once for the swift devastation of gray whale populations through two rounds of intensive whaling in the mid-nineteenth century and for a substantial amount of the early scientific knowledge of gray whales. His behemoth 1874 book on marine mammals devoted its first chapter to the ‘California Gray Whale’.²³

Scammon’s writings were among the earliest to use the devil-fish moniker, and some credit him with originating or first documenting the label. The name devil-fish appeared in the first chapter, among a list of additional nicknames. Scammon made few direct references to the label outside that list. He graphically described whaling and stories of gray whales exhibiting what might be interpreted as devil-fish behaviour. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century writing often invokes Scammon’s graphic descriptions of whaling and detailed accounts of gray whales’ monstrous behaviour to highlight the cruelty of whaling – and the antipathy of commercial whalers towards gray whales.²⁴

Scammon’s descriptions of the whales, however, were more nuanced, complex and ambivalent than simply representing cruel destruction. Three gray whale characteristics Scammon noted repeatedly are far less devilish: playfulness, maternal care and sagacity. It is sagacity Scammon arguably dwelled on most; indeed, sagacity was ambivalent for Scammon, encompassing playfulness, wiliness, devilishness, tenacious parental care, capacity for learning and more. Writing that ‘these whales are possessed of unusual sagacity’, Scammon highlighted

²³ C.M. Scammon, *The Marine Mammals of the North-Western Coast of North America, Described and Illustrated; Together With an Account of the American Whale-Fishery* (San Francisco: John H. Carmany and Company, 1874), pp.20-33. Cf., pp.259-272; C.M. Scammon and E.D. Cope, “On the Cetaceans of the Western Coast of North America,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia* **21** (1869): 13-63. The relationship between whalers’ knowledge and whale science has been discussed by Burnett, *Sounding of Whale*, pp.23-189; Rozwadowski, *Fathoming Ocean*, pp.26-46.

²⁴ E.g., Cunningham, *Soundings*, pp.96-99; Peterson and Hogan, pp.273-274; Russell, p.64; Thompson, pp.97-100. These contemporary readings of Scammon sometimes grapple with the contradictions of Scammon’s views, but mostly as a conundrum within binary options – hating or loving whales.

both devilish and caring behaviours.²⁵ Reading his work closely, and in contrast to prior historical arguments, it becomes clear that Scammon viewed gray whales as genuinely intelligent.²⁶ Scammon appears to have had a certain amount of respect for the animals' care for the young and their sagacious dispositions. Yet, unlike later environmental movements' linkages between cetacean intelligence and conservation, this respect or recognition of gray whales' sagacity did not lead Scammon to question commercial harvests, nor to express regret about his actions – even in discussing the likelihood of gray whales' extinction.

The only place in which Scammon demonstrated *sympathy* for gray whales was in his descriptions of Indigenous whaling. Whereas Scammon described Yankee whaling as 'civilized', he portrayed Indigenous whaling as savage and cruel. Despite Scammon's extensive technical descriptions of his own brutal harvesting techniques, he described Indigenous whaling as violent attacks on 'the poor creature'. Scammon's earlier descriptions of Yankee whaling were largely clinical; here, the language became more emotive, graphic and sympathetic to whales. 'But scarcely have these poor creatures' left their southern range, he wrote, 'before they are surprised by the Indians', who he describes as acting 'like enemies in ambush ... rushing upon their prey with whoop and yell, launching their instruments of torture, and like hounds worrying the last life-blood from their vitals'. This quotation, in addition to its blatant racism, is a very different description of the act of killing a whale — an act which defined his own career. Moreover, this is the first instance of a genuine sense of sympathy for gray whales; the 'poor creature' is quite a different figure than the devil-fish. Scammon's anti-Indigenous racism should not be dismissed as the ignorance and bias of a man of his time, but rather as integral to his descriptions of gray whales. In the context of his own hunting, gray whales were worthy adversaries; they became

²⁵ Scammon, *Marine Mammals*, p.29.

²⁶ Cf., Burnett, *Sounding of Whale*, p.522.

worthy of pity for Scammon when subjected to (longstanding, largely sustainable) Indigenous hunting practices.²⁷

Yet in none of these descriptions – of whales as playful, maternal, sagacious, or pitiful victims – did Scammon portray gray whales as *friendly*. Contemporary readers of his work might interpret actions Scammon saw as devilish as friendly, such as closely approaching boats, but Scammon himself did not go so far as to see these actions as *benevolent*.

An additional, and overlooked, aspect of Scammon's writing is that his book was not *contemporaneous* but retrospective, indeed, nostalgic. Despite largely writing in the present tense, Scammon did not write these descriptions while on whaling voyages; it is more memoir than logbook. Scammon's discordant care and disregard (or even antipathy) for gray whales therefore must be read with this retrospective writing in mind. The book's inside-cover image captures the dissonant affective experience of reading the book: a beautiful idyllic illustration, that, upon closer glance, depicts men in small boats slaughtering gray whales trapped in their birthing lagoons (Figure 1). The image mirrors an oft-quoted line near the end of the book: 'here the scene of slaughter was exceedingly picturesque'.²⁸ This description and the cover image were nostalgic visions keying into late nineteenth century yearning for a not-yet-gone, but increasingly romanticised, era of commercial whaling. It was both backwards-looking and anticipatory – anticipating a future in which whaling and whales were no more. But that future had not arrived by 1874, nor was it inevitable.

Scammon's own nostalgic and retrospective view of gray whales is clearest in the gray whale chapter's conclusion:

²⁷ Scammon, *Marine Mammals*, pp.28-32. Scammon does not specify Indigenous communities, but presumably refers to multiple Coast Salish and Alaska Native, Makah and Nuu-Chah-Nulth peoples.

²⁸ Scammon, *Marine Mammals*, p.266; cf., Cunningham, p.98; Marx, 'Scene Of Slaughter'; Russell, p.64

The civilized whaler seeks the hunted animal farther seaward, as from year to year it learns to shun the fatal shore. None of the species are so constantly and variously pursued as the one we have endeavored to describe ; and the large bays and lagoons, where these animals once congregated, brought forth and nurtured their young, are already nearly deserted. The mammoth bones of the California Gray lie bleaching on the shores of those Silvery waters, and are scattered along the broken coasts, from Siberia to the Gulf of California ; and ere long it may be questioned whether this mammal will not be numbered among the extinct species of the Pacific.²⁹

Here, Scammon saw extinction as inevitable and unavoidable, but did not directly express regret or advocate regulation; about fifteen years later, another observer of gray whales similarly paired nostalgic discussion of their devil-fish behaviour with anticipating their extinction, but advocated protection and conservation.³⁰ Thus, nostalgia and memory in this era were not uniform and used understanding of the past to project different images of the future. The imperialist nostalgic inevitability of extinction was not universally assumed.³¹

The interweaving of Scammon's retrospective view of gray whales, anticipation of inevitable extinction and anti-Indigenous racism speaks more broadly to the interweaving of ecological and social histories in American history. Much like the terrestrial history of the bison has come to be understood as one of both *bisons*' history and broader campaigns aimed at violently disrupting Indigenous peoples' lifeways in the North American Plains, so too are gray whales' histories entangled histories of natural resource exploitation and colonialism.³²

Although, unlike bison, grays and other whales were not purposefully targeted for extinction with the explicit goal of undermining Indigenous peoples' survival, gray whales were

²⁹ Scammon, *Marine Mammals*, p.33.

³⁰ J.D. Caton, 'The California Gray Whale', *The American Naturalist* **22**(258) (1888): 509-514.

³¹ Rosaldo, 'Imperialist Nostalgia'.

³² For additional bison and whale comparisons, see: Caton, 'California Gray Whale', 514; E.S. Gardner, *Hunting the Desert Whale: Personal Adventures in California* (London: Companion Book Club, 1961), p.48; R. Kellogg, 'Whales, Giants of the Sea', *National Geographic* **77**(1) (1940): 35; Marx, *Frail Ocean*, pp.128. Analyses of such comparisons include: Demuth, *Floating Coast*, pp.66-67; H.M. Rozwadowski, 'Arthur C. Clarke and the Limitations of the Ocean as a Frontier', *Environmental History* **17**(3) (2012): 591.

nonetheless enmeshed within broader colonial and imperial projects in coastal space within and beyond the late nineteenth-century.³³

AMOROUS AND SOCIABLE MONSTERS: LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the years after Scammon's 1874 book, commercial whaling of gray whales declined. Rounds of intensive lagoon whaling in the 1850s and 1870s, combined with ongoing coastal whaling activities, substantially reduced the population. Encounters with gray whales continued, though, as other commercial, industrial and leisure activities took to the seas.

Newspapers in this era of increasing industrialization and commercialization of the California coast provide ample evidence of how stories of gray whale encounters circulated far beyond local communities. Nationally syndicated columns shared often fantastical stories of adventures on the West Coast's oceanic frontier, within the broader context of the popularity of 'realistic' animal stories in the late nineteenth century.³⁴ Among these stories is the earliest description I found of what could be described as friendly whale behaviour – and which was *recognised at the time* as friendly behaviour. In 1895, a column titled 'Sociable Pacific Whales', reported that gray whales 'like to make friends with vessels'.³⁵ The article described whales as 'harmless monsters'. It recounted the story of a gray whale following a ship traveling towards South America for three weeks. This 'curious companion' reportedly 'played about it, attempting no injury, but swimming alongside and receiving many bullets in its blubber without resenting

³³ J.L. Reid, *The Sea Is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); cf., Demuth, *Floating Coast*. On cetaceans and anticipatory nostalgia, see: S. Besky, 'Lobsters, Whales, and Traps: The Politics of Endangerment in the Gulf of Maine', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5(4) (2022): 1994-2010; T. Choy, *Ecologies of Comparison: An Ethnography of Endangerment in Hong Kong* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), pp.23-52.

³⁴ K. Jones, 'Writing the Wolf: Canine Tales and North American Environmental-Literary Tradition', *Environment and History* 17(2) (2011): 201-228.

³⁵ *The sun* (New York), 5 May 1895, p.5; cf., *Morning Press* (Santa Barbara), 3 July 1883, p.3.

them'. The column then recounted another story of a whale off Catalina Island, which pulled a line and nearly capsized a fisherman. This behaviour was seen not as violent or malicious but as a playful whale accidentally getting caught in the line. Other whales then joined this one and 'played about the bow'. The article concluded that these whales 'doubtless thought that the yacht was a new kind of whale, and were trying to literally scrape acquaintance'.

The story of the vessel-following whale appeared again in another article four years later, titled 'Love Affairs of Whales'.³⁶ This focused on a tour boat captain off Catalina Island. A former whaler, the captain said gray whales 'get so foolish, they even fall in love with boats'. He recounted a gray whale that got so close, it scared everyone onboard; he stated: 'I never saw so affectionate an old cuss as this'. He further called the whale 'sociable' for rubbing against the boat. Yet, at the same time, he decided not to shoot it because it would be too dangerous, for 'of all the whales, this species is the most vicious'. The whale followed the boat for some time, and the captain's explanation for this behaviour is it must have thought the boat was another whale and was 'courting' the boat due to 'love at first sight'. He added skippers did not purposefully attempt these close encounters for fear of their boats being smashed. The captain then launched into other stories, including one that appears to be the vessel following story. He claimed that whale interpreted the crews' bullets and other assaults as 'love taps'.

These stories are significant because, according to the standard narrative of gray whale history, friendly whale behaviour began after the end of commercial whaling and following the implementation of conservation regulations. Friendly behaviour, in this view, emerged when gray whales could trust they would not be harmed. Yet these stories, in an era of reduced but ongoing commercial whaling, reveal that observers at the time recognised gray whales as

³⁶ *The sun*, 24 Sept. 1899, p.4.

sociable and amorous. Furthermore, these more benevolent descriptions co-existed alongside, rather than replacing, violent and fearful responses to gray whales. Gray whales could at once be friendly and monstrous, fun and threatening, for observers in the late nineteenth century.

Additionally, memory and nostalgia weave into these 1890s stories. The Catalina Island tour boat captain, for example, is a former whaler, who left the job due to rheumatism. By the 1890s, whaling was beginning to hold a nostalgic cultural role, of a golden industry run by strapping, industrious men; its economic decline at this time was lamented in similar ways as the ‘closing’ of terrestrial ‘frontier’.³⁷ As historians of the American West and oceanic frontiers have noted, at the turn-of-the-century, the ocean occupied a paradoxical role as an oft-imagined inexhaustible next frontier that already was becoming exhausted, depleted of former opportunities to forge particular American futures.³⁸ These 1890s newspaper articles, then, cannot be simply read as factual contemporaneous accounts, but as works of memory, *remembering* whaling and whaling-adjacent encounters as adventures of an increasingly bygone era.

ENDANGERED VICTIMS OR VILLAINS: EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

By turn of the twentieth century, descriptions of gray whales in newspapers, magazine articles and other public textual sources began to reflect increasing recognition of gray whales’ endangerment. Yankee whalers largely abandoned Mexican lagoons by the early 1900s, coastal whaling was dwindling throughout North American Pacific waters, and Norwegian whalers

³⁷ F.J. Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (1894): 199-227; W. Cronon, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’, *Environmental History* 1(1) (1996): 7-28.

³⁸ On American oceanic frontiers, see G. Kroll, *America’s Ocean Wilderness: A Cultural History of Twentieth-Century Exploration* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008). Cf., Rozwadowski, ‘Clarke and Limitations of Ocean’; *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), pp.161-187.

finished the final intensive round of lagoon whaling by the late 1920s.³⁹ Although gray whales continued to be seen as monstrous or devilish, they also began to be seen as victims of various threats.

Ship strikes were one arena in which contemporaneous observers disagreed on whether gray whales were victims or perpetrators. Gray whales often closely approach boats, and some late nineteenth and early twentieth century observers interpreted this behaviour as aggressive – vengeful whales attacking ships. Yet others began to see the same actions that rendered gray whales monstrous as evidence of their victimization. A 1901 *Scientific American* article lamented gray whales as victims of their own ‘sociable disposition’, which subjected them to undeserved, deadly ship strikes.⁴⁰ This formulation reverses the action of the strike – from striker to struck victim, foreshadowing how ship strikes typically are understood today.

Another source of new victimization for gray whales was a shift in attention to a different maritime monster: the killer whale. In describing purported discoveries about killer whale behaviours, journalists often put gray whales into a new role: sympathetic – or merely pathetic – victim. As the potential prey of villainous killer whales, the gray whale’s devilishness sometimes was ignored entirely in depictions of the killer whale as a ‘submarine butcher’.⁴¹ Killer whales emerged as ‘bloodthirsty monsters which hunt in packs like wolves’, brutally attacking gray

³⁹ Dedina, *Saving Gray Whale*, pp.19-27; Henderson, *Men and Whales*; Reeves et al., ‘Nineteenth-century Ship-based Catches’; Reid, *Sea Is My Country*, pp.167-177.

⁴⁰ C.F. Holder, ‘Running Down Whales’, *Scientific American* **84** (8) (1901): 121; cf., *San Francisco Call*, 25 April 1897, p.6; *The morning news* (Savannah), 4 July 1897, p.4; *Pine Bluff daily graphic*, 21 Feb. 1901; *Olneyville times* (Providence), 17 Jan. 1902; *Bridgeport evening farmer*, 1 June 1912.; *Columbus journal* (Ne.), 1 July 1891.

⁴¹ *Morning Press*, 7 Aug. 1892, p. 3.

whale mother-calf pairs.⁴² Stories often described killer whales pursuing gray whales with the intensity and ferocity of wolves, making direct connections to the oft-maligned wolf.⁴³

Yet, while people were still encountering gray whales on the West Coast (as devilish monsters or pitiful victims), others were describing these same whales as extinct or nearly extinguished. Many writing about gray whales at the turn of the twentieth century saw gray whales' looming extinction as inevitable. These predictions directly or indirectly mirrored Scammon's anticipation of coming extinction in 1874. Among these was a series of numerical figures about gray whales' decline appearing within newspaper columns highlighting groups of unrelated facts and figures in the 1920s.⁴⁴ These statistics sometimes credited a presumably posthumous Scammon-authored *Nature* article which may not exist. Regardless of their specific source, these continued references to Scammon demonstrate his influence on remembering gray whale histories.

In addition to anticipations of extinction, reports also declared gray whale extinction as already complete. Some newspaper articles mentioned in passing, and as fact, that gray whales were extinct in California.⁴⁵ Yet newspapers also continued to report encounters with, and catches of, gray whales along this coastline through the late 1910s and 1920s.⁴⁶ The apparent (if incomplete) assumed extinction of gray whales drove museums and other institutions to

⁴² *Evening star* (Washington, D.C.), 16 April 1892, p.5.

⁴³ *The Republican* (Oakland, Md.), 3 June 3, 1892; *The herald* (Los Angeles), 27 Feb. 1893, p.3; *Shepherdstown register*, 21 Aug. 1919, p.1. On wolves, see: J.T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) and Jones, 'Restor(y)ing "fierce green fire"', 'Writing Wolf'.

⁴⁴ *Arizona state miner* (Wickenburg), 28 March 1925; cf., *Evening star*, 23 June 1923, p.11; *Winslow mail*, 14 Nov. 1924, p.2; *Seattle star*, 21 Nov. 1924, p.11.

⁴⁵ Examples of assumed extinction: *San Francisco Call*, 13 Dec. 1911, p.17; *Topeka state journal*, 12 June 1917.

⁴⁶ Additional examples of continued catches/encounters: *The Seattle post-intelligencer*, November 6, 1893, 4; *Los Angeles herald*, June 10, 1908, 2; *Daily Alaskan* (Skagway), 31 Jan. 1917; *Madison daily leader* (S.D.), 22 Aug. 1922.

prioritize collecting specimens, if not yet preserving their live counterparts *in situ*.⁴⁷ In 1911, American Museum of Natural History researcher Roy Chapman Andrews embarked on an expedition to the Korean peninsula to determine whether any gray whales still existed in the Asian Pacific. Andrews and reporters covering the expedition claimed gray whales had been extinct for years in the North American Pacific, despite continued reports of encounters and catches. Headlines declared ‘gray whale still lives’, with Andrews ‘rediscover[ing] the gray whale’ by finding an extant population in Korea.⁴⁸

Despite the rarity and precarity of gray whales from the turn of the twentieth century onwards, descriptions of devil-fish and friendly whales persisted. For example, in 1916, a beloved and named gray whale (‘Farallon[e] Charley’) in San Francisco Bay was the star of duelling local newspaper articles, which were then syndicated nationally.⁴⁹ These two newspapers debated whether this known and cared for whale – who was beloved for, among other things, a hyperbolic list of his superlative attributes, distinctive snorting and a proclivity for catching biscuits thrown by steamship passengers – had been killed in a battle with either a larger whale or swordfishes. The sense of relief at Charley’s reported survival in the second article, which decries the original article (which announced Charley’s likely demise) as a ‘fish story’, is palpable. Although neither article directly described Charley as friendly, he was evidently a known, cared for, and, indeed, friendly whale.

⁴⁷ On natural history collecting and extinction, see: Hennessy, ‘Saving Species’; D. Jørgensen, ‘Erasing the extinct: the hunt for Caribbean monk seals and museum collection practices’, *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos* **28** (2021): 161-183.

⁴⁸ On Andrews, see, e.g., *Evening standard* (Ogden City), 28 Nov. 1911, p.1; R.C. Andrews, *Whale hunting with gun and camera; a naturalist’s account of the modern shore-whaling industry, of whales and their habits, and of hunting experiences in various parts of the world* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1916), pp.186-214; Kroll, *America’s Ocean Wilderness*, pp.9-36.

⁴⁹ *San Francisco Chronicle*, 31 Aug. 1916, p.15; *San Francisco Call*, 26 Sept. 1916, p.3; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 Aug. 1916, p.1; cf., *Harrisburg telegraph*, 25 Sept. 1916, p.6.

At the same time, the devil-fish label persisted, growing in popularity as a nostalgic label applied retroactively. Prior to the turn of the twentieth century (and even beyond it), ‘devil-fish’ more commonly described various other marine species, including rays, octopuses, squid and cuttlefish, perhaps speaking more to broader fears of life in oceanic depths than specifically of gray whales.⁵⁰ Starting in the late nineteenth century and increasingly in the early twentieth century, newspaper articles and other texts often invoked the devil-fish label in describing what was, by that time, *historic* commercial lagoon whaling. For example, a 1908 column described ‘memories revived’ of Yankee whaling in BCS. After highlighting the ‘golden era’ of whaling, commencing in 1850, the article portrayed gray whales as ‘not easy to kill’.⁵¹ They ‘soon became known as the “devil fish,” and by that name they are now known in the books’. The column ended with gray whales’ and whaling’s declines. Other writing throughout this time also invoked the devil-fish label nostalgically alongside stories of whale-hunting adventures, often of the same incident in the unspecified past of a mother’s fatal attack on a whaling crew.⁵²

These accounts helped popularize the devil-fish label as a *retroactive* description of how people had once encountered whales. Nostalgic views of gray whales as monstrous devil-fish positioned these whales as the well-matched and even noble adversary of masculine heroes working in the Yankee whaling industry. This intersection of nostalgia, memory, masculinity and nature in the context of whaling emerged in aforementioned anxieties about the closing of frontiers.⁵³ Once the devil-fish was on the brink of extinction — or imagined to have already fallen off the brink — its devilish behaviour became a way to remember American ecological

⁵⁰ For non-whale devil-fishes, see, e.g.: *Sacramento Daily Union*, 13 Dec. 1866, p.3; *Scientific American*, 29(9) (1873): 131; *New York Times*, 9 Oct. 1877, p.5; *New York Times*, 19 Jan. 1878, p.2; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 April 1899, p.37. On fear and oceans, see: Adler, *Neptune’s Laboratory*.

⁵¹ *Deseret evening news* (Salt Lake City), 7 March 1908, p.23 [reprinted from *N.Y. Post*].

⁵² E.g.: *The sun*, 20 Aug. 1899, p.2; *Olneyville times*, 17 Jan. 1902; *Madison daily leader* (S.D.), 14 March 1912; Andrews, *Whale hunting*, pp.187-214.

⁵³ *Olneyville times*, 17 Jan. 1902; cf., Caton, ‘California Gray Whale’, 511.

history through particular modes of nostalgia. These processes of remembering gray whale histories were a key stage setting up for later articulations of gray whale histories. It is here that remembering gray whales as devil-fish became prominent, and the claims in this era would be repeated by later observers.

KNOWING DEVIL-FISHES AND FRIENDLY WHALES THROUGH TOURISM AND SCIENCE: MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

Although gray whales became a rare and endangered species in North American waters, encounters with them did not end, nor did interactions with grays as devil-fish end after the cessation of commercial whaling in the 1920s or international bans in 1938 and 1946.⁵⁴ Two common sources of observations of gray whale behaviour in the mid-twentieth century (from the 1930s to the mid-1960s) were scientific and travel expeditions, which often overlapped. The Baja peninsula has long inspired travel narratives from US-based authors and journalists. These pieces often were and are highly exotifying, describing Baja as remote, harsh, untouched and primitive. From turn-of-the-century newspaper articles touting an ‘Adamless Eden’, to John Steinbeck’s 1951 *Log from the Sea of Cortez*, the Baja peninsula has grabbed the attention of US-based writers as a site of nature and adventure.⁵⁵

Some of the accounts specifically mentioned gray whale behaviour, revealing devil-fish behaviour continuing past the 1920s. In novelist Erle Stanley Gardner’s 1960 travel memoir, descriptions of awe-inspiring and fearsome whales abounded. Gardner continuously referred to

⁵⁴ The precise endpoint of whaling is difficult to pinpoint because different harvests ended at different times and early regulations were relatively ineffective (Dedina, *Saving Gray Whale*; Oslund, ‘Protecting Fat Mammals’; Reid, *Sea Is My Country*).

⁵⁵ *New Britain herald*, 26 July 1916, p.6; J. Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (New York: Viking Press, 1951). Dedina critiques the ‘pristine myth’ of Baja (Dedina, *Saving Gray Whale*, p.155). On Baja-US history, see: Castillo-Muñoz, *Other California*.

photographing gray whales as ‘hunting’ them, comparing camera to gun and panga to whaling vessel. Interestingly, Gardner claimed local sea turtle fishermen near Ojo de Liebre (then called Scammon’s/Scammon Lagoon) scoffed at the idea of gray whales being dangerous or vicious; he then suggested his own party caused whales to shift from ‘neighborly’ to aggressive *because* of their attempts to photograph them. Gardner briefly discussed the devil-fish history but indicated he was unaware of this history prior to his encounters. Instead of coming into the lagoons expecting devil-fish behaviour, Gardner and his companions were surprised by how not ‘peaceable’ the whales were and by their propensity to charge boats. He repeatedly wrote of ‘word getting round’ among whales of the photo-hunters’ pursuit of them, claiming that pursuing whales — even for photographs, a key aspect of both contemporary and historical animal tourism — prompted their transformation into defensive and even aggressive beasts.⁵⁶

Mid-twentieth century expeditions to BCS also sought to render gray whales into experimental, not just photographic, subjects. Prior to the 1960s and 1970s, the focus of this research was not on gray whale behavioural ecology or conservation, but rather on physiology and anatomy. In the 1950s, a famous cardiologist, Dr Paul Dudley White, led expeditions to BCS attempting to record whales’ heartbeats. Doing so involved shooting a harpoon and tranquilizer dart with electrodes straight at the heart of a whale. A newspaper headline described a similar expedition conducted off Catalina Island as: ‘Harpoon of Happiness Tranquilizes Whale’. These expeditions, led by US-based medical practitioners, explicitly aimed to use insights into cetacean biology to ‘illuminate features of the human heart that doctors do not understand’.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Gardner, *Hunting Desert Whale*, pp.21-89 [UK publication year: 1961]. On colonial wildlife tourism and hunting with cameras and guns, see: J.R. Ryan, “‘Hunting with the camera’: Photography, wildlife and colonialism in Africa”, in C. Philo and C. Wilbert (eds), *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations* (Oxon: Taylor & Francis, 2000), pp.205-222. Andrews also connected whale-hunting and cameras in his memoir (*Whale hunting*).

⁵⁷ P.D. White with S.W. Matthews, ‘Hunting the Heartbeat of a Whale’, *National Geographic* **110**(1) (1956): 49-64; *Nome nugget*, 14 Jan. 1953, p.5; *Evening star*, 1 Feb. 1956, p.B-9; *Evening star*, 21 Jan. 1957, p.1.

Like their photographic and adventure tourism counterparts, scientific expeditions encountered devilishness. White's expedition quickly found gray whales do not often respond placidly to being harpooned, whether for profit or for science. The first expedition likely took place near the Scripps Institute, off La Jolla, California in 1953. Bad weather and 'uncooperative' whales doomed the expedition, but the researchers decided to try the lagoons, hoping whales would be easier to study at the endpoint of their migration.⁵⁸

Whales were not more cooperative in or near the lagoons. Like the Scammon's crews before them, White and his 'coronary explorers' (as one newspaper described them) found gray whales ferocious in 1956. Expedition members pursued a mother and calf in a small boat; the mother attacked their vessel. One headline declared the whales 'just won't co-operate'. White said his team had 'chosen four adjectives to describe [gray whales]: Elusive, sagacious, formidable, and wary', with 'sagacious' perhaps unintendedly echoing Scammon. In his own *National Geographic* article, White framed the expedition in the introduction through the devilfish lens: 'Before the expedition was over, we learned why the California gray whale long ago was nicknamed "devilfish"'. White also referenced Roy Chapman Andrews in describing, inaccurately, how gray whales went extinct on the California coast. Through these references to Andrews and, more indirectly, to Scammon, White's writing (as well as that of his contemporaries, including Gardner and Wesley Marx) reveals how subsequent generations of observers built on earlier, retroactive remembrances of gray whale behaviour.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Nome nugget*, 14 Jan. 1953, p.5; *Evening star*, 9 Feb. 1956, p.1; *Nome nugget*, 10 Feb. 1956, p.4; *Evening star*, 13 Feb. 1956, p.1.

⁵⁹ *Evening star*, 9 Feb. 1956, p.1; *Evening star*, 13 Feb. 1956, p.1; White with Matthews, 'Hunting Heartbeat', 49-64. In the 1960s, Gardner and Marx directly discussed both White and Scammon (*Hunting Desert Whale*, p.22-23, 42-51; *Frail Ocean*, pp. 116-123; 'Scene of Slaughter').

Although the cardiac expeditions certainly have comedic effects as somewhat spectacularly failed experiments, White's efforts and the discourse surrounding them also reveal continued devil-fish behaviour – and less-than-friendly *human* behaviour – over a decade *after* the cessation of commercial gray whale harvests. Stories from the cardiac and photographic-tourism expeditions complicate the argument that gray whales ceased being devil-fishes and became friendly whales upon realising they were no longer threatened – and upon forgiving humans for past violence. Moreover, these examples show more complicated views of local perceptions of devil-fish behaviour and of continued anthropogenic threats to gray whales, as tourism and scientific research provoked similar defensive responses from whales. Thus, far from a neat, clear progression from devil-fish to friendly whale, the devil-fish — and its reasons for acting devilishly — persisted into a time in which it is now imagined to have become placid. Finally, both sets of observers also drew on earlier nineteenth and twentieth century accounts to contextualize and narrate their experiences with gray whales. These nested references reveal how citational practice shapes and reinforces the emergence of particular historical narratives.

MESSY ENTANGLEMENTS: CO-PRODUCING DEVIL-FISHES AND FRIENDLY WHALES

Together, the examples discussed thus far challenge the dominant devil-fish to friendly whale narrative of gray whale-human relationships. Historical evidence does not support the clean progressive timeline of the from devil fish to friendly whale narrative; it is impossible to pinpoint when the transition in either behaviour or perception occurred because neither actually *happened*. Instead, archival evidence suggests a far more complex set of relations unfolded between people and gray whales on the California coast. Encounters were messier and more

nuanced than the dichotomy of ‘devil-fish’ and ‘friendly whale’ suggests. Neither the timeline nor the geographies of these devilish or friendly encounters are clean or simple, and ample evidence also suggests such encounters are not limited to only gray whales.⁶⁰

Yet disputing the simple facts of historical gray whale encounters is not my full aim. Indeed, I take seriously the lessons of opposing and potentially not-fully-accurate stories. As Nayanika Mathur observes, the truthfulness and utility of stories about animals is neither more reliable in nonfiction nor less reliable in fiction; we can learn much about human-animal relationships and histories from stories across genres and with varying degrees of accuracy.⁶¹ Instead of merely complicating the timeline of an appealing story, the examples discussed provide an opportunity to intervene in interpreting or representing more-than-human encounters more broadly.

From reading this wide array of historical as well as contemporary accounts of encountering gray whales, I argue friendly whale behaviour is not a simple state of being that is either present or absent in the personality of an individual animal. It is instead a dynamic process of encounter which is coproduced between people and whales, and is recognised and interpreted to different meanings and ends.

According to Pancho Mayoral, a whale-watching captain with experience in BCS and the Santa Barbara Channel (and Pachico Mayoral’s son), encountering ‘friendly’ whales requires certain types of interaction. For example, splashing your fingers in the water can transform a ‘curious’ whale into a ‘friendly’ one, but these interactions are regulated differently across

⁶⁰ What might be called devilish or friendly behaviour is observable in other species. On attacking and/as agency, see: K. Maglen, “‘An Alligator Got Betty’: Dangerous Animals as Historical Agents”, *Environment and History* **24**(2) (2018): 187-207; J.A. Martin, ‘When Sharks (Don’t) Attack: Wild Animal Agency in Historical Narratives’, *Environmental History* **16**(3) (2011): 451-455.

⁶¹ N. Mathur, *Crooked Cats: Beastly Encounters in the Anthropocene* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), p.103.

national borders.⁶² Combining Mayoral's insights with the historical evidence already discussed reveals a more complicated understanding of the friendly whale phenomenon. Experiencing a friendly whale encounter is not about coming upon an individual, particular whale who happens to be friendly. A person does not happen upon a friendly whale who is swimming along in the water, existing as a 'friendly whale'. Friendliness, devilishness, or various other dispositions are not a static state of being or even personality traits of whales. Friendliness is *co-produced* in encounters between people and whales.

Typically, groups of people go out looking for particular kinds of encounters and take particular actions to make those encounters occur. Meanwhile, some whales will not engage in those encounters in those ways, whilst others might. Finally, for the encounter to be a 'devil-fish' or 'friendly whale' encounter, the human observer or representer must interpret it as such. Thus, this is a multispecies co-produced phenomenon because it requires the agencies of both people and whales, relying on whales participating (or not) in particular ways. Co-production does not mean all actors (human or not) experience encounters equally or even intentionally. More-than-human co-production is imbued with power differentials and divergent motivations.⁶³

Furthermore, classifications, definitions, and interpretations of those encounters depend on viewers' standpoints or perspectives. We cannot know how whales experience these encounters. We can, however, gain insights into the perspectives of those human viewers who document and remember these encounters. Every example explored previously involves not only particular forms of behaviour from whales, but, crucially, *recognition* of that behaviour and

⁶² Francisco 'Pancho' Mayoral, author interview, 19 February 2021.

⁶³ On multispecies co-production, see: E. Giraud and G. Hollin, 'Laboratory Beagles and Affective Co-Productions of Knowledge', in M. Bastian, O. Jones, N. Moore, and E. Roe (eds) *Participatory Research in More-than-Human Worlds* (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), pp.163-177; P. Howell and H. Kean, 'The dogs that didn't bark in the Blitz: transpecies and transpersonal emotional geographies on the British home front', *Journal of Historical Geography* **61** (2018): 44-52.

subsequent *interpretation* of it by human viewers. Some interpret the same actions — for example, approaching boats — as benevolent while others interpret those actions as aggressive. Feminist theorists, historians of science and science and technology studies (STS) scholars have long noted that standpoint necessarily shapes supposedly objective observations of phenomena and is always partial, embodied and positional.⁶⁴ Recognising an encounter with a gray whale as curious, friendly, devilish, disinterested, or any other affective descriptor depends on the observer's standpoint. Different actors do not only interpret differently; what they *see* is quite literally different. Taking these observations beyond the case of gray whales raises significant questions for historians, more-than-human theorists and STS scholars alike. How does the whales' agencies – to reject encounters, or to act in similar ways but that are interpreted differently by different human observers, et cetera – shape their own representations, and how can we work to recognise this other-than-human shaping of human representations in historical materials? What do co-production and differing interpretations of multispecies encounters mean for our broader understandings of agency and more-than-human histories?

NOSTALGIA, REMEMBERING, AND ANTICIPATING GRAY WHALES' FUTURES

A second broader observation from the archival material explored in this article relates to memory, nostalgia and the production of historical narratives. The version of gray whale history I have been describing as the standard narrative emerged in the 1970s and continues in various iterations to this day. This narrative relies on a series of three successive eras of retroactively describing and remembering gray whales. Each of these eras produced new ways of remembering gray whale histories, while implicitly and sometimes explicitly building on prior

⁶⁴ On standpoint theory, see: A. Wylie, 'Feminist Philosophy of Science: Standpoint Matters', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* **86**(2) (2012): 47-76.

eras' nostalgic production of memory, regardless of historic veracity or accuracy. These three phases can be characterised as: 1) Scammon's writings (late nineteenth century), 2) late nineteenth and turn-of-the twentieth century extinction narratives and 3) mid-twentieth century science and travel writing. The standard narrative that emerged in the 1970s was not the first wave of nostalgia, produced merely by the burgeoning mainstream environmental movement, but a new development in a long history of producing versions of gray whales through remembering their histories. This lineage of remembering gray whales – and producing particular versions of gray whale histories through those remembering processes – laid the groundwork for later observers in the 1970s to articulate the now-standard, from devil-fish to friendly whale narrative of gray whale history.

A century after Scammon's book, these forms of nostalgia and interpretations of endangerment coalesced in a newly emerging context. The influence of the save the whales movement and broader developments in environmentalism in the late 1960s and 1970s on the emergence of the devil-fish to friendly whale narrative cannot be underestimated. In 1971, one year before the first documented friendly whale encounter, Mexico protected gray whale habitat, in the first national action to protect the species. In 1972, the US enacted the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Globally, and particularly in the US, this was an era of looking back at the course of Western anthropogenic environmental interventions and rethinking relationships with the environment and other species, particularly whales. The gray whale's rebirth as the friendly whale coincided with a broader reimagining of whales and of imagined ecological pasts within Western thinking. Instead of sea monsters to be feared or fish stocks to be harvested, whales became gentle giants imbued with wisdom and intelligence. Gray whales, as the friendly and apparently *forgiving* whale, thus became the ultimate version of this gentle leviathan – not just

because of their own actions, but because of broader social and cultural changes amongst those people observing, interacting with and invoking memories of them.⁶⁵

CONCLUSIONS

The chronology of gray whales transforming from devil-fishes to friendly whales is not linear. Instead, looking deeper into the history of human-gray whale encounters along the North American Pacific Coast, from the mid-nineteenth century to the contemporary era reveals a much more complicated set of interactions and relations. Gray whales acted in ways that might be interpreted today as friendly whale behaviour throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sometimes, observers publicly interpreted this behaviour as devil-fish behaviour, while other times, as friendly, sociable, or affectionate. Devil-fish behaviour also continued past its supposed decline in the early twentieth century, as observers continued to experience charging, ramming and fast-moving evasive behaviours. Instead of finding out when and how the transition from devil-fish to friendly whale occurred, I found the entire narrative unravelled upon pulling at a few threads.

All these pieces of archival evidence point to a messier set of relationships and a far more complicated story. Yet this is not simply an exercise in proving something wrong or quibbling with the details. The powerful, appealingly clean story of ‘from devil-fish to friendly whale’ influences contemporary tourism economies, conservation and management, research agendas and more. The conservation narrative I have been describing as standard or dominant relies on a certain framing of both the gray whale’s behaviour *and* its relationship to humans; thus, understanding the complexities of both is crucial. As a once-critically-endangered species now

⁶⁵ See footnote 4.

touted as a conservation ‘success story’, how gray whales’ histories are narrated has consequences for conservation decision-making and for applying the lessons of this species’ conservation to other cases. Simply put, this story matters.

I suggest devil-fish and friendly whale behaviour were (and are) non-mutually exclusive possibilities within gray whales’ behavioural repertoire. Moreover, both devil-fish and friendly whale encounters are co-produced phenomena, requiring particular affective, embodied participation from both gray whales and humans alike. Neither devil-fish nor friendly whale behaviour are interpreted universally, even when what would seem to be the same evidence can be observed by different actors. Additionally, just as human actors are not and have never been homogenous or static, so too are *gray whales* dynamic and non-homogenous historical agents. Gray whales are not passive recipients of narratives and discourses but instead actively intervene, undermine and rewrite their own stories. The role gray whale behaviour plays in this study suggests promising lines of inquiry for continuing to address the historiographical challenge of recognising and describing more-than-human historical agency. Re-examining narrations of gray whale history offers an additional way of thinking about the historical significance of a multispecies ‘living terrain of encounter’, as Ryan Tucker Jones describes in the context of Southern Right whales; historically analysing these living terrains of encounter enables fuller understanding of complex more-than-human histories.⁶⁶

Gray whales do not leave behind written records, but they do leave behind footprints – the impression their flukes make on the water after descending for a sounding dive. These footprints metaphorically weave through archives and other historical evidence, showing up unexpectedly, partially, and in ways that depend on the viewer’s interpretation, memory and

⁶⁶ Jones, ‘Whale of a Difference’.

emotional relations with these whales. Affect, emotion and memory are at the heart of what I have described as the standard narrative of gray whale history and conservation. Describing gray whales' trajectory from devil-fish to friendly whale as a sign that they have forgiven humans for the guilty histories of commercial whaling suggests narrators arrive to these sites of potential encounter, or to stories of these encounters, with particular emotions and understandings of environmental history. Far from discounting the role of emotion and memory in shaping both environmental history and the remembering of environmental histories, I find, alongside Dolly Jørgensen and others, an urgent need for examining environmental histories of emotion.⁶⁷ These memories and emotions are powerful and contain not only potential for problematic, overly simplistic understandings of environmental and oceanic histories, but also profound and intimate approaches to grappling with these complicated histories.

With historical gray whale encounters, the intertwining of emotion and memory produces particular ways of remembering environmental histories that have become standard. It is not just that the inaccuracies of the devil-fish to friendly whale stories are problematic. It is that they foreclose other ways of understanding, knowing and encountering gray whales. Instead of asking gray whale to grant 'us' — an implicitly limited, particular 'us' — absolution for the sins of complicated, entangled ecological and social histories, what other possibilities does this long history of varied encounters raise? Human relationships with gray whales have always been messier than the dominant narrative arc suggests. Engaging with this messiness is crucial for shaping human gray-whale relationships into the future.

⁶⁷ D. Jørgensen, *Recovering Lost Species in the Modern Age: Histories of Longing and Belonging* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019); cf., Adler, *Neptune's Laboratory*; A. Gaynor, S. Broomhall, and A. Flack, 'Frogs and Feeling Communities: A Study in History of Emotions and Environmental History', *Environment and History* **28**(1) (2022): 83-104; Howell and Kean, 'Dogs didn't bark'.

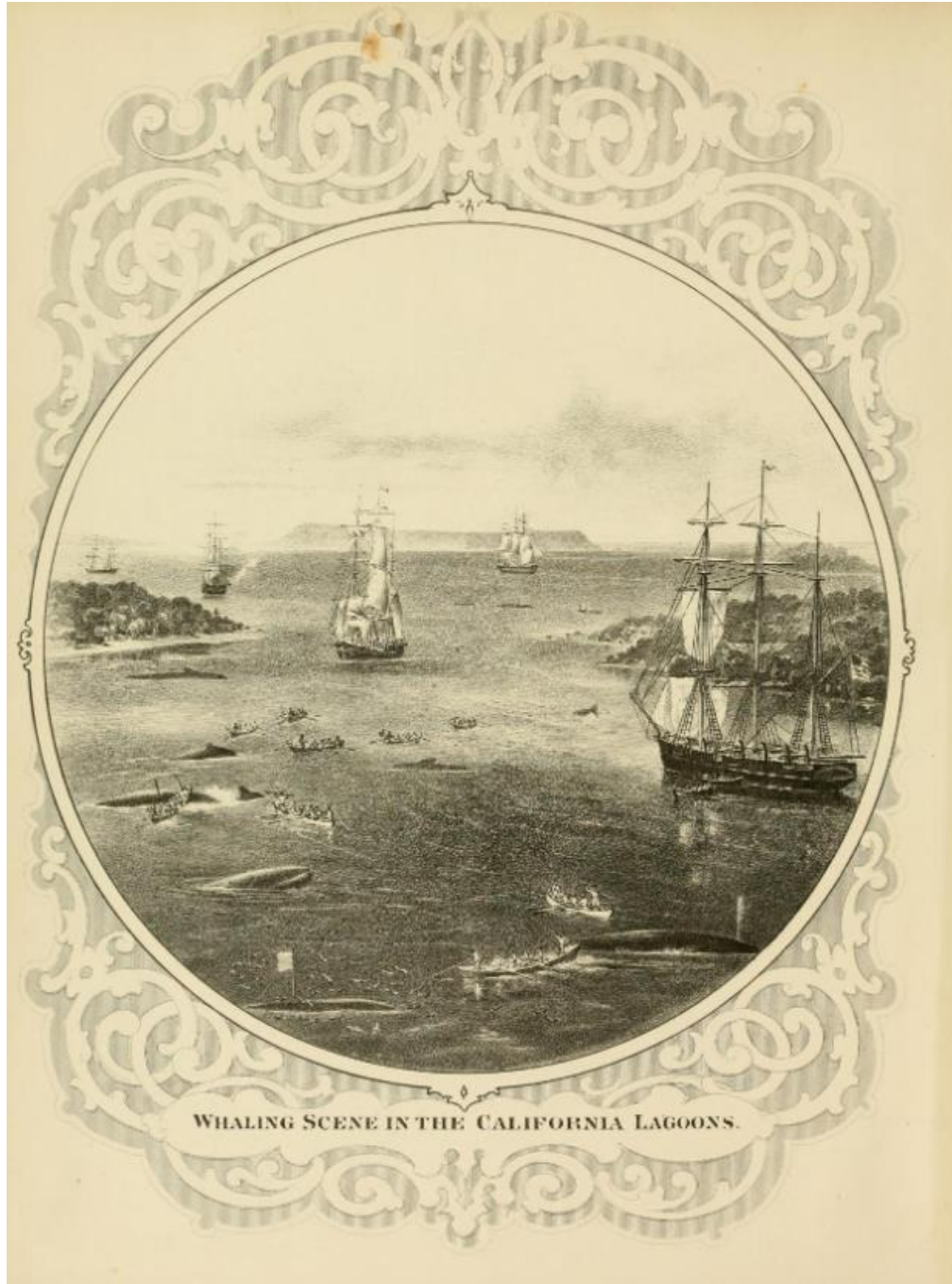


Figure 1. Whaling Scene in the California Lagoons, Charles Melville Scammon, 1874. Source: Smithsonian Libraries/Biodiversity Heritage Library (Public Domain).