The gray whale is the official California marine mammal, having edged out the sea otter for the position in 1976. There were once three stocks of gray whales—one in the Atlantic Ocean, long extinct; one in the western Pacific; and a third in the eastern Pacific.

The species makes well-documented seasonal migrations up and down the state’s coast and beyond, from the warm, shallow waters of Mexico to the nutrient-rich waters of Alaska. During their 19,300-kilometer (12,000-mile) journey, gray whales are often spotted from shore, making them a favorite of whale-watching companies. They are easily identified by their dark gray color, lumpy back, heart-shaped spout, and absent dorsal fin. They grow up to 15 meters (49 feet) long.

Gray whales are known to feed on at least 85 different species. They specialize in bottom feeding, focusing on amphipods—small, shrimp-like organisms that live in tube structures in mud. They also ingest other mud-dwelling invertebrates, including tube worms and mollusks.

To feed on these creatures, whales suck in water and mud and separate food
morsels using their broom-like baleen plates. They then push the excess water and mud back into the ocean by using their tongue to scrape food from the baleen.

As bottom feeders, gray whales prefer shallow waters and therefore migrate near the coast. Mothers birth one calf at a time, nursing them in the warm, shallow waters near Baja California, Mexico.

Unfortunately, some of these characteristics of gray whales nearly led to their demise.

Alisa Schulman-Janiger is the gray whale census director for the Los Angeles, California, chapter of the American Cetacean Society. She says the hunting of gray whales in Baja California lagoons during the late 1800s and early 1900s was devastating.

“The single biggest thing is that gray whales were targeted in their nursing lagoons,” she says. “So the whalers would go into the lagoons and kill the pregnant mothers, the nursing mothers, and the calves would die also.”

Eastern Pacific gray whales were hunted to near extinction in the mid-1800s and again in the early 1900s. Their blubber produced oil used for lamps. The animals were easily accessible to whalers because they remained close to the coast. The species became overhunted in Southern California and Mexico. As populations rebounded in the 1920s, whalers used “floating factories” to process the whales out at sea.

Today, Pacific gray whales are protected by international organizations and several government agencies. The International Whaling Commission (IWC) was established in 1946 to regulate whaling throughout the world’s oceans. Gray whales received protections from the IWC in 1947. In the United States, the animals are further protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act and Endangered Species Act. Mexico transformed some of Baja California’s major
breeding and nursing lagoons into a protected refuge zone.

Limited whaling is still practiced by indigenous peoples in Alaska, Canada, and Mexico. There have also been some reports of illegal whaling by nations that do not accept IWC treaties.

After being near extinction in the 1950s, the gray whale population in the eastern Pacific has rebounded to an estimated 19,000 animals, considered to be a healthy stock. In 1994, the gray whale was “de-listed,” or removed from the Endangered Species List.

Unfortunately, gray whales in the western Pacific, vulnerable to whalers from Japan and Russia, have not fared as well—their population remains at just under 100 animals.

“The steps that they [the IWC] took in the case of the western gray whale mostly weren’t taken soon enough,” Schulman-Janiger says. “For the eastern Pacific gray whales, those steps plus other laws that were passed by the United States to protect them along their migratory route has really, really helped tremendously.”

Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Part of Speech</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>amphipod</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>aquatic animal (crustacean) similar to shrimp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlantic</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>one of Earth's four oceans, separating Europe and Africa from North and South America.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blubber</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>thick layer of fat under the skin of marine mammals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>calf</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>baby whale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>climate</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>gradual changes in all the interconnected weather elements on our planet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coast</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>edge of land along the sea or other large body of water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Part of Speech</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>crustacean</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>type of animal (an arthropod) with a hard shell and segmented body that usually lives in the water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decade</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>10 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>demise</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>death or end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endangered Species</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>(1973) U.S. legislation that protects endangered species when they are threatened by human activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entangle</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>to tangle or twist together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>estimate</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>to guess based on knowledge of the situation or object.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extinct</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>no longer existing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extinction</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>process of complete disappearance of a species from Earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>material, usually of plant or animal origin, that living organisms use to obtain nutrients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>habitat</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>environment where an organism lives throughout the year or for shorter periods of time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>illegal</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>forbidden by law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indigenous</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>ethnic group that has lived in the same region for all of their known history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>group of national governments that decides the rules for whaling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whaling Commission</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>invertebrate</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>animal without a spine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lagoon</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>shallow body of water that may have an opening to a larger body of water, but is also protected from it by a sandbar or coral reef.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>law</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>public rule.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>migrate</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>to move from one place or activity to another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mollusk</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>type of invertebrate animal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>female parent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mud</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>wet soil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Term</strong></td>
<td><strong>Part of Speech</strong></td>
<td><strong>Definition</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nurse</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>person who cares for the sick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ocean</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>large body of salt water that covers most of the Earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outlaw</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>to make illegal or against the law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overhunt</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>to capture and kill enough animals to reduce their breeding population below sustainable levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Ocean</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>one of Earth's four oceans, bordered by North America, South America, Australia, Asia, and Antarctica.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>population</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>total number of people or organisms in a particular area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prevent</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>to keep something from happening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>profitable</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>able to make money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rebound</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>to bounce back or recover from a downfall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salt mine</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>industrial site where salt is extracted from deposits within the Earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sea otter</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>marine mammal with thick fur native to the Pacific Ocean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seasonal</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>capable of being hurt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>migration</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>type of marine worm that cannot leave its protective tube.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shallow</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>movement of animals or other organisms determined by the changing weather or seasons, or in response to labor or climate conditions. For animals, seasonal migration usually refers to movement to a warmer climate during the winter and a cooler climate during the summer. For humans, seasonal migration may happen because of drivers such as crop and livestock management or tourism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shore</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>coast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stock</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>supply.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>treaty</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>official agreement between groups of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tube worm</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>largest marine mammal species.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whaling</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>industry of hunting whales.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Audio & Video

- National Geographic News: Grisly Whaling Video Released

Worksheets & Handouts

- International Whaling Commission: Review of the status of the western North Pacific gray whale

Websites

- International Whaling Commission

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