

# TALES OF THE NORTH PACIFIC



Using a crossbow, Mate attaches a radio transmitter to a blue whale (in 1994). He pioneered the use of satellite tags. Early ones, attached with a pole, weighed four pounds. Today's look like steel darts and weigh five and a half ounces. The don't harm the animals, he says. Photo: Flip Nicklin

Whale researchers spend many of their days working in offices and laboratories, and many others searching a seemingly endless ocean. But there are fascinating interludes and there's even high adventure. Here are a few examples:

Bruce Mate will never forget a night on a 150-foot-long National Science Foundation ship in the Chukchi Sea, north of the Bering Strait. Most scientists aboard were studying the life histories of marine mammals. There were five dead seals on the back of the deck.

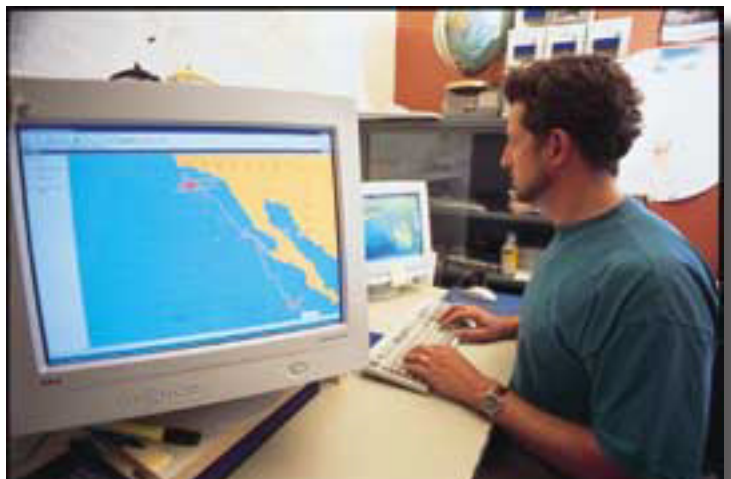
"We were adrift more than a mile from the nearest ice floe," he says. "About 2 a.m., someone on watch called the lab where I was working and said a white whale had just passed the boat. I was excited. I thought it was a beluga whale and hurried out to the side of the ship to look over the side." Mate could feel the polar bear's breath. "The bear was climbing aboard within three feet of where I stood and took a swipe at me," he says. "This is a creature that can pull a seal through a six-inch breathing hole in the ice-break every bone and eat it like an ear of corn. It was a gut-wrenching, visceral experience for me." Mate screamed and apparently that scared the polar bear. By the time others rushed out the bear was in the water swimming around.

Mary Lou Mate recalls a day in Hawaii when she,

Bruce and Barb Lagerquist came up on a tiger shark trying to eat a huge sea turtle. "It would take the turtle under with each bite. The turtle was exhausted," she recalls. "But the shark couldn't bite through the shell. We were rooting for the turtle. You root for the underdog. But that's nature. We don't know how it ended. We had to leave before it was over to go try and tag some more whales."

"One of my neatest moments," Barb says, "was the first time I tagged gray whales in Baja with Bruce. Our crew was camping by a bay. I lost the coin toss and got up at 2 a.m. to turn the tags on. You feel like you're all alone in the world, and then you hear these whales out there. It sounded like the pressure in a steam pipe letting off. There's nothing else in the world like it."

Bruce is a little shy about it, but with prodding he recounts the day two male gray whales tried to mate with a female who resisted by positioning herself belly-up under his raft. The males were on each side and not deterred, with their bright pink, seven-foot you know whats in the raft. "Those males were focused and they didn't pay any attention to us," says Mate. "We joked about OSU producing the largest contraceptive in history."



At the Hatfield Marine Science Center, computer specialist Tomas Follett monitors the travels of "Kelly," a blue whale tagged off California that could be headed for the "Costa Rican Dome," a remote, open-ocean location Bruce Mate believes could be a breeding and calving site. Photo: Lynn Ketchum