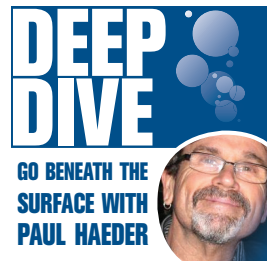


From Colombia to the Oregon Coast

International scientist moors his work on whales at Newport

‘**N**ew information breakthroughs for me are exhilarating. Working with all that whale data is like looking into the dark with a flashlight. It’s work that is able to contribute new information to the field.’ — OSU Whale Researcher, Daniel Palacios

Whaling’s first commercial iteration with harpoons started in Japan around 1570. With many more nations participating in killing whales for exploitation throughout the following centuries — seeking oil, blubber, flesh and other body parts — by the turn of the 20th Century, many of the 90 species of whales were on a steep decline, endangered or near extinction.



For one Oregon State University research faculty member of the Marine Mammal Institute, the cetacean is his passion, his life. Daniel Palacios became intellectually and spiritually connected to

cetaceans after seeing the iconic humpback whale banners and picket signs deployed on Earth Day, while religiously watching the series “The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau.”

Two-parts passion, one-part inspiration and three-parts intellectual drive propelled him to where he is today — researching the pathways, habitats and health of Earth’s largest animals.

The harpoon this 50-year-old scientist throws is outfitted with both a satellite tracking tag and small biopsy plug extractor, not to harvest whale meat, but rather to collect valuable data on what whales do, what they eat, where they go and, in future research projects, measure their overall physical health.

Palacios has been working with teams collecting the information on sperm, humpback, Gray, fin, blue and other whale species to determine their range and pelagic journeys throughout the Pacific coastal upwelling, all the way down to the Gulf of California.

“One of my drivers is discovery and knowledge, what you could say is strict hardcore science . . . pure analytical and statistically important science,” he tells me while we share coffee at a café in the Wilder community near Oregon Coast Community College.

Early Dreams in South America

Palacios’ love and interest in science started young — five or six years of age while growing up in landlocked Bogotá. His parents (an engineer father and lawyer mother) bought him encyclopedias and books on animals. “I was continuously reading about African animals. I was mesmerized.”

He stresses living in an urban and cosmopolitan capital city was like being worlds away from his own country’s swath of Amazon rainforest.



HANNAH O’LEARY/OSU

“The Amazon jungle would have been like Africa to me growing up in a big city. Our world was so disconnected from the natural world. We had no sense of the ocean or the Amazon.”

Some 45 years later — traversing his early curiosity attending a Catholic school in a city of 7 million, to now, with all those titles and associations from OSU (“PhD/ Endowed Associate Professor in Whale Habitats/ Whale Telemetry Group/ Marine Mammal Institute and Dept. of Fisheries & Wildlife”) — Palacios has kept his eye on the proverbial prize of being a marine scientist.

He said his parents sacrificed to put him and his three sisters into the best schools they could afford. His grandparents came from humble beginnings in rural Colombia not far from Bogotá. He reminisces about this K-12 experience where he was taught math, physics and liberation theology — a philosophy that measures helping the poor and understanding the plight of the underprivileged tied to capitalism’s great class divide as part of religious enlightenment.

This Calasanz school from the Escolapios Order bore the name of the Spanish founder, who went to Rome in

the 1500s to teach the very privileged and, on his daily crossing back over the Tiber River, saw the poverty and disadvantaged circumstance of the masses.

“In Bogotá, they would send us to a sister school for the poor and we’d help teach the kids. Even though it was a religious school, going to college my first two years was a walk in the park. We were really well prepared by the priests.”

Meeting of the Whale Minds

Currently, Palacios spends most of his time analyzing all the data from satellite tags and biopsies from humpback whales. He likes the vigorous, meticulous nature of this work, even though 90 percent of his time is not working with whales directly in their habitat.

I first met Palacios at the American Cetacean Society monthly meeting in Newport. It was his 15 minutes of fame with his PowerPoint in front of a packed room at the public library. “This is actually the second time I have presented to the ACS. Something like 17 years ago, in Monterey.”

Monterey was his home for more than a decade, and his boss was NOAA (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) as he was tasked to answer why these humpbacks are in abundance in this upwelling ecosystem of Northern California, and to determine their migratory patterns and territorial range.

“My dream was to work with these people studying this classic upwelling ecosystem,” he said.

As he shows slides and wonderful images of humpbacks to us naturalists who are interested in science, yes, and informed but not steeped in hard science, he states he understands the allure of the charismatic whale.

“All these people who have a strong affinity to whales are genuinely interested in their plight which makes funding the OSU foundation and endowment easier.” It turns out one of Palacios’ mentors, OSU’s Bruce Mate, was a forerunner in getting the general public to support their work. That donor base serves as a buffer, helping Palacios and others at the Marine Mammal Institute continue their work collecting and analyzing so much data from satellite tags.

He later tells me that while he has authored 75 professional journal articles in periodicals such as *Marine Mammal Science* (through the Society for Marine Mammalogy), he realizes few read these rarefied publications; whereas, the real passion and interest in his field rests with whale watchers, naturalists, eco-tourists and writers.

Palacios counts his lucky stars and serendipity in his life: “I am at a place beyond my wildest dreams. I’ve received so much support, and where I’ve gotten to is due to the generosity of many people.”

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Paul Haeder is a writer living and working in Lincoln County. He has two books coming out, one a short story collection, “Wide Open Eyes: Surfacing from Vietnam,” and a non-fiction book, “No More Messing Around: The Good, Bad and Ugly of America’s Education System.”