

Whalefest: Youngsters enjoy learning the ropes



Nina Rosen of Marine Life Studies helps Mike Moncla, 5, of Carmel operate a carabiner on Sunday during the sixth annual Whalefest Monterey 2016 at Old Fisherman's Wharf. Vernon McKnight — Herald Correspondent

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Marine Life Studies executive director Peggy Stap demonstrates how to reset a carabiner.
Vernon McKnight — Herald Correspondent

Monterey >> Climate change, entangled whales, underwater robots, marine-related camps for kids and ocean pollution. Those were some of the subjects of booths at the sixth annual Whalefest Monterey 2016 over the weekend at Monterey's Fisherman's Wharf.

It was a virtual cornucopia of information on marine life and activities in and around the Monterey Bay Marine Sanctuary. You could stroke pelts from otters and seals, touch a piece of whale baleen, learn how to identify marine mammals and how to report a basking shark sighting.

One of the most popular booths was one for a robotics camp for kids. Youngsters could operate miniature remote-controlled underwater robots in a tank of water while trying to catch a plastic toy shark.

"Look, I caught it," a boy shouted to his father.

"I didn't see it," the father replied.

"I caught it, I caught it," the boy insisted.

At a Marine Life Studies booth you could use a long pole to attach a tracking buoy to a small replica of a whale entangled in fishing gear. After a boy completed the task he displayed a wide smile.

“Great,” said a Marine Life Studies volunteer. “You just helped save a whale.”

Marine Life Studies, a nonprofit group which is involved in research, education and conservation, has a whale entanglement team (WET). The team was started from scratch in 2006. It has been involved in freeing a number of whales from fishing gear in Monterey Bay.

Executive director Peggy Stap was among those who organized the team. The Michigan native saw her first whale at age 41 in 1996 when she visited Maui and went whale watching. The experience changed her life.

Stap sold her business in Michigan, moved to Maui and volunteered with the Oceanic Society Whale and Dolphin Research Expedition. More than five years ago, she moved to Monterey because, “There are more whales and dolphins here,” she said.

Whale entanglement teams began on the East Coast, and Stap was surprised there were none in the Monterey Bay area. The Monterey Bay team started with a permit from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and a small boat. Volunteers assembled equipment, including cutting tools and buoys with electronic sensors to track the entangled whales until the gear can be freed.

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With a \$150,000 donation and a \$60,000 loan from one of its volunteers, Marine Life Studies purchased a 40-foot boat that is moored in Moss Landing. The larger boat gives the team room to store its gear and allows it to stay with an entangled whale longer.

The team must get permission from NOAA to respond to an entanglement. They work to disentangle a whale from the boat only, not in the water. There were 25 reports of entanglements in Northern California last year, 21 of them in the Monterey Bay Sanctuary, Stap said.

“We’re just the Band-Aid,” Stap said of the team. She said fishermen get a bad rap because of the entanglements but they are working hard to solve the problem. Marine Life Studies’ entanglement team, Stap said, receives help from fishermen, whale-watching boat operators, the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute and others. It is funded by grants and donations and has no paid staff.

What’s it like freeing an entangled whale? “For me it just touches something inside of you,” Stap said. “It’s nice to know that the whale can go on and live a natural life.”

To report an entangled whale, call 877-767-9425.

On a more somber note, climate change is affecting whales’ food sources. Steve Webster, former senior biologist at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, said ice sheets are disappearing at the North and South poles.

Krill, the main source of food for baleen whales, feed on algae under the ice sheets. Their waste feeds creatures on the sea floor on which gray whales feed. As habitat for krill and algae dwindle, the whales will dwindle too. Webster said the number of gray whales has shrunk.

Climate change is caused by the burning of fossil fuels. This results in global warming and ice melt. The result, he cautioned, will be higher sea levels. Add to that the increasing alkalinity of ocean water and the problem is even more severe.

“If we in the next 10 to 20 years don’t do something the resulting repercussions can be catastrophic ...,” Webster said. “We need to get serious about this.”

For more information on climate change, Webster recommended these websites: www.berkeleyearth.com; www.citizenclimatelobby.org; and www.350.org.