

Marine Conservation

An Interview with Kristie Wrigglesworth, Executive Director, Pacific Whale Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE *Kristie Wrigglesworth is the Executive Director of Pacific Whale Foundation. She has been a lifelong advocate for animals and is passionately committed to protecting marine mammals and their environment. Wrigglesworth obtained her BA degree in law and justice from Central Washington University and her JD cum laude from Seattle University, where she studied animal law. She is licensed to practice law in Washington State and the State of Hawaii.*



Kristie Wrigglesworth

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *Pacific Whale Foundation (pacificwhale.org) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 1980 to protect the ocean through science and advocacy and inspire environmental stewardship. Its vision is to be the people's environmental organization for the protection of the world's whales, dolphins and other marine animals living wild in their natural habitats. The organization is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors and its work is funded through fundraising activities, memberships and donations from supporters worldwide.*

Will you highlight the history and heritage of Pacific Whale Foundation and how you define its mission?

Organically rooted in environmental advocacy, Pacific Whale Foundation (PWF) was founded in 1980 by Greg Kaufman as a nonprofit research, education and conservation organization with 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status. After graduating from the University of the Pacific, Greg immediately became involved in field studies and conservation efforts to protect humpback whales. Fueled by unbridled passion, his advocacy efforts led to the cessation of whaling in Tonga in 1997 – three years prior to the establishment of the nonprofit organization that today reaches more than 400,000 people annually in a typical year.

Armed only with a small inflatable boat, a second-hand camera and a colossal dream, Greg initiated photo-identification studies of humpback whales in Maui Nui (the “Four-Island” region comprising Maui, Kaho’olawe, Lana’i and Moloka’i). Through agreements with local tourism boats, the nonprofit sponsored whale watches while informing passengers about

its important work. This tactic led to the creation in 1986 of PacWhale Eco-Adventures, a for-profit marine tourism subsidiary wholly owned by PWF that significantly altered the future of the organization.

Supported through memberships, donations, charitable grants, social enterprise PacWhale Eco-Adventures and dedicated supporters, Pacific Whale Foundation has since evolved into a respected global thought leader in marine conservation with a mission to protect the ocean through science and advocacy and inspire environmental stewardship.

What are the key initiatives and programs of the Pacific Whale Foundation?

Through applied research, in which all PWF research studies and publications directly impact and support our conservation advocacy and education programs, we provide science-based strategies designed to conserve global populations of whales and dolphins. Since 1980, our researchers have published more than 100 peer-reviewed publications, reports and books designed to advance our knowledge and inform better management of the world's cetaceans. Our North Pacific humpback whale photo-ID catalog, featuring more than 4,730 individual documented whales, is shared with research collaborators around the world.

We believe that education is a very important part of our mission. Not only did we connect 142,584 people with the marine environment last year through eco-tours on Maui and in Australia, we also inspired the ocean protectors of tomorrow through our robust youth education programs. In spite of the global pandemic, we successfully impacted 7,396 adults and school-aged children through virtual and hybrid marine education platforms.

Providing formal public testimony, such as opposing an extension on the plastic foodware ban in Hawaii and supporting the restricted use of disposable body boards in Maui County, is an important part of Pacific Whale Foundation's advocacy work. Testimony is submitted on a variety of ocean-related issues, both locally in Hawaii and around the world. This year alone, we submitted a total of 17 testimony, comments and support letters. Our Conservation Program also encourages eco-friendly measures such as

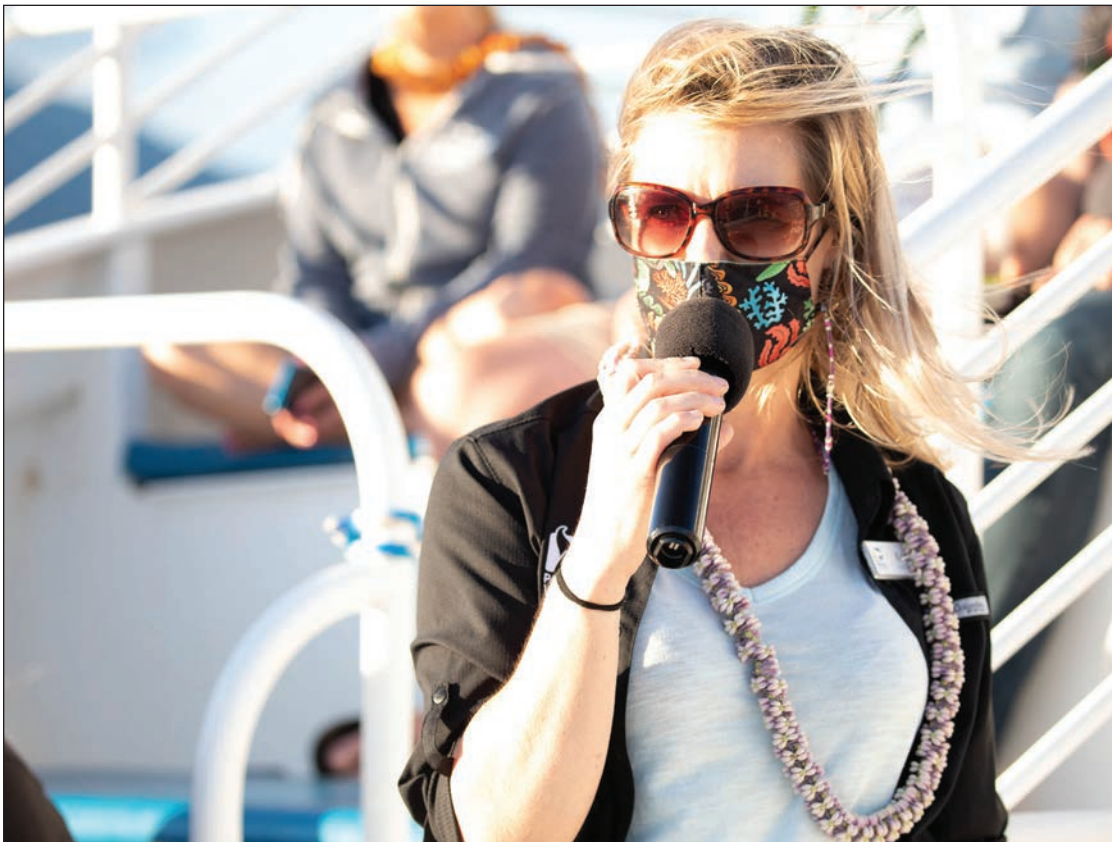
limiting single-use plastics and selecting sustainable seafood. We are immensely proud of our Coastal Marine Debris Monitoring Program and our new Adopt a Beach Program. Through these initiatives, approximately 22,770 individual pieces of trash were removed in 2020 from beaches throughout Maui and neighboring Hawaiian Islands, as well as Canada and select mainland U.S. states.

What do you see as the biggest concerns in protecting the oceans and what are the keys to driving sustainable impact in these efforts?

In general, we focus our energy, resources and research efforts on understanding and developing mitigation strategies for our determined five major threats – underregulated tourism, ship strikes, marine debris, climate change and fishing gear/fisheries interactions – endangering cetaceans worldwide.

Educating the public about unsustainable fishing practices is also paramount to our mission. Bycatch – the incidental catch of nontargeted species resulting in mortality or serious injury – is an overarching fisheries issue. The U.S. Ocean Commission has named incidental catch as the biggest threat to marine mammals worldwide. Much of our ongoing research in this area targets operational or direct interactions in which marine mammals come into physical contact with fishing gear, often resulting in injury or death due to entanglement or entrapment. In Ecuador, the use of marine mammals in fish aggregating devices (FADs), which is technically illegal and highly dangerous to target animals, is of particular concern. While there remains a desperate need for universal support of sustainable fisheries and fishing practices, we believe that goal can be realized through conscientious consumer demand.

Species suffering frequent interactions with fishing gear are at risk of rapid decline, eventually leading to extinction. In Hawaii, our primary research species is the endangered false killer whale, which is part of the dolphin family. With fewer than 150 individuals left, if nothing is done soon, these sea mammals will become extinct within my daughter's lifetime. Our current research contributes to NOAA's False Killer Whale Recovery Plan and is focused on determining the actual degree of risk to the entire population versus clusters of this endangered population to better target our conservation and advocacy efforts.



Kristie Wrigglesworth working on behalf of Pacific Whale Foundation

Another major threat addressed through our research, education and conservation efforts is marine debris – a huge problem for the world’s oceans and waterways that demands immediate attention. Our most recent research found that a smoking ban enacted several years ago on Maui beaches has not proven effective. The quantity of cigarette filters, which contain non-biodegradable plastic known as cellulose acetate and can leach toxic chemicals into the surrounding environment, did not appreciably decline. The findings from this study will inform our advocacy for compliance requirements and enforcement at the state and local level.

Finally, as climate change warms the ocean and contributes to significant behavioral changes in marine species, our vital research on humpback whale body condition and migration in Hawaii, Australia and Ecuador will help us advocate for additional protected areas that support migratory routes and essential breeding grounds.

Will you highlight some of Pacific Whale Foundation’s recent research and its focus on advocacy?

Our primary research focus currently is on under-regulated ocean tourism. Fortunately, captive whales and dolphins used solely for commercial entertainment purposes is losing its luster. Rather than supporting such exploitation, more and more consumers prefer to view these beautiful creatures in their natural environment. This is understandably better for the animal and also offers a richer experience for the consumer; to fully connect with a specific animal, observing it in its natural state provides the quintessential learning opportunity. Ocean tourism, a huge, rapidly expanding industry,

must be properly regulated to avoid potentially harmful consequences.

A recent uptick in swimming-with-whales, a commercial activity that is generally more invasive than traditional boat-based whale watching, is one example of how ocean tourism can have dire results. In response to this emerging visitor draw, our researchers and research partners are conducting and advocating for studies that illuminate the potential harm to humpback whales – and human participants, on occasion – from this activity. Resulting from our recently published Australia study, we have proposed new “swim-with” guidelines and are launching a public awareness campaign in 2022. Furthermore, our next two publications will address operator compliance with respect to these guidelines and explore consumer support for this type of activity.

In Hawaii, three of our published studies were instrumental in mitigating whale and vessel collisions through a voluntary speed limit and establishing approach limits and time area closures for dolphins, ensuring that vessels don’t disturb dolphins during critical rest periods needed to engage in night feeding and to reproduce. Our ongoing research in Ecuador, where ocean tourism is poorly regulated, is vital in assessing the health of the humpback whale population through abundance estimates and creating vessel-operator training that we provide annually during whale season.

In addition to donors, members, grants and other revenue streams, our innovative social enterprise structure is key in funding and supporting PWF’s extensive research projects. As the sole owner and shareholder of PacWhale Eco-Adventures, which has offered ocean

eco-tours and whale watches for more than 40 years, PWF has been able to study whale and dolphin traits and behaviors almost daily while championing conservation-led guidelines and regulations applicable to the ocean tourism industry as a whole.

Will you discuss Pacific Whale Foundation’s commitment to diversity and inclusion?

Pacific Whale Foundation believes that diversity and inclusion are crucial for long-term success and achievement of our mission to protect the ocean through science and advocacy and inspire environmental stewardship. The complicated issues threatening our marine environments will never be prioritized and effectively addressed without first achieving equity and inclusion in our communities and businesses. Our employees, board of directors, consultants/advisors, supporters and program participants are committed to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Leadership, staff from all PWF levels and BIPOC voices are making big system changes at the organization. We are currently involved in a two-year Working Towards Racial Equity Program supported by the National Science Foundation and facilitated by The Lawrence Hall of Science at UC Berkeley and the Justice Outside Organization. There are many opportunities for us to move forward in this direction, and we are committed to do our part to achieve racial justice.

Did you always know that you were attracted to this type of work and that this was your passion?

My passion has always been in the area of animal rights and protection, but I was also drawn to child welfare and family services when I was younger. I thought I might have ended up in private legal practice, but I made the switch to the nonprofit sector nine years ago and never looked back. I love the work, but the best thing about it is working with great people for a worthy cause. I followed my heart and took a big risk, and it brought me to my dream job. I am so grateful to the founder of the organization, Greg Kaufman, for being an incredible visionary, and for current Board Chair Wayne White and Vice Chair MK Rosack for giving me a chance to lead and live my passion.

How do you measure success for Pacific Whale Foundation when you are addressing an issue that does not have a quick fix and requires a long-term approach?

When we are dealing with complicated and developing global problems, such as climate change, it can be overwhelming and defeating. However, success is achieved by seeing through the problem and focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. Small wins must be celebrated, because small wins add up to big wins and create momentum to achieve long-term solutions. I believe success is best measured through engagement of others, strong partnerships, changes in policy and voluntary guidelines, and research findings that can be applied to conservation actions that further protect the ocean and our precious whales and dolphins. ●