

Whales of Guerrero: Learning Exchange in Baja California

The Barra to Baja Learning Exchange is a fact-finding mission to southern Baja California to meet peers who have saved local waters through marine conservation efforts. It will be like a visit in the future for the local opinion leaders of Barra de Potosí, many of whom have never been more than 50 miles from home.



Report by Katherina Audley

A group of delegates from Barra de Potosí, a fishing village in Guerrero, Mexico, completed a learning exchange in Baja California, and has committed to creating an actionable, community-backed five-year plan for marine restoration and a healthier community by February 2020 as a result of the experience.

The 14 travelers from Guerrero, Mexico represent all sectors of their community: men, women, youth, elders, fishermen, tour guides and restaurant owners. The intensive learning exchange was undertaken with community members in Laguna San Ignacio, Agua Verde and Cabo Pulmo. Subjects the delegates learned about included: functional community organization and infrastructures, how to improve communication and run productive meetings, best whale watch

practices, oyster aquaculture, women's cooperatives, best ecotourism practices, no take zones (fish sanctuaries) and Natural Protected Areas. All trip participants grew as individuals and community leaders and our region's communities and marine environment are already beginning to benefit as a result of this expedition.

A first step was in May 2018 an 8-day planning trip to 4 key sites in Baja with 3 key community leaders and project director, Katherina Audley and Melissa Luna, a neighboring community partner supporting social impact in the region. The planning trip with key delegates created strong buy-in and cultivated leadership in community leaders. The full exchange in February 2019 was more impactful due to relationships created between community leaders in the Baja and Guerrero communities during planning trip.

The three community members who made this planning trip changed their behaviors on a local level (for example, by eliminating the use of single use plastic and Styrofoam in their homes and businesses, increasing efforts to pick up garbage), became strong vocal advocates for collaboration and prioritizing the common good in meetings with their fishing and tourism coops. The expedition seemed to have ‘flipped a switch’ in the delegates toward committed marine stewardship and community organization advocacy having seen firsthand how functional community organizations and long term marine conservation commitments can benefit a community.

The informational resources (digital pictures and short documentaries) created during and after the planning trip were effective and useful materials that we used repeatedly (and continue to use) during village presentations and meetings.

The next step was to create awareness about learning exchange opportunity in community and empower community to select most appropriate delegates for larger exchange in winter 2019. Therefore, we organized six planning trips, community presentations and events and workshops in Barra de Potosi, Guerrero to prepare for impactful learning exchange in Baja 2019 and keep community interest and engagement high.

Nine additional delegates selected by community to undertake learning exchange in 2019 based on information and learning objectives established by the community. The planning trips, presentations and workshops were essential to keeping key delegate participation and commitment high. The entire community knew about the opportunity and felt included and even those who were not able to attend the expedition felt that they were valued participants in the process. Delegates were selected by the community and represented a good sample of interests and demographics. Travelers had time to prepare themselves for the expedition and undertook the journey with clear understanding of expectations and the tasks at hand.

Through this project we facilitated a learning exchange for community representatives from Guerrero to meet with and learn from Baja communities which have reversed marine conservation threats and challenges through participatory actions, community organization and collaboration.

We organized an eight-day fishermen/ecotourism learning exchange between 12 community leaders in Baja California Sur and Barra de Po-



The tour of the restricted areas and the fishing cooperative in Agua Verde inspired the whole group.

tosí, México and 2 WGRP team members as well as 60+ meetings in 3 communities (Cabo Pulmo, Agua Verde and Laguna San Ignacio). Barra de Potosí travelers were male and female, ages 12-57, and represented all aspects of the village social and economic fabric. Paradigms explored were: Natural Protected Areas, No-take fishing sanctuaries, community-run vigilance programs, safe whale watching, sustainable ecotourism, women’s art cooperatives, women-owned restaurants and tourism businesses, children’s conservation programs, community information centers, recycling, oyster aquaculture, community organization and development processes, collaborating with NGOs, marine ecotourism and new forms of ecotourism.

A village member and documentarist photographed and filmed the entire exchange and made a series of short videos and presentations

for delegates to present to the community upon their return. All travelers were also interviewed via video on the last day of the exchange.

Traveler engagement was high during the entire trip. All travelers awoke early and stayed up late talking about plans, next steps and what they could bring back to their own community from each location. Longstanding rifts between community members were set aside during the expedition and the entire group took every op-

The opportunity to observe the best whale watch guides in the world in San Ignacio Lagoon as they navigated their boats through gray whale-filled lagoons reinforced our nascent culture of responsible whale watching among the most experienced guides in our region.

The women who joined in the expedition found their voices, some for the first time, and returned to Barra de Potosi empowered leaders who eliminated the use of single use plastic in our annual



The participants of Barra de Potosí are men and women aged 12-57 years and represent the social and economic fabric of

the village.

portunity to learn that they were given.

Perceptions about safe whale watching, no-take zones, Natural Protected Areas, community organization and development, the role of women in advancing conservation, oyster aquaculture, recycling, the role and use of NGOs, and how ecotourism can benefit (and harm) communities changed dramatically during the exchange. Even the travelers who were strongly opposed to the concept of NPAs before the expedition and became committed advocates of them early on in the expedition.

Observing no-take zones and a well-managed fishing coop in Agua Verde inspired the entire group to request further exploration and capacity building opportunities to see if we can implement something similar in our region.

village art fair and brokered the purchase of biodegradable straws to replace plastic straws in all of the beach restaurants.

The entire group was reminded again and again that with unity and a clear, shared vision anything is possible and change is possible but takes time and patience. All participants completed the exchange with a strong commitment to participate in on-going meetings upon completion of the journey to bring some of the new ideas experienced in Baja to Guerrero. All participants began to see themselves as leaders in the community and took on more active roles in advancing conservation upon their return to Guerrero.

Next steps: The exchange and planning trips funded by Lighthouse Foundation have ignited a commitment from our community in Barra de Potosí to restore their degraded marine envi-

ronment and to prioritize activities that promote unity and advance marine conservation. The next step is to define a clear vision and strategy and cultivate buy-in from the extended and neighboring communities. Whales of Guerrero is committed to continuing to work with the Barra de Potosi community toward co-developing a marine management plan, facilitating further, deeper learning exchanges, and building trust between neighboring communities. Now is the time to leverage the motivation and energy that the delegates bring back from Baja. If we are able to secure funds to continue our work in the region, it is reasonable to expect that we will have a community-backed marine management plan ready to implement by 2023.

Funding period:

since 2017

Funding 2019:

12.399 EUR

Project partner:

Katherina Audley, Project Director
Whales of Guerrero Research Project
9815 N. Syracuse Street,
Portland, OR 97203 USA

Project Location:

Barra de Potosí, Guerrero, SW Pacific México