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Protecting Baja's AQUATIC TREASURES

*Shining a Light on Conservation
in the Sea of Cortez.*

~by Ardith Stephanson | photos by Michele Roux~

It has been said that without darkness, there is no light. For Michele Roux, the darkness of the global pandemic shone a light on an opportunity that changed her life. Roux, a professional photographer, left her native Argentina nine years ago. She lived in various locations, and finally landed in Mexico, first in Cancun and then in Los Cabos in 2019. Then the global pandemic hit, and the world shut down.

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“I came just to document the migration of humpback whales, and then the pandemic hit, and I had to stay,” Roux explains. “Then I discovered the Sea of Cortez, which I love. The marine life is so amazing.”

Being “trapped” in Los Cabos opened the door to Roux’s love of the waters around Baja Peninsula, and its biodiversity changed her career path. She has continued as a professional photographer, but also obtained her diving certification and tour guide certification. She now focuses on conservation tours, taking guests on the water to educate them about the area,

with a particular spotlight on nature and its preservation.

“I’m now a dive guide, tour guide and a nature photographer, but I am very focused now on the conservation of the oceans,” she says.

Roux has become well known as a conservationist. She is one of the contributors to the upcoming book *The Ocean Speaks*, a collection of stories from the founders of the charity Ocean Culture Life.

Described on its cover as “A photographic journey of discovery and hope,” the book shares over 200 underwater images from

every ocean on the globe, and proclaims itself as “a stunning celebration of ocean life, a unique glimpse into the biggest habitat on the planet and marks a small point on the journey towards protecting it.”

“*The Ocean Speaks* amplifies the voices for those who can not speak for themselves,” Roux explains. “The stories are told through 45 ocean storytellers and photographers who have taken ocean protection into their own hands. This book captures the beauty, the adventures, and the importance of the five oceans in each story, and offers a unique glimpse into our planet’s largest life support system.”

Roux is one of those 45 storytellers, contributing an article about the migration of the humpback whales to Baja California Sur and their importance for the ocean to combat climate change. The title of her segment is “The Trees of the Ocean.”

The conservation of the ocean has become Roux’s passion, and one of her greatest areas of focus is the protection of the whales that migrate to the Los Cabos area every winter. Through her whale watching tours, she aims to educate guests about the importance of whales to the ocean and the overall ecosystem of the earth.

“Humpback whales undergo one of the longest migrations of any species,” she says, speaking to the nearly 5000-mile journey the whales make twice a year. “Ecologically, the whales play a crucial role in maintaining ocean health. They mix nutrients in the currents, which helps create the phytoplankton that helps produce the air we breathe.

“This is like a cycle. The plankton need the humpback whales, and we need the plankton to survive, to breathe. That makes conservation of the whales very important.

Without whales there is no ocean, there is no life.”

Humpbacks are just one of the whale species that travel south every year, and tours to watch them are extremely popular in Los Cabos. In fact, whale watching is the basis of many trips to the Los Cabos area. Off the tip of Baja California, the whales gather every winter, traveling for several months from their homes off Alaska.

There are also gray whales, which gather farther north on the Pacific side, and blue whales — the largest whale in the world — in the Loreto area. The biggest blue whales can grow up to 100 feet long. The typical humpback ranges from 40-56 feet and gray whales grow up to 50 feet in length.

The whales travel south to mate over the

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winter months, then return again in the autumn for the females to give birth in the same area. As the water warms each spring, they travel back north for the summer months, after teaching the babies to swim in hopes they can safely make the trip.

As a result, a species like humpback whales have only one baby every two years. For a number of reasons, Roux is worried about the survival of the whales.

“When the cub is born, it is with their mother for one year, and then becomes totally independent,” she explains. “After the year, the mom comes again to mate, and is pregnant for 11-12 months. But

when the whales come here, the orcas come too. The orcas eat the babies, so on that trip back to Alaska, many cubs don’t survive.”

That’s nature taking its course, but unfortunately, it’s not just the cycle of nature that puts whales in jeopardy. For one, the humpback whale is still hunted in many countries. Added to that are concerns about climate change, variations in migration patterns, and man-made hazards, including those during whale watching expeditions.

“Six years ago, on my first whale watching tour, I would see many whales,” she says. “Every year has been less and less. Every year it is changing a lot. It’s complicated to know

the reason. There could be many reasons.”

One of the most popular sights on a whale watching tour in Los Cabos is the breaching whale. The humpbacks seem to breach more than other species, using their powerful tail fin to launch themselves out of the water. That allows for a full view of this beautiful creature, but it sometimes gives rise to an abuse of the whale watching process, something that concerns Roux and other conservation-focused tour guides in the area.

Mexican regulations govern whale watching activities, with a goal to protect and conserve whales and their habitat. These regulations state that a maximum of four

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boats can remain around the same whale or group of whales, and also defines the distance that boats must remain away from whales: boats with whale watching permits can approach a whale more closely than those without a permit.

Boats are also supposed to keep a constant cruising speed, must be slower than the slowest whale in the group, and avoid any drastic changes in speed and direction when close to the whales. Boats are directed to approach a whale from its side and from the

back — never from the front — and not to encircle them as this is threatening to the whale. Noise pollution from so many boats has also been defined as a threat to whales.

Anyone who has been on the water in Los Cabos, or even watched from shore, can describe times when one or more of these regulations is not being followed. This activity is governed by PROFEPA, the Federal Attorney's Office for Environmental Protection, but in reality it's difficult to enforce and violations occur.

"The humpback whale is very protective," Roux says. "When the boats try to stay close to the cub, the mother will change direction to protect it. The cub may get disoriented and lose its mother."

"It's terrible. There are many boats around the whales, disrupting them, some have their cub with them, and they can't escape around the boat. We have to respect them."

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“The critical point is respect... People have to try to understand that respect is the principal point for me. When they understand respect, they understand conservation...”

Unfortunately there are many that don't respect the rules. It's very important as a guide to promote conservation and respect.”

That being said, there are many tour operators in the Los Cabos area that **do** follow the rules, so Roux encourages visitors to do their research and choose a tour with people who promote respect for the whales and conservation of the ocean.

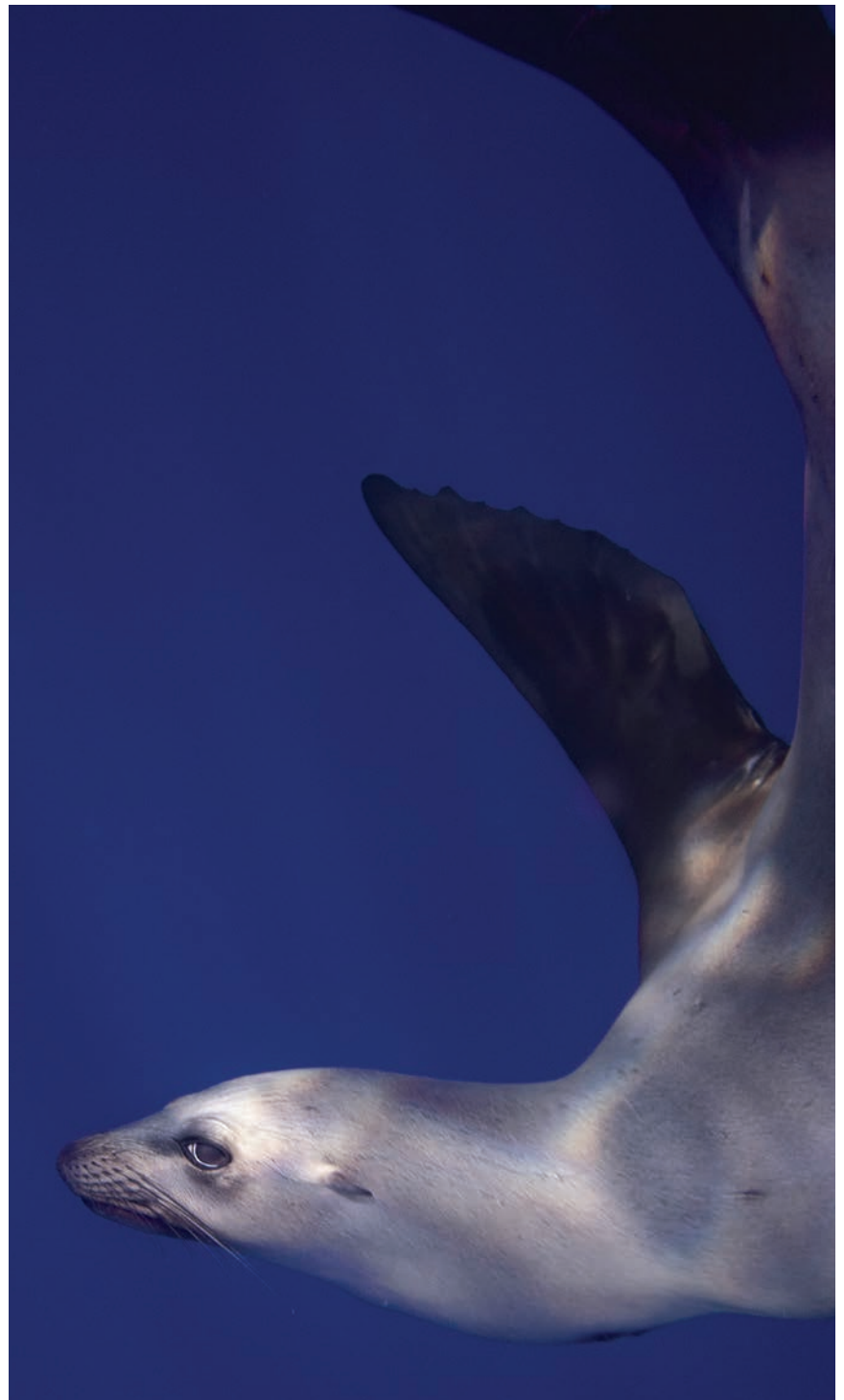
It's not just the whales that deserve our respect. Roux gets excited talking about all the species that are on display in the Sea of Cortez, once famously described as the “aquarium of the world” by oceanographer, filmmaker and author Jacques Cousteau.

“All year in Baja California Sur there are many activities,” Roux says. “Every season there is something. The humpback, blue, and gray whales, and whale sharks. After the whales are gone it's the mobula ray season, there are orcas, sharks, and

marlins. All year we have a lot of activities.”

Depending how far you want to range from Cabo San Lucas and San Jose del Cabo, and the time of year, that could be as close as snorkeling at Pelican Rock or Chileno Bay, or a drive to La Paz to swim with whale sharks. It could also mean a trip to view the mobula rays at La Ventana up the East Cape; diving or snorkeling with a certified shark excursion to see mako, blue, hammerhead and silky sharks; visiting Isla Espíritu Santo, a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site and National Park; or diving at Cabo Pulmo National Park, renowned for its coral reef outcroppings and multiple dive sites.

The beaches of Baja California Sur are also home to five of the seven sea turtle species found in the world, making the region one of the most important nesting areas. The nesting season coincides with





hurricane season, making it more difficult for them to lay their eggs and survive. Hatchlings are also threatened by predators, pollution, fishing activity, and human impact.

An activity gaining in popularity is to take part in a turtle release, helping hatchlings navigate the many dangers to safely arrive in the ocean. Roux encourages participants to choose only authorized nonprofit organizations to ensure the activity is carried out in an ethical, scientific manner and with a real impact on the conservation of these endangered species. Unfortunately, there are companies that offer the experience at high prices without any type of regulation or proper protocols, which can negatively impact conservation efforts and the

organizations that truly protect the turtles.

“Turtle release represents a profound act of hope, but also a great responsibility,” Roux says. “By taking part, visitors not only experience an unforgettable moment, but also directly support environmental education and the marine biologists who volunteer their time without any form of financial compensation for this activity.”

While visiting Baja California Sur, Roux encourages us to consider what small acts we can take to help the ocean thrive. That could mean not feeding the fish when you snorkel — another no-no that is oftentimes violated — and seeking out authorized tours that are reputable and promote conservation, to ensure we are part of responsible tourism.

“The critical point is respect,” Roux stresses. “Something so simple as respecting an animal is something people don’t always understand. People want to touch the animal, and they want a selfie. It’s not a zoo. It’s an ocean and we can’t control the ocean. You are in nature, and you are in the ocean.”

“People have to try to understand that respect is the principal point for me. When they understand respect, they understand conservation.”

For more information, visit online at: www.blueandwild.com

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El Fin!