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## **NOAA REPORTS SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN 2006 GRAY WHALE CALF NUMBERS**

Scientists from NOAA's Southwest Fisheries Science Center in La Jolla, Calif., recently recorded an eight percent increase in the estimated number of gray whale calves migrating along the California Coast this spring. The increase may be attributable to extended access to feeding grounds resulting from reduced sea ice in the Arctic Ocean.

For the past 13 years, NOAA scientists have established a survey site at the Piedras Blancas Light Station, a small point of land jutting out into the Pacific Ocean midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, to count gray whale cows and calves migrating from Baja California to the Bering Sea. The cow-calf pairs tend to travel close to the shoreline, sometimes passing as close as fifty yards from the researchers.

"Because these Arctic whales migrate close to the coast each year, our scientists can monitor their population status and relate any changes to environmental factors on these amazing animals. This also allows us to determine easily if any Arctic research efforts are needed," said Bill Fox, director of NOAA's Southwest Fisheries Science Center.

The number of calves migrating to northern feeding grounds is valuable information to scientists because it is an important indication of the overall health of the Eastern Pacific population of gray whales. These animals were nearly driven to extinction in the early 1900s by the whaling trade, but have bounced back to a population between 19,000 and 23,000 as a result of international cooperation and protection.

This year, scientists estimate 1,018 calves will return to the Bering Sea, up from last year's estimated 945, continuing a steady growth over the last five years. The increase may be the result of a shift in the distribution of whales to productive northern feeding grounds and shrinking sea ice in the Chuckchi Sea. Longer feeding seasons seem to result in increased numbers of pregnant females bringing their pregnancies to full term.

The number of returning calves has not always been as favorable as today's numbers indicate. In 1999 the estimated number of northbound calves dropped below 500 and then remained below 300 calves in 2000 and 2001.

The counting of whales at Point Piedras Blancas begins at the end of March and lasts until the migration ends near the end of May. Ironically, the same promontory used by scientists to monitor whale populations today was once used as a spotting station by coastal whalers in the 1800s.

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-30-

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