



**Jim Harvey, interim director of Moss Landing Marine Laboratories, has a whale of a story for his students.**

**Moss Landing marine biologist** kept media briefed during ‘Big Miracle’ rescue

# VOICE OF THE WHALES

By AMY E. WEST

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Since the late 1980s, a lecturer at Moss Landing Marine Laboratories has told his students an unbelievable tale of a dramatic rescue at the top of the world. Now Hollywood is telling the story.

Jim Harvey, the lab's interim director, participated in the gray whale rescue depicted in the film “Big Miracle,” which hit theaters this month. The movie portrays the efforts to save three juvenile whales trapped in an ice floe, cut off from their migration route, in Barrow, Alaska. The above-and below-surface saga brought together Inupiat, scientists, oil companies, environmentalists and the Russian and American governments during the Cold War.

In fall 1988, Harvey was busy with postdoctoral work at NOAA's National Marine Mammal Laboratory in Seattle. On one of those fall days, his supervisor, Santa Cruz native Dave Withrow, walked into Harvey's office with a proposition: “You want to go to Barrow?”

The scientists, tasked with correcting inaccurate



**Journalists record the sounds from a California gray whale trapped in an ice floe near Barrow, Alaska, in October 1988.**

COURTESY OF JIM HARVEY

media coverage of the trapped whales, were perfect fits for the two-week mission. Harvey was an experienced tagger who spent time with gray whales in Mexico, and Withrow was a seasoned traveler to that part of Alaska.

They arrived on the scene nearly a week after the whales were spotted by a local Alaskan who found them poking their barnacle-covered bodies through a 15-foot hole. The youngest whale had since died. And with the recent arrival of donated chainsaws, the ice was a flurry of activity as rescuers cut breathing holes for the animals.

The whales, late to migrate to warmer

southern waters, were not in great shape. Unaccustomed to such cold temperatures and ice, their skin began cracking and bleeding.

The extraordinary attempts to break an ice-free path and persuade the whales to follow — efforts that included Russian icebreakers, a hover-barge, a tractor with screws and a Greenpeace activist hoping to lure the animals to safety with song — drew worldwide media attention.

And Harvey and Withrow were dropped into the fray. Helicopters shuttled the two biologists to and from the site, which was several miles from land. Although a hut would

eventually arrive, Harvey spent a few nights on the ice in temperatures well below zero.

Harvey's long days usually involved standing, monitoring the whales' health, providing support and advice to the rest of the team, and giving numerous press briefings to the media.

“He just fit well in that sort of fieldwork,” Withrow said. “He's a good guy to be in the field, no matter where.”

To keep warm, Harvey and Withrow donned cold-weather “bunny boots,” multiple wool and down layers and

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# Harvey

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other essentials provided for the biologists. Many members of the media were pulled without warning from covering the presidential election, and arrived underdressed. Harvey recalled an odd collection of reporters dressed in crisp, brand-new gear purchased days earlier from REI.

The native Alaskans, on the other hand . . .

"They'd put their bare hands in the water, and seemingly operate without a problem," Harvey said.

Withrow and Harvey played key roles in informing rescuers about the whales' behaviors, and advised against such risky rescue suggestions as dynamiting the ice to bust past an ice shelf.

Because the whales refused to explore beyond their initial breathing hole, the new chainsaw-formed openings started at 4 to 5 feet apart to help them "blunder into a hole," Harvey said. Spacing between the openings eventually increased after the whales took interest in bubbler machines meant to stir the water and keep the holes ice-free. The whales followed the sound of the bubbler, and after opening one hole, "the whales were breathing within that hole in a minute," he said.

Though Harvey meant to tag the whales, government



Credit Bill Roth/Anchorage Daily News

**Barrow residents carved breathing holes into the Beaufort Sea icepack of Point Barrow, Alaska, during the two-week California gray whale rescue effort, which gained worldwide media coverage in October 1988.**

officials decided the animals had suffered enough exhaustion and stress by the time they were near the open ocean. The tagging technology at the time used VHF transmitters, which required planes to track them within a 7- to 10-mile radius. Adding more strain to the animals may have resulted in adverse consequences.

"There was such a huge amount of interest in the whales that I didn't want to be responsible for their death," Harvey said.

The Russian icebreaker cut the whales a choppy path to a stretch of open water, and from there they had a good chance of making it, said Withrow. None of the land-based rescuers

witnessed the whales' final departure, and though some claim to have identified the whales later (nearly impossible because of their changing barnacle pattern), no confirmation exists of their escape.

Though the event could have been portrayed as a huge waste of money, Harvey said, "A lot of people learned about gray whales, their migration patterns, and that maybe every once in awhile we do something positive."

Ocean animals are trapped in ice every year, and nature normally takes its course.

"If news media hadn't picked it up, the whale would have been harvested, or died in that hole," said Harvey.

Harvey has not seen the

movie, but his students tell him the biologist roles were cut.

Withrow watched the film with hopes that it portrayed events truthfully. But as an observant scientist familiar with the actual events, his list of movie goofs is long. A few: The movie cut NOAA from the film, though it ran the entire operation; no one ever entered the water; and the sounds played in the movie were certainly not gray whale vocals.

However, he said, "The thing the film did do well was talk about diverse groups working well together."

The movie, filmed in Alaska over 10 weeks, stars Drew Barrymore, Ted Danson and John Krasinski.