



NOAA Teacher at Sea
Tara Fogleman
Onboard NOAA Ship JOHN N. COBB
June 1 – 14, 2007

Date: 1 June 2007

Location: Southeast Alaska—In Transit from Juneau

Mission: Alaskan Harbor Seal—Pupping Phenology and Site Monitoring

The boat set sail today as we headed for our first haulout sites. Because this first day was a traveling day, where no sampling would be conducted, I had a chance to explore the JOHN N. COBB, speak with the crew, and become better acquainted with life at sea.

Our Boat, the JOHN N. COBB—

The JOHN N. COBB is the oldest vessel and the only wooden ship in NOAA's research fleet. She was built in 1950 and named after John Nathan Cobb, the first dean of the University of Washington School of Fisheries. The boat is 93 feet long, has a beam of 26 feet, and a draft of 12 feet. The JOHN N. COBB typically cruises at speeds of around 10 knots, propelled by a 325 hp diesel engine. She has a crew of 8 and can carry up to 4 scientists.

The JOHN N. COBB spends most of her time in the waters of southeast Alaska, supporting the research of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The ship can collect fish and crustacean specimens using a trawl and longline, or sample fish larvae, eggs, and plankton using plankton nets and surface or midwater larval nets. Marine mammal studies, such as the one that I will be part of, are conducted aboard or by the use of smaller boats stored on the JOHN N. COBB.

Daily Life on the JOHN N. COBB—

Life on board the JOHN N. COBB is exciting but intimate—the entire crew and scientists must work together to keep the ship clean and in working order so that the scientific research can be done. As mentioned earlier, the ship has several crew members, and each of the crew has important responsibilities that are integral to the proper working of the ship.

- The Commanding Officer—Our Commanding Officer, Chad, has authority over all other crew members and ship personnel. He drives the ship on alternating 6-hour shifts and is responsible for medical care in the event that anyone were to get hurt.
- The Executive Officer—Dan is the Executive Officer (also referred to as the XO) for the JOHN N. COBB on this cruise. He is the direct representative of the Commanding Officer, and is therefore responsible for executing the policies and orders issued by the Commanding Officer. He also drives the ship for 6-hour shifts, alternating with the Commanding Officer.

- The Chief Marine Engineer—Del, or “Chief”, serves as our Chief Marine Engineer. Because his main responsibilities are to oversee the Engineering Department and fix any problems with the mechanical or electrical systems on the ship, he is usually down below in the engine room.
- The Chief Steward—Bill, our Chief Steward, is in charge of the galley, or kitchen, of the ship. He provides the crew and scientists with three meals everyday, all cooked on a diesel stove. Because the galley on the JOHN N. COBB is very small, it is very important that those onboard the ship are clean and respect the requests made by the Chief Steward.

There are also other crew members that are responsible for duties such as relieving the Chief Engineer, keeping the boat clean, and driving the skiffs stored on the JOHN N. COBB during scientific operations.



Photograph 1. Bill, the Chief Steward of the JOHN N. COBB, cooks a delicious dinner for the crew.

The crew members and scientists sleep in various locations on the boat—though some have it better than others! Most of the crew members, with the exception of the Commanding Officer and Executive Officer, sleep in one large room at the front of the boat. Their room includes bunks, drawers and storage space for their clothing, a small sink, and a couple of benches that also serve as storage units. Because there is always someone sleeping aboard the ship, curtains can be pulled across each bunk to block light and provide privacy. The scientists are housed in staterooms located just behind the

galley, and these rooms provide more space to allow the scientists to work. Each stateroom has two bunks, a small desk, a sink, and a couple of storage units for clothes and other personal belongings. The bathrooms, or heads, are located in the hallway and are shared by all on board, and there is one community shower for all crew and scientists to use.

All of our meals are served in the galley at specific times of the day. Bill, the Chief Steward, rings a bell when a meal is served, and we each take a designated seat at the table. Meals are served family-style, where the dishes are placed on the table and we serve ourselves. The crew generally consists of some big guys, and so there's a lot of eating at each meal! At the end of the meal, we clear our plates, thank the Steward, and head off to do our daily work.

However, life on the JOHN N. COBB isn't always just about work—the crew enjoy their time off by fishing when the boat is anchored, reading magazines, watching movies, or playing games such as cribbage or solitaire. There is even a treadmill and rowing machine for those crew members that want to fit a workout into their busy schedule. Often, the scientists are busy with entering their data and preparing for the next day's operations. Because there are always some crew members who are sleeping on the boat, it is important that noise is kept to a minimum at all times.



Photograph 2. Tara Fogleman, a NOAA Teacher-at-Sea participant, hangs out in her bottom bunk aboard the JOHN N. COBB.

Safety First: Preparing for Emergencies at Sea—

It is standard practice for the crew and scientists to perform safety drills during the first 24 hours at sea, and this cruise was no exception. After lunch, we practiced the “Abandon Ship” drill and the “Fire” drill. During the “Abandon Ship” drill, everyone aboard was required to report to a life raft and bring (and put on) their survival suit, gloves, and hat. The survival suit is a bright orange outfit intended to cover nearly your entire body (excluding the face), provide insulation from the cold water, and provide floatation. It also has several safety features, including a strobe light and whistle. During the “Fire” drill, everyone aboard the ship plays a crucial role—many of the crew don protective fire gear and prepare the fire hose, while others assist as needed. Because everyone plays a role in these emergency situations, it is important that the scientists become familiar with their responsibilities before performing the drills.

Dolphins and Humpbacks and Bears, Oh My!—

Alaska is beautiful—rugged mountains topped with snow, extensive spruce forests, and dark-blue water that can be so calm in the bays that it appears we’re on a lake. There were two exciting finds on the way out of Gastineau Channel—we saw the spray of a humpback whale off in the distance (though I can’t truly say I’ve seen a humpback yet) and I saw a group of Dall’s porpoises riding the waves at the bow of the boat. The Dall’s porpoises are very different from the Atlantic bottlenose dolphins that I commonly see off the coast of Georgia—they are black and white in color (like an orca), they have a smaller dorsal fin, and they are nearly 8 feet in length—but their behavior is similar, as they travel in groups and enjoy riding the waves. We also spotted two brown bears, most likely a mother and her cub, and several bald eagles while we were anchored in a bay. Bald eagles are fairly common here, and they are easy to spot because their bright, white heads easily stand out among the dark green of the spruce trees and the grayish-black color of the rocks.



Photograph 3. This photo of two brown bears was captured by Chief Scientist Dave Withrow as the JOHN N. COBB anchored in Gut Bay, Alaska.

Tomorrow, we'll begin traveling to haulout sites at low tide (which falls in the morning, between 8 AM and 10 AM) to count harbor seals and their pups. So with that in mind, I'm off to bed—we have a busy morning tomorrow and I need my rest!