

**SAVING THE OCEAN**  
**DESTINATION BAJA TRANSCRIPT**

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TEASE

**Carl Safina**

On this edition of Saving the Ocean, we're petting whales in a Mexican lagoon.

Absolutely incredible.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

Where they once fought for their lives against the whaler's harpoon... gray whales now fight for attention from adoring fans.

**Carl Safina**

I've never petted a whale.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

We'll meet the fishermen who befriended these gentle giants.

And see how they're reaping profits by protecting Baja's stunning sea life.

**Carl Safina**

That's amazing!

**Carl Safina**

I'm Carl Safina. Join me now for Saving the Ocean.

## FUNDER CREDITS

### **Announcer**

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The Kendeda Fund -- furthering the values that contribute to a healthy planet.

And by Okeanos -- foundation for the sea.

## INTRO

### **Carl Safina**

Hi, I'm Carl Safina. No matter where I travel I always return here to walk, feel the seasons change. I've been coming here since I was a kid.

Now I'm a marine biologist and I write books about the ocean -- that magic, majestic two-thirds of the planet that starts right there in the surf.

In my travels I see pollution, over fishing, coral reefs in trouble. But I also meet inspiring people working to solve problems.

In this series, we visit people with solutions, and places getting better.

So I hope you'll join me in these journeys. It's all about Saving the Ocean.

## **DESTINATION BAJA**

### **Carl Safina (narration)**

We're heading south of the border, down to Mexico's Pacific coast.

#### **Carl Safina**

We're flying over Baja California, eight hundred miles of very rugged desert. And we're going to a place that's very remote, San Ignacio Lagoon.

### **Carl Safina (narration)**

An inlet off the Pacific Ocean, the lagoon is eighteen miles long and three miles wide. It's shallow, salty and home to one of the richest concentrations of sea life on the planet.

The lagoon is the centerpiece of the El Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve, the largest wildlife refuge in Latin America.

That's our destination below, a small camp perched on the shore. I've come to meet some fishermen with a remarkable way of managing their ocean resources. Instead of competing against each other, they cooperate with each other.

#### **Jesus Mayoral**

This is going to be our boat today.

#### **Carl Safina**

Looks nice

#### **Jesus Mayoral**

The Pachico Uno. Welcome aboard.

#### **Carl Safina**

Thanks

**Carl Safina (narration)**

My hosts are Jesus Mayoral and his father Don Pachico. Fishermen most of the year, they work as guides each winter, catering to tourists who come from far and wide to see Baja's most famous "snow birds" -- the thousands of gray whales that winter over here.

**Carl Safina**

This is where the grey whales come to breed, both to mate and to have their babies. It's a safe place for them to give birth because they don't have to contend with predators like sharks and killer whales.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

To get to these warm, friendly waters, the whales had to make a grueling two month long journey through the Pacific Ocean.

Each fall, they leave their feeding grounds off Alaska and swim down the west coast to Baja, and into San Ignacio Lagoon and two others like it. Come spring, they travel back north. At twelve thousand miles round trip, it's one of the longest animal migrations on earth.

Jesus is headed for the mouth of the lagoon -- the only spot where the whale-watching boats are allowed to operate.

**Jesus Mayoral**

The biggest part of the lagoon remains for whales' privacy. And the observation area would be in our port side, this island named Punta Piedra and the sand dunes in the other side of the lagoon. So here we trace an imaginary line. And from here all the way to the mouth it's the observation area. When the whales cross this line, that's their private side. So we cannot access to the whales or follow whales in that area.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

What's different about how this place operates is that the fishermen work together to run the whale watching business, rather than competing for it. They formed a tour guide association to manage the area and police themselves.

**Jesus Mayoral**

Tico Tico, Tico. Pachico Uno.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

Before we can enter the observation area, Jesus must radio in for clearance.

**Jesus Mayoral**

Every time we get to the observation area we have to call a guard. We hire him to keep an eye on us, to keep control in the area. Right now he already gave us the go-ahead, so we are welcome into the area right now.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

It's not long before I see just how special this place really is.

**Carl Safina**

There's a bunch of whales here. Three of them breaching in the last minute. That's crazy. Oh! Oh, oh, oh! Look at that. It's hard to know what to look at here.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

It's like we're in the middle of a whale freeway.

**Carl Safina**

This place is just loaded with life. Just loaded. Dolphins and whales in the same glance. There are so many whales here that you can smell their breath on the wind.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

The guides want to make sure their boats aren't crowding the animals – especially the hundred or so mothers who are nursing calves. So only sixteen boats are allowed in the area at a time.

An added benefit of so few boats is the chance for a really close encounter. Jesus tells me that some whales will actually approach a boat, often with their babies in tow.

I'd love to see that. But before I know it, our allotted ninety minutes in the area are up and we have to leave to give another boat a turn. But Jesus promises we will come back out tomorrow to get another crack at meeting a mom and a baby.

**Carl Safina**

I could imagine in a lot of places people would like to ignore the limits and just say, well you know they say sixteen or eighteen boats, its twenty-five boats, who cares.

**Jesus Mayoral**

We are controlling ourselves and regulating ourselves in the activities we're doing to keep the lagoon as pristine as possible to be a better place for our kids and the future generations.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

It's also good business.

By limiting access to a small number of tourists, the boat operators can charge a premium price – fifty dollars a head for a two hour long tour.

Most impressively, the tour guides have set this up so that the entire community benefits. During my visit, I'm staying at Don Pachico and Jesus' family-owned camp.

**Carl Safina**

Salut. To the whales

**Carl Safina (narration)**

It's one of a number of simple but comfortable lodges along the shore that provide an authentic Baja experience for visitors... and create a lot of jobs.

**Jesus Mayoral**

Fresh from the lagoon, we have scallops and shrimp.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

And the local fishermen earn good money selling fresh seafood directly to the camps.

This kind of cooperative, conservation-minded approach has deep roots here in Baja.

To find out how it began, I headed ten miles up the coast to the fishing town of Punta Abreojos. That's Spanish for "Cape Open Eyes," which aptly describes what I was in for: a real eye-opening experience.

Early each morning, the fishermen of Punta Abreojos Fishing Cooperative – some sixty boats strong –head to sea. It's a scene that hasn't changed since 1948, when the cooperative was formed.

**Carl Safina**

Some fishing boats coming in. They trap fish for something called Sand Bass, I think. We'll see what they got.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

As the word cooperative implies, everyone shares in the work, visitors included.

**Carl Safina**

When in Rome.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

The cooperative was begun by the town's founding families as a way to survive together in the harsh, unforgiving desert.

With the ocean their only source of food and income, the fishermen banded together to share the work and carefully nurtured their limited resources. Sixty years on, the town has not only survived, it's thrived.

I'm heading a mile off shore to check some lobster traps with fisherman Javier Villavicencio and co-op biologist Eduardo Enriquez Gonzalez.

**Eduardo Enriquez Gonzalez**

The last season we had a very good season.

**Carl Safina**

That was good?

**Eduardo Enriquez Gonzalez**

We had like 216 tons.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

The fishermen's most lucrative catch is the red rock lobster, a spiny lobster without claws that lives on the shallow, rocky reefs that fringe the coast.

Lobster season ended a few weeks back – this footage was shot by the cooperative on the final day of fishing. Right out of the sea, the lobster is packed on ice at the local plant and shipped fresh to China and Japan.

They're not fishing for lobster now, but there's still plenty of work to do. Once a month, they set out a few dozen traps to sample the lobster population.

**Eduardo Enriquez Gonzalez**

Strong!

**Carl Safina (narration)**

I get the nod to haul up the first one.

**Carl Safina**

Three lobsters.

**Eduardo Enriquez Gonzalez**

We have here a female. Its pregnant, here is its sperm.

**Carl Safina**

Wow, that's the sperm. She carries that stuck on her like that?

**Eduardo Enriquez Gonzalez**

Yeah.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

They are finding large numbers of pregnant females in their samples - a sure sign the population's doing well.

**Eduardo Enriquez Gonzalez**

It's a baby.

**Carl Safina**

A little one. In the commercial season that would be too small?

**Eduardo Enriquez Gonzalez**

Yeah, it's too small.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

The fishermen abide by a minimum catch length set by Mexican regulators. But the co-op is way ahead of the government when it comes to preventing overfishing.

**Carl Safina**

Ok, it's a nice one.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

If their population samples reveal a drop in the number of lobsters, the co-op will increase the minimum catch length to allow more young lobsters to breed before being caught.

They'll even reduce the amount of lobster their own fishermen are allowed to trap. You might think all the rules and extra monitoring work imposed by the cooperative would rankle the fishermen. But it's quite the opposite.

**Javier Villavicencio (subtitles)**

We fishermen are very happy with the job we have done, the conservation of the area, and the example we have set for the world. We fish responsibly and protect the resources that are the source of life for everyone.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

Their impressive restraint has paid off. In 2004, the Marine Stewardship Council, a group that sets standards for environmentally friendly seafood, certified Baja's red rock lobster fishery as sustainable.

With this coveted eco label, the fishermen can sell their lobster at premium prices – more than twenty dollars a pound this season.

The Punta Abreojos fishermen have been so successful that their rich waters have become prime targets for poachers. To fight back, the co-op formed its own private coast guard.

Every night the fleet patrols the coastline for fish pirates. The beefed-up security has worked wonders. They recently shut down poachers who were making off with a very valuable catch. Abalone.

These giant sea snails may not be familiar to most Americans, but they're a prized delicacy in Asia. Harvesting abalone requires one of the more unusual fishing methods you'll ever see. They dive for them.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

The Baja fishermen use what's called a "hookah" breathing system.

The diver is connected to the boat with a hose, down which fresh air is pumped. This frees the diver from having to haul bulky scuba tanks around. And saves some energy for the demanding job of prying stubborn abalone off the rocks.

**Carl Safina**

Today is opening day of abalone season for the cooperative. And one of the interesting things is that the federal government says they could have opened it two months ago but they've decided to leave it closed until the abalone have finished spawning.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

The decision will cost the fishermen some income in the short-term, but they're focused on the long haul.

Abalone are very slow growing – it takes ten years to reach six inches long, the minimum catch size.

So the fishermen want to do everything they can to boost the number of juveniles in the pipeline. Back on land, Eduardo showed me their latest investment.

**Eduardo Enriquez Gonzalez**

Here we do the spawning of the abalone.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

It's an aquaculture lab where they raise their own.

**Carl Safina**

So these are the adults?

**Eduardo Enriquez Gonzalez**

Yeah.

**Carl Safina**

Let me see if I can pull one off here. Oh, that's like not hard, its impossible.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

He uses wild-caught adults as breeding stock to spawn new offspring in the lab. When they're a bit bigger these baby seed abalone will be released into the ocean.

In the last five years the cooperative has seeded over two hundred thousand abalone. Thanks to all these efforts, the abalone population is doing quite well.

**Carl Safina**

That's amazing. I can't believe how many you got in such a short time.  
That's really incredible.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

Even with all the challenges, it's turning out to be a great opening day to the season.

**Carl Safina**

So how many of these are you allowed to keep every day?

**Luis Silverio Arce**

One hundred twenty.

**Carl Safina**

One hundred twenty per day, uh huh.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

Just one wild Baja abalone, shelled and canned, sells for forty dollars. That translates into a good payday for the fishermen.

**Carl Safina**

How much money do you make from these?

**Luis Silverio Arce**

Five hundred dollars, another five hundred dollars for the two other guys.

**Carl Safina**

No kidding, that's really quite good.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

The one hundred seven fishermen who belong to the cooperative make a good living from their hard work – about sixty thousand dollars a year each.

But everyone in Punta Abreojos profits. From the hundreds of support jobs the fisheries generate... to the millions of dollars the cooperative donates to fund community services, schools, and the churches.

**Carl Safina**

This community has organized itself in such a way that it's taken ownership for the resources. And because of that the protection, the management, the cooperation that they've put in has allowed all the resources to stay very abundant and very healthy. And to give them a maximum return on the catch.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

One sure sign of their success is that the model has been adopted by nine other fishing towns along the coast... and, of course, by the San Ignacio whale watching guides.

In the lagoon, I'm back for my second go at having a close encounter of the grey whale kind. We've been granted another turn in the observation area. And it's not long before Jesus spots something.

**Jesus Mayoral**

I see a mother and baby at one o'clock.

**Carl Safina**

Yes, I see them.

**Jesus Mayoral**

They're right in front.

**Carl Safina**

This is absolutely unbelievable. Look at that. Holy smoke.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

When Jesus and Pachico cut their engines, the pair moves even closer.

**Jesus Mayoral**

A good idea when a friendly whale approaches is that you have to touch it. If you don't touch her she'll go away.

**Carl Safina**

I'm ready for you baby.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

Once I start splashing, the calf boldly swims closer.

**Carl Safina**

Oh my god! Oh my god, I can't believe it. I really cannot believe it. I can't believe it. That is just insane. Crazy.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

The baby is only eight weeks old but as curious as can be.

Then mom, all forty-five tons of her, gets in on the act.

**Carl Safina**

And look how approachable. Look at this, look at this. Wow, just absolutely, absolutely incredible.

When that little one came up – it's not that little, it's a twenty foot long animal, but it's undeniably a baby. And that look in its eye was the same innocent look you see in a puppy's eye. That same sort of innocent, I'm here to discover look.

**Carl Safina**

I'm petting a whale. Hello you. I have never had this experience, I've seen a lot of whales in a lot of places but I've never petted a whale.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

This scene is all the more remarkable given the grey whales' long, bloody history with man.

When American whaling ships discovered the Baja breeding lagoons in the 1840s, they quickly turned the whale havens into slaughterhouses.

Trapped inside the shallow bays in large numbers, the grays were easy prey for harpooners.

Decades of intensive hunting decimated the population – from forty thousand down to less than five thousand at the turn of the twentieth century.

**Carl Safina**

During the whaling era these whales got a reputation as being very fierce. When they were harpooned they would turn on the whaleboats and smash them to bits and people thought that they were unusually aggressive.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

After commercial whaling was finally banned here in 1947 the species began to bounce back. There are now more than twenty thousand gray whales, a healthy population. But their fierce reputation lived on among the fishermen.

**Pachico Mayoral**

Every fisherman used a piece of wood to bang on the boats and scare the whales away.

**Carl Safina**

Why did the fishermen think they had to be afraid of the whales, what was said about the whales?

**Pachico Mayoral**

Nobody had anything nice to say about them. They were known as the Devil's fish.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

All that changed one magical day in 1972. Pachico was out fishing with a friend when a large whale startled them by surfacing just inches away from the boat.

**Pachico Mayoral**

My partner and I were both afraid. The surprise was so intense that our legs were shaking.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

But instead of threatening the boat, the whale just cozied up to it and hung out. And that's when Pachico decided to bridge the gap.

**Pachico Mayoral**

I touched the whale very gently and the whale remained calm. Minutes passed and I kept petting her until my fear went away.

**Carl Safina**

When you reached out and touched that first whale, how did that make you, how did it make you feel?

**Pachico Mayoral**

It was sublime for me because when I saw the size of the whale and I was so small by comparison, I gave thanks to God.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

Eager to share the gift with others, Pachico began taking tourists out to see the whales and the lagoon's tourism business was born.

**Carl Safina**

That day you and that whale, you made peace, peace between people and whales. And I think that you changed the world a little bit.

**Pachico Mayoral**

Whales were heavily hunted by humans. Yet they are very friendly toward us and they forgive all the damage we did. And that's why I have a lot of love and respect for them.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

Remarkably, over the years the friendly behavior has spread among the whales in San Ignacio Lagoon.

**Carl Safina**

Here comes the babe, here comes the babe, here comes the babe.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

Jesus estimates that about one in ten whales are so-called friendlies.

**Carl Safina**

Wow. Oh my god. The mother is nose to nose with the baby.

**Jesus**

Oh yeah.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

Of course it's not all fun and games. In a few weeks, the calves will follow their mothers out into the dangerous open ocean, where a third of the youngsters will perish before they reach the Arctic feeding grounds.

So here in lagoon the calves are busy growing and putting on strength as quickly as possible. Thanks to their mothers' incredibly rich milk, the babies pack on fifty pounds a day.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

With all that going on, it's astounding that they still have the curiosity and the desire to reach out and make contact with us humans.

**Carl Safina**

The mother just lifted the boat up a little. That was interesting. And we're having this just incredible, incredible experience -- you have whale breath on the lens -- and there's not another boat around besides the two boats that we have for this filming. The whales are completely comfortable with the boats and it's really remarkable. You could easily see how this would be so overdone. But it's done right and that's why it can last.

**Carl Safina (narration)**

No one knows why the whales of San Ignacio Lagoon are so friendly. Most gray whales in the other lagoons keep their distance from humans.

Whatever the reason, there's no arguing that this is a very special place.

And I'm glad the whales have people like Jesus and Pachico around to watch out for them.

It's heartening to see what a great job the Baja fishermen are doing. And they've done it all their way.

It's home grown, community based and in the capable hands of people who understand just how blessed they are to be the stewards of this magnificent place.

Here's hoping that the Baja way will continue to spread.

And perhaps even to migrate, like the whales, across oceans and borders to other shores.

For SAVING THE OCEAN, I'm Carl Safina.

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### **Announcer**

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