



Expedition: Sperm Whales in Dominica

Field Study: Marine biology/Animal Behavior

Summary: *Female sperm whales live in matriarchal groups that stay together their entire lives, with the males remaining until they leave to roam the ocean in their teens. Gaelin Rosenwaks traveled to Dominica to study and film these fabled giants for Finding Physty, her film about a young male sperm whale that she met as a toddler when he was stranded and kept in captivity for 9 days in a boat basin in Long Island, NY. Her very personal project focuses on the interactions between young whales and their mothers, aunts and grandmothers to better understand where Physty should have been when he found himself ill and stranded, and where he would be now 40 years later after having been released back into the wild. This was the third in a series of Gaelin's expeditions to reconnect with these sperm whales.*

THE EXPEDITION

Our expedition took us to Dominica, where there is a resident population of these females. I wanted to understand the family dynamics of sperm whales and once again meet them eye to eye. Under a strict government permit, we were able to get in the water with these incredible animals. Since Physty was a young whale, he should have still been with his mother and her matrilineal unit. He would leave his family to roam the ocean once he was older, but Physty was young and certainly still should have been with his mother.



Gaelin Rosenwaks with Team

Our timing was important, because our previous expeditions had been in the fall. This one needed to happen in the winter so that there was a possibility of seeing a large male whale. Physty would now be a large mature male sperm whale, and it was important for me to attempt to see the animal Physty would be today. While there are visions of seeing Physty himself, with few identifying markers upon his release, this would be difficult. However, the large male whales come back to their natal waters of Dominica in winter, and our hope was to see and possibly get eye-to-eye with one of these leviathans, who are upwards of 60 feet in length, while the females are around 30 feet.



I was honored to carry Flag #29 on this expedition to document and understand a group of animals that epitomize badass female leadership, protecting their family and sticking together. I was very excited to have my mother on the expedition with me. She had introduced me to Physty, sperm whales and the ocean when I was a toddler, and now I could introduce her to sperm whales under the water!

EXPEDITION GOALS

The purpose of the expedition was to film and photograph sperm whales for my film, *Finding Physty*, which was in production at the time but had been put on hold as a result of the pandemic. *Finding Physty* is a story of a young male sperm, nicknamed Physty, who in 1981 was stranded in New York then, nine days later, successfully rehabilitated in captivity and released into the wild. When I was a toddler, my mother took to me to visit the young whale, and I'll never forget the moment that I locked eyes with this giant whale as he lay in the boat basin of Robert Moses State Park. It was a magical moment that sparked my curiosity for the undersea world. Flash forward nearly 40 years, and I decided it was time to tell the story of this incredible rescue and to reconnect with these fabled giants.

WHO

Gaelin Rosenwaks

WHAT

To film and photograph sperm whales for her film, *Finding Physty*

WHEN

March 2021

WHERE

Caribbean Sea, Commonwealth of Dominica, West Indies

WHY

Document and understand a group of animals that epitomize female leadership, protecting their family and sticking together



Gaelin Rosenwaks

Most people know about sperm whales from reading *Moby Dick*. They seem like ferocious beasts, but in reality they are incredibly intelligent animals that live in closely-knit family units. The females stay together for their entire lives, so grandmothers, mothers, sisters and babies travel as a unit, protecting one another. These females are some of the strongest and most intelligent ladies on the planet.

EXPEDITION RESULTS

I'm happy to say that we returned safely from our expedition despite many hurdles and I am excited to share our findings and the film in the months to come!

Fall 2022 Update:

Since March 2021, we completed another expedition to Dominica in October 2021 to continue the film and book project. My book, *Sperm Whales: The Gentle Goliaths of the Oceans*, published by Rizzoli Publication will be out in October 2022. The film was just reviewed by the New York Times Book Review: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/30/books/review/sperm-whales-gaelin-rosenwaks.html>

And the film is in post-production and will be released in 2023.



Gaelin Rosenwaks with spermwhale

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

In the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic, I urgently needed to get back to Dominica so I could complete the shooting for my film, *Finding Physty*, about my personal connection with sperm whales. After more than six months of trying to get back to Dominica, with my permit dates getting pushed month to month, we were able to finalize dates and headed down to the beautiful waters of Dominica in March 2021. Many hurdles were faced and safety measures were taken, but I was able to bring my team down to Dominica to reconnect with the whales that I had fallen in love with on my past expeditions.

ABOUT THE FLAG CARRIER

Gaelin Rosenwaks is a marine scientist, explorer, photographer and filmmaker. She began her career at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution conducting research in Antarctica and then earned her Master's Degree in Coastal Environmental Management from Duke University researching Giant Bluefin Tunas. Alarmed by the changes happening in the oceans, Gaelin founded Global Ocean Exploration Inc (GOE) to share her passion for ocean exploration, marine conservation, and storytelling. She now participates and conducts expeditions in every ocean to alert the public not only to the challenges facing the oceans, but also to what science is doing to understand these changes. Gaelin is a US Coast Guard Licensed Captain, a Fellow of both the Royal Geographical

Society and The Explorers Club, and a member of the Society of Women Geographers. She has published articles in scientific journals, newspapers and magazines and has delivered lectures at global conferences and many institutions, including the Explorers Club, Patagonia, Inc, Duke University and Yale University. She has appeared as an expert on TV programs including The Discovery Channel, Science Channel, CBS News, and Business Insider, and as a presenter and angler on the National Geographic Channel Series, Fish Warrior. Her photography has been displayed in many exhibitions, including solo exhibitions at Duke University, The Maritime Aquarium, and the Patagonia Upper West Side Store in NYC. Gaelin was the expedition biologist and photographer for an expedition using submarines to explore the bottom of the Blue Hole with Sir Richard Branson and Fabien Cousteau. This expedition was live broadcast on the Discovery Channel with a follow-up documentary on the Science Channel. Her latest project on sperm whales is the cover story for the June/July 2020 issue of Outside Magazine. In addition, her films have been screened at many prestigious film festivals around the country.



Gaelin Rosenwaks with Team on boat

To Gaelin, there is nothing better than being in the open ocean surrounded by endless blue water and passing wildlife. Currently, Gaelin is working on a new project, *Finding Physty*, a film and accompanying photography book to be published by Rizzoli Publications about her personal connection with sperm whales.



EXPEDITION TEAM:

Gaelin Rosenwaks, Stacy Rosenwaks, Will Allen, Jerry Daway, Vener Seamans, Jefferson Charles

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