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## In Memoriam Dr. Jonathan Stern

by William Keener, Isidore Szczepaniak, Marc Webber, Graham Worthy,  
Frances Robertson, Carolyn Kurle, and Leslie Cornick

Jonathan Stern, marine ecologist and minke whale expert, passed away on 16 February 2017 at the age of 62. He taught in the Biology Department at San Francisco State University and was a long-standing researcher at the University of Washington's Friday Harbor Laboratories. From 2000 to 2003, he was an adjunct faculty member at Florida State University.

Jon grew up in San Rafael, California, and obtained an undergraduate degree at Sonoma State University while volunteering at The Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito when it first opened

to rehabilitate seals and sea lions in 1975. He spent his first summer after college working at the Friday Harbor Laboratories where he began his life's work studying minke whales.

Jon's study of minke whales in the Salish Sea was the first to apply photo-identification techniques to a baleen whale and resulted in the longest running longitudinal study of the species. His main interest lay in the animals' foraging ecology and particularly the searches they use to find patches of prey. Through his ability to track individual minke whales, Jon was able to analyze their



**Figure 1.** Jon Stern enjoying minke whale fieldwork in the San Juan Islands, July 2008 (Photo credit: Frances Robertson, Northeast Pacific Minke Whale Project)

movement patterns in the context of optimal foraging strategies.

His parallel study of minke whales in Monterey Bay earned him a Master's degree at San Francisco State University. Jon was a tremendous champion of the minke whale, arguing that minkes are not simply the small cousins of the mighty blue whale. They are ecologically very different and should be appreciated on their own terms. Thus, what began as a thesis project for a Master's degree at SFSU became Jon's life work on these often underappreciated whales.

He went on to complete his doctorate at Texas A&M University where he studied the distribution and movement patterns of baleen whales. His interest in the role of marine predators in ocean ecosystems led him to study many other cetacean species over the years, including fin, humpback, gray, and killer whales. During his career, Jon also developed intelligent software for modeling carbon, nitrogen and energy flux through ecosystems at NASA/Ames Research Center, and he served as the Conservation Chair for the American Cetacean Society.

In 2008, Jon made an important discovery in San Francisco Bay. After a complete absence of

more than 60 years, harbor porpoises had returned to reoccupy the bay on a daily basis. He considered this a good news environmental story that should be shared and studied. To that end, he co-founded Golden Gate Cetacean Research, a nonprofit organization devoted to conducting research on the cetaceans of the bay and the Northern California coast. In recent years, this work expanded to include studies of the local coastal bottlenose dolphin population.

Talking science with Jon was always exhilarating and thought provoking. People naturally gravitated to Jon for his ideas, humor, and simple love of knowledge. He was a champion of friends, colleagues, students, and anyone who wanted to learn, always sharing enthusiastically and openly generous with his collaboration and resources.

Jon's passing leaves a very large hole in the aquatic mammals community. He was many things to many people: scientist, teacher, mentor, and friend, as well as a talented musician. The meaningful ways in which Jon contributed to so many lives with his wisdom, enthusiasm, and gentle humor are truly an inspiration. He will be greatly missed.



**Figure 2.** Harbor porpoise in San Francisco Bay, December 2010 (Photo credit: Jonathan Stern, under NOAA Fisheries Permit GA LOC #15477). The gold domes in the background belong to the Russian Orthodox cathedral.