

In Memoriam: Isidore “Izzy” D. Szczepaniak (1950-2021)

by Marc Webber, William Keener, and Tim Markowitz

Isidore Szczepaniak, marine biologist and expert on the cetaceans of the San Francisco Bay Area, passed away on 25 November 2021. He was a young and very active 71-year-old who lived life fully to the end. He was a Research Associate of both The Marine Mammal Center and the California Academy of Sciences, and he served on the boards of the American Cetacean Society’s San Francisco Bay Chapter and the San Francisco International Ocean Film Festival. Izzy, as he was known by all, was also a long-time naturalist for the Oceanic Society. On hundreds of boat trips that he led to the waters of the Farallon Islands, he introduced thousands of awestruck passengers to that unique pinniped and seabird colony 40 km off the mainland.

Izzy grew up on Long Island, New York, where he graduated from Hofstra University with a degree in Philosophy in 1972. That’s where he first started surfing, sparking his lifelong interest in ocean health and marine wildlife. After graduating, he moved to Pacifica, California, and worked the night shift at the U.S. Postal Service so he could surf and patrol beaches during the day, and go back to school.



Izzy Szczepaniak leading a natural history trip to the Farallon Islands, November 2021 (Photo courtesy of Susan Hopp)

At San Francisco State University, he earned his second undergraduate degree in Biology, and then he went on to complete his master’s in Marine Biology under the late Hal Markowitz, with whom he became a lifelong friend. Izzy’s thesis was on the *Abundance, Distribution and Natural History of Harbor Porpoise, Phocoena phocoena, in the Gulf of the Farallones, California*. While working on his project, he would drive down to Moss Landing Marine Labs just to take classes with Victor Morejohn, an old-school biologist who taught the value of field collection of museum specimens, a lesson Izzy took to heart. For the next 45 years, Izzy volunteered to collect stranded marine mammals for the California Academy of Sciences. Whenever a dead porpoise, dolphin, or whale washed up from Half Moon Bay to Bodega Bay, Izzy was usually first on scene. He would put up with the stench and collect anything, he would say, as long as it fit in his car.

Izzy began field research activities on shore as a harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina*) observer for the California Department of Fish & Wildlife but soon branched out to pelagic trips in search of cetaceans. He joined a NOAA Fisheries population survey for harbor porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena*) along the West Coast, and led international natural history expeditions for the Oceanic Society, ranging from the gray whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*) lagoons in Baja California to the humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) wintering grounds on the Silver Bank in the Dominican Republic. In the 1990s, Izzy photographed humpback whales off Costa Rica, providing Cascadia Research Collective with vital data on the species’ North Pacific distribution. Between 2002 and 2010, he documented the occurrence and behavior of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) residing in the Turneffe Atoll off Belize.

Closer to home, Izzy had been guiding local whale-watching tours since 1982. He was a fixture on the *Salty Lady*, the boat chartered by the Oceanic Society to cruise the Gulf of the Farallones where he felt at home. He always had with him a pair of trusty binoculars, a camera, and bright yellow “Rite in the Rain” notebooks. Over

the years, Izzy amassed voluminous field observations, along with the most extensive marine mammal library in Northern California. He passed on his enthusiasm and knowledge to the next generation as he taught an annual naturalist certification course focused on marine mammals, which was sponsored by the American Cetacean Society.

Izzy was a key scientific witness to changes in cetacean abundance in the San Francisco Bay Area. After an absence of more than 60 years, harbor porpoises returned to reoccupy the bay in 2008. Izzy immediately began to study the phenomenon and co-founded Golden Gate Cetacean Research, a non-profit organization devoted to conducting research on the cetaceans of the bay and coast. In 2019, Izzy joined The Marine Mammal Center when it created a new Cetacean Field Research Program. Collaboration with his close colleagues continued there, the work growing to include studies of gray whales, humpback whales, and the coastal bottlenose dolphin population. Izzy spent many an hour searching for dolphins from headlands and beaches, even from the Golden Gate Bridge, as he helped build the first photo-identification catalog of bottlenose dolphins for Northern California. At the time of his death, as lead author, he was in the final stages of preparing a manuscript for peer review on the range expansion of coastal bottlenose

dolphins from Southern California to new habitat in the Bay Area.

Izzy was indefatigable—always on the go, never saying no to a new project or opportunity to give a talk where he could inspire people to care about the plight of marine mammals. Recently, Izzy achieved one of his dreams, working as a member of the NOAA-led team that conducted surveys for the critically endangered vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*) in the upper Gulf of California in 2021. And throughout his life, Izzy never lost his passion for surfing. He would regularly surf up and down the coast; and in September 2021, he entered the Pedro Point Surf Club's annual longboard competition, reaching the finals in the "Legends" division.

We will remember Izzy as tireless and purposeful, kind and patient, a man who displayed a generosity of spirit toward the natural world and all people. With a gleam in his eye, he was always first to volunteer for rugged offshore assignments or to lend a shoulder when there was heavy lifting on shore. Izzy's sudden passing leaves a huge void in the San Francisco Bay Area marine mammal community. He is survived by his daughters, Alana and Lisa, his brother, Tom, and his partner, Susan Hopp. He will be greatly missed by his many friends and colleagues.



Izzy giving a public talk on the conservation of vaquitas at The Aquarium of the Bay, San Francisco, 2018 (Photo courtesy of Susan Hopp)