



**2023**

# **ANNUAL REPORT**





A lush forest scene with tall, moss-covered trees. In the background, a waterfall cascades down a rocky ledge. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

AWF strives to understand, protect,  
and inspire appreciation for whales  
and their marine habitat through  
ecological monitoring, research,  
mentorship, community-building,  
and global engagement.

Our operations occur on the lands  
and waters of the Tlingit (Lingít)  
Peoples (on and surrounding  
Sheet'-ká X'áat'l) and adjacent to  
the territories of the Xaadas and  
Ts'msyen Peoples.

With respect and humility, we recognize the  
sovereign relationships the Tlingit Nation have  
held with their lands, waters, and other-than-  
human relations since time immemorial. We  
also recognize that the Tlingit role as stewards  
and managers of these ecosystems continues  
to this day, despite the unjust and violent  
actions of colonization and attempted land  
dispossession. We at Alaska Whale Foundation  
recognize our responsibility to follow  
Indigenous leaders in their work to decolonize  
and reIndigenize conservation science and  
ecosystem management, and endeavor to work  
towards these ends.



# A Letter From the Director



**Dear friends and supporters,**

As we approach the end of another year, our commitment to research and marine conservation remains steadfast. Yet, we are now poised to embark on an important new chapter in our organization's history, one that will see us refocus our mission, crystallize our priorities, and reinvigorate our Board of Directors.

Alaska Whale Foundation was founded by a team of passionate individuals who wanted to shed light on the amazing behaviors of the endangered humpback whales in Southeast Alaska. This enthusiasm never wavered as our small, volunteer-led organization expanded over the ensuing years. Instead, it propelled us forward and inspired others to help us make significant achievements in the field of marine mammal research and conservation.

But we now find ourselves at a critical inflection point. Warming oceans are having a devastating impact on entire marine ecosystems and the coastal communities that depend on them.

We have witnessed this ourselves as we've watched the health of whales in Alaska decline over the past decade. It is, therefore, imperative that we adapt to this shifting conservation landscape and rethink how we can be most impactful.

Several years ago, we launched an ocean health program committed to advancing our understanding of whales and their marine habitat. Foundational to this was, and still is, a comprehensive set of research and monitoring initiatives. By collecting data about shifting ocean conditions and staying at the forefront of scientific knowledge, we can make informed decisions that serve to protect and promote the health of our oceans and the human and non-human communities that depend on them.

However, we also recognize now, more than ever, that the key to lasting change lies in inspiring the hearts and minds of individuals. For this reason, we've expanded our mission to include mentorship and global engagement programs, through which we aim to foster a deep appreciation for, and commitment to, ocean conservation. We also firmly believe that an organization like ours thrives on the strength of its community. Therefore, we are committing to building a network of individuals, organizations, and communities who share our passion for marine conservation and shared ocean health.

Over the past few months, I have been working with AWF's Board of Directors to distill these new commitments into actionable priorities.

**Today, I am thrilled to introduce the following mission-driven Strategic Priorities that will guide us forward in the coming years:**



Maintain a long-term, comprehensive whale and ecosystem health monitoring program to track changing ocean conditions and provide the foundation for understanding the impacts of climate change on marine communities.

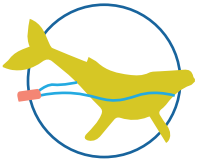


Maintain an impactful research program through strategic projects and partnerships, graduate student support and mentorship, and support for dissemination through peer-review journals, conferences, and symposiums.



Foster enduring relationships within the AWF network and among diverse Southeast Alaskan communities, ocean-users, organizations, and decision-makers through youth mentorship, stake- and rights-holder engagement, and establishing inclusive and equitable practices.





Maintain an active role in the Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network.



Develop a broad, multimedia communication strategy to amplify our mission-driven activities and promote ocean conservation.

Admittedly, I remain concerned for the health of whales, our oceans, and our planet. However, I am confident that these priorities will position us to make a positive and lasting impact towards ocean conservation in Alaska and beyond.

But, we can't do this alone. Your steadfast support and belief in our mission have been a driving force behind our continued growth and success. We hope you will continue to be a vital part of our journey.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andy Szabo'.

Andy Szabo, PhD  
*Executive Director, AWF*







# OCEAN HEALTH PROGRAM UPDATE

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AWF first launched a formal whale health research initiative in 2016. This was motivated by our concerns over declines in whale numbers, record-low calf sightings, and an increase in the number of whales in poor body condition that were linked to a widespread marine heatwave that impacted much of the North Pacific. In the ensuing years, we expanded the program to include a broad set of both whale and ocean health metrics.

Marine heatwaves are predicted to increase in both their frequency and magnitude and so, too, are their

impacts on marine ecosystems. Fortunately, eight years on we are now in a far better position to track how Alaska's whales and their coastal habitats are faring as our oceans continue to warm.

We have recently released a 2023 End-of-Year Research Report that highlights some of the results from what we are now calling our Ocean Health Program (OHP). However, we are proud to highlight some of the other achievements that have come from the OHP.



## Ocean Health Program Metrics of Success

37

Undergraduate interns have joined us at our field station and developed the skills they will need to become the next generation of marine stewards.

8

Graduate students have incorporated data from the OHP into their graduate research projects, and we are planning to support two more students in 2024.



National Geographic Society and Lindblad Expeditions, world leaders in science education and eco-travel, have become long-term supporters of our work.

3

Universities – University of Hawaii at Manoa, University of Alaska Fairbanks and University of Alaska Southeast – are now formal research partners.



Our work has been highlighted in National Geographic's Secrets of the Whales and two PBS Changing Seas episodes (Vanishing Whales and Humpback Health).

2

'Blue-chip' nature documentaries featuring our work are set to be released in the coming year.

### SUMMER SPOTLIGHT

## Whale Necropsy

In September, three members of the AWF field team assisted in a partial necropsy of a whale washed up on a beach in South Hoonah Sound / Peril Strait. The whale was upside-down on the beach, and there were no markings indicating a clear cause of death. Sadly, upon returning to the field station, we identified the whale using fluke images to Epimeletic (SEAK-0562), a well-known & beloved Southeast Alaska whale.





# DISENTANGLEMENT PROGRAM UPDATE

This summer, AWF contributed to NOAA's Large Whale Response Network on multiple missions. In July, our team responded to a report of a well-known whale, Manu, entangled in fishing gear near Juneau. Upon finding Manu, we helped assess the nature and severity of his entanglement, noting that he had crab pot gear laced through his mouth and trailing back beyond his flukes. Unable to approach closely enough to begin removing gear, we helped affix satellite telemetry gear that allowed us to relocate him and monitor his health status once he left the area. Over the ensuing weeks, Manu traveled ~ 700 nautical miles spanning multiple responder districts until, in late July, the erratic satellite pings suddenly stabilized, revealing the tag was no longer affixed to the

Photo by Sean Neilson, NOAA MMHSRP Permit No. 24359

animal. Shortly thereafter, a sport fisher found the gear floating in Frederick Sound, but there was no sign of Manu. Nearly three months passed with no further sightings raising concerns that he did not survive the ordeal. However, in late October, while conducting fall whale health surveys in Seymour Canal – not far from where we received Manu's last location – we found him feeding among a large aggregation of whales! And he was looking healthy (i.e., fat!) with no obvious signs of trauma.

AWF also assisted the National Park Service in the successful rescue of a young humpback near Glacier Bay, Alaska. The whale was severely entangled with heavy gage line and partially anchored to a 300-pound crab pot. Using a 25-foot Kevlar poles affixed with "hook knives", and throwing grapples with cutting blades, the response team made strategic cuts to the lines, allowing the animal to swim away with most of the gear left behind. National Park Service staff were able to match photos of the entangled whale's fluke pattern to a known individual, SEAK-5490, a young whale first documented by AWF in 2021.

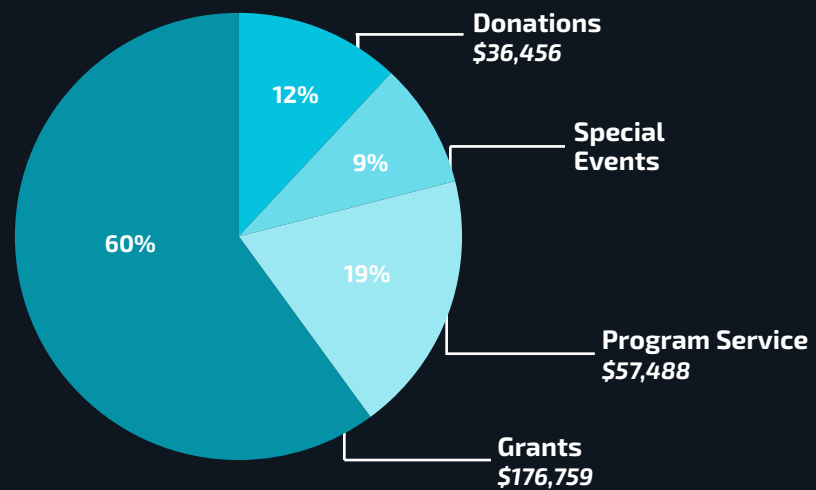




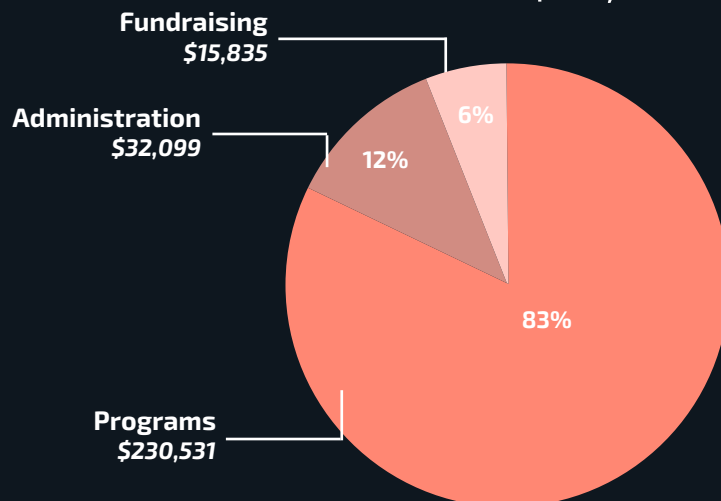
# 2022 FINANCIAL REPORT

*\*Full financial statements available upon request.*

## REVENUE: \$297,328



## EXPENSES: \$278,465





# Personnel



**Andy Szabo, PhD**  
Executive



**Dana Bloch**  
Graduate Fellow



**Martin Van Aswegen**  
Graduate Fellow



**Gussie Hollars**  
Graduate Fellow



**Will Gough, PhD**  
Research Affiliate



**Rocio Prieto Gonzalez, PhD**  
Research Affiliate



**Liah McPherson**  
Drone pilot



**Alyssa Russell**  
Communications



## 2023 Interns



**Annie Bartlett**



**Maeghan Connor**



**Marie Angot**



**Hannah Hughes**



**Jess McCoppin**



**Kristen Alvstad**



**Romina Carnero-Huaman**



### INTERN SPOTLIGHT

## Annie Bartlett

“The feeling of returning to Warm Springs Bay, whether after a year away or simply a long day on the water, is almost indescribable. As you round the corner into the bay, the water calms, the temperature seems to rise, and a thundering waterfall comes into view. But it is the smell—the fresh scent of cedar & hemlock trees—that hits me the most. It is unlike anything I have experienced. Thinking about that now, I’m reminded how fortunate I am to have visited this place for two summers as an Alaska Whale Foundation research intern.”



# Our Board



**Jim Nahmens**  
*President*



**Lauren Eckert, PhD**  
*Vice President*



**Don Holmes**  
*Treasurer*



**Jim Brennan**  
*Secretary*



**Fred Sharpe, PhD**  
*Director*



**Buffy Redsecker, MFA**  
*Director*



**Madison Kosma, MSc**  
*Director*



**Grant Riewe**  
*Director*



**Elsa Sebastian**  
*Legacy Member*



**Pat Sharpe**  
*Legacy Member*



**Steve Morello**  
*Legacy Member*



**In the past year, we have invited four new members to join our Board. Each brings unique and valuable skills and a diversity of experiences that will help guide us as we focus on our strategic priorities.**

- **Lauren Eckert** is a Conservation Scientist, National Geographic Explorer, and storyteller. Her graduate work (University of Victoria) focused on the intersections of Indigenous and Western sciences and relationships between humans and wildlife to better understand and transform conflict that stymies conservation efforts. This work motivated Eckert to delve deeper into conservation science that recognizes humans' important role in global ecosystems, engages communities directly in conservation, and supports human well-being and rights alongside ecosystem protection. Currently, she is an incoming postdoctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia in the Centre for Indigenous Fisheries.
- **Buffy Redsecker** spent eight years on the board of the International League of Conservation Photographers (iLCP), including three years as Board Chair. While there she honed her skills at board recruiting, with an eye for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and began her "love affair with the nitty gritty" of board governance. During the Covid-19 pandemic, she turned her attention to an underserved part of her local community - the Emergency Medical Service (EMS) of the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) and now serves on the EMS/FDNY Help Fund Governance and Nominating committees. As well, Redsecker is President of the SunLight Time Foundation, an organization she co-founded with her husband, Serial Entrepreneur Alan Chung, to support creative and disruptive approaches to traditional problems with an emphasis on planetary health.
- **Madison Kosma** comes with a strong background in research, education, and outreach in Alaska. She has coordinated beluga whale monitoring in Cook Inlet, Alaska as a NOAA sub-contractor, worked as Science Outreach Coordinator and Marine Mammal Stranding Coordinator for the Sitka Sound Science Center (SSSC), was an Alaska Sea Grant Fellow with NOAA Fisheries, and conducted graduate research (University of Alaska Fairbanks) on humpback whale interactions with Alaska's commercial salmon-rearing facilities. Currently, Kosma is developing a PhD project focused on the health of bowhead whales, which are ecologically and culturally important denizens of Alaska's arctic waters.
- **Grant Riewe** brings a wealth of experience from both the corporate and nonprofit worlds. He currently serves as Chief Technology Officer to Vibrant Emotional Health, a non-profit that operates the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline in the United States in partnership with the US Government. Beyond suicide intervention, Vibrant serves communities across the United States to transform mental healthcare access for all. Sought after as an advisor to growing organizations, he is also an Executive Fellow with the University of St Thomas, Opus College of Business, teaching graduate courses in Minneapolis, MN. Riewe was formerly a consultant with McKinsey & Company, a global management firm, and Accenture, LLP, an international technology consultancy. Riewe is committed to leveraging his wealth of experience in developing and executing big-bet innovation strategies to help AWF reach its goal of long-term sustainability.





**Our team of scientists, students, staff, and volunteers work to understand, protect, and inspire appreciation for whales and their coastal habitat through long-term ecological monitoring, research, community-building, mentorship and global engagement.**

As our planet continues to warm, we need your help more than ever in these efforts to ensure the long-term health of whales and ocean ecosystems.

Learn more about AWF's Ocean Health Program, and how you can support it, at [alaskawhalefoundation.org](https://alaskawhalefoundation.org)



**Alaska Whale Foundation is able to achieve its ocean health research and conservation goals in the remote wilderness of Southeast Alaska because of organizations and individuals who are as passionate about our mission as we are.**

**Thank you to our recent funders and supporters:**

North Pacific Research Board  
Lindblad Expeditions-National Geographic Fund  
Baranof Wilderness Lodge  
Lindblad Expeditions  
Whale Song Expeditions  
Maple Leaf Adventures  
Thistle Needworks Inc.  
Hale Family Foundation  
Schwab Charitable  
Fidelity Charitable  
National Philanthropic Trust  
United Way of the Bay Area  
United Way of San Luis Obispo County  
Vanguard Charitable  
Amazon Smile  
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Peggy Spellman  
Shelly Stoltz  
David Thorpe





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