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## NEWS WORLD

PLATT

# Calgary woman killed by whale in boat was tragedy waiting to happen



By Michael Platt, Calgary Sun  
Thursday, March 12, 2015 7:06:00 EDT PM



Jen Karren of Calgary in an undated photo posted to Facebook. Karren died after a whale crashed with the tour boat on which Karren was aboard near Cabo San Lucas on Wednesday, March 11, 2015.

It was a tragedy waiting to happen — except it had never happened before.

There had been near-misses, a few injuries and even sunken boats, but until Jen Karren fell victim to a breaching baleen whale off the coast of Cabo San Lucas in Mexico, fatalities attributed to whale-tourist conflicts were unheard of.

“A Beautiful and gentle soul, so kind and loving. We will all think of you often and carry you in our hearts and memories, You are truly loved,” wrote one family member, underneath a Facebook photograph of a smiling Karren.

The 35-year-old Calgarian, who worked in the mailroom at WorleyParsons, died doing what thousands of tourists before her have done, despite the apparent risk that comes with steering relatively tiny boats through waters teeming with whales, some up to 16 metres long.

Official reports from Mexico’s Federal Attorney for Environmental Protection (Profepa) state that Karren was returning along with eight other tourists, including her husband Trevor Karren, from a snorkelling trip in the Bay of Santa Maria.

The tour, run by a company called Cabo Adventure, was nearing port when their “fragile inflatable boat” came in close contact with a breaching whale, either a gray or humpback.

The captain, José Salazar Tendis, made an emergency turn when the whale jumped out of the water directly ahead — but the boat couldn’t veer fast enough, and reports say the giant mammal crashed down, clipping the tiny craft with its tail.

Two people were seriously injured in the collision, while Karren was struck by the huge tail and thrown from the boat, leading to a rescue by a tour guide and another passenger, who jumped into the water to save her.

The Profepa report says another tourist on the boat, said to be a nurse, started CPR — but even after Naval Rescue paramedics took over, it was too late, and Karren was declared dead at a hospital a short time later.

The mishap has triggered some criticism of the whale watching industry around resorts like Cabo San Lucas, where officials had been reporting a very heavy migration of grays this year.

Taking tourists to see the whales is a thriving industry for locals, and close calls seem inevitable as boats vie for encounters with the majestic beasts.

But until Wednesday, whales and the boats buzzing around them, season-after-season, somehow managed to avoid serious disaster.

“I was wondering if they got too close. You know tourists want to get close, but I do think the captain would know better,” said Catherine Matsalla, a former Calgarian who now lives in Cabo San Lucas.

“It is always a concern. The whales have been super active this year — I have seen more than other years and a lot of breaching. Lovely to watch from a distance but they are massive creatures so being close is a big no-no.”

Wild whales have a virtually spotless record when it comes to human fatalities, though boats occasionally suffer from close encounters.

Perhaps the most famous of modern times took place in 2010 off the coast of South Africa, when a southern right whale was caught on camera crashing down onto a small boat, snapping the mast in two.

Karren’s death in Mexico is unique — and whether a single fatality will change whale watching rules seems doubtful.

A 45-year-old female injured in Wednesday’s collision was reportedly taken to a hospital in the U.S. with serious head trauma, while the other victim, a man, was released after treatment.

Back in Canada, the astonishing tragedy has left family and friends of Karren in a state of disbelief, having lost a young woman whose entire life was an adventure.

Karren, who married Trevor, “the one I love”, in 2012, was an avid traveller, and on her own Facebook page, she talks about trips to South America, Jamaica and Mexico, as well as Thailand.

“I am just shattered to hear such tragic news of such a beautiful giving soul,” wrote a friend on Facebook, echoing the posts of many.

— With files from Bill Kaufmann