San Francisco Bay is popular with whales

Thar she blows: Remember Humphrey the humpback whale, whose much-heralded visits to San Francisco Bay in 1995 and 1996 made him a media sensation? Well, now researchers are beginning to realize that whales in the Bay are not quite as rare an occurrence as they used to be.

The Ecological Society will launch a special research study tomorrow to probe what appears to be a large increase in the number of gray whales visiting the Bay during their seasonal migrations between Alaska and Baja California. According to the institute, whales traditionally have wandered into the Bay only once in a blue moon. But during the past 12 months alone, numerous gray whale sightings have been made from at least 7 to 10 miles northeast of San Francisco.

The new research will help scientists put a finger on just why the Bay has become so popular lately with whales.

Little known: To date, researchers don't know much about whale activity in the Bay. Initial observations, however, show that individual whales have been seen lurking in specific areas for several days.

Groups of up to four whales also have been encountered, usually with one whale from the group breathing directly above the observers. The researchers say that this unusual behavior may be a result of the whales intentionally trying to communicate with humans or to attract attention.

Down with diabetes? If whales are going to return to the Bay, maybe the region could benefit from whale watching. The Ecological Society plans to launch a program to promote whale watching as a way to combat diabetes in the area.

Green acres: Since gardening season is on the way, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission has decided to green the city with a new program. The commission will provide free compost for residents who want to start their own gardens. This will help reduce waste and improve the local environment.

The East Bay Regional Park District also is getting involved. The agency plans to remove invasive species from a section of the park that runs through Sanjou Regional Wilderness. Each year, the agency spends $2 million on this project, but environmentalists are concerned about the loss of native species. The agency has agreed to set aside 20% of the area for native species, which include grasses, shrubs, and trees.

Not only will the landscaping improve the local environment, but it will also provide a boost to the local economy. The commission estimates that the project will create 100 jobs and generate $5 million in revenue for the local economy.