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Protecting Fat Mammals or Carnivorous Humans? Towards an Environmental History of Whales

*Karen Oslund**

Abstract: While the history of the relationship between whales and humans has been generally written as either a history of wildlife protection, or as a history of symbolic relations between humans and animals, this paper argues for the need to see these two aspects of the history in relationship with each other, and against treating them as separate themes. The result of this division has been a methodological entrenchment of the view promoted by some whaling activists: that “modern” whaling and “traditional” whaling are morally opposite to each other. Rather, the paper notes the multiplicity and complexity of human-whale interactions world-wide and points to several cases in which the two stories could be interwoven in order to enlarge the parameters of the field. In addition, the paper briefly summarizes the important events in the environmental history of whales, especially since the establishment of the International Whaling Commission in 1946, and the emergence of the “save the whales” campaigns of the 1970s.

The global history of whale hunting and whale protection over the past two thousand years can be understood as part of two broad and well-established themes of environmental history, namely: the history of wildlife protection and management, which includes the hunting of animals according to certain legal or cultural restrictions, and the history of the symbolic and metaphoric relations between humans and animals, i.e. the history of how humans have understood and characterized animals.¹ When only industrialized, Western societies are

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taken into account, the history of whales and whaling up until the 1960s is usually written almost entirely as a history of the first type, that is, as economic history, political history, or the history of technology. After the 1960s and the emergence of the environmental movement, scholars often include some consideration of the second theme, with its orientation towards anthropology or the history of ideas, in order to understand how various environmental organizations sought to reconfigure the broad public understanding of whales as animals as part of their efforts to achieve bans on hunting whales. This division is of course a very general one, and it applies only to the history of whaling in some Western nations, and not to fishing societies or indigenous peoples, who frequently have long traditions of symbolic and culturally significant relationships with whales. In this essay, I will discuss both aspects of this story, while stressing the need to combine these two histories, thereby showing what environmental history has to gain from a more unified approach to the history of whales and whaling.

Several features of the history of whales distinguish it from other cases of human-animal interactions. Unlike wolves, dogs, or many other animals that are the subjects of environmental history, the nature of whales and their oceanic living environments means that both the hunting and the protection of whales have been international, as well as national and regional, issues, especially since the advent of modern conservation policies after World War II. Thus, the different understandings and meanings that people of different cultures attach to whales have often come into conflict in international discussions, treaties, and negotiations. Whales are not completely unique among animals in this respect, of course, as other animals also have ranges that cross geo-political boundaries, but the extent of the territory in which whales live – from the South Pacific to the North Atlantic to the Antarctic waters – means that an exceptionally large number of nations with widely diverse cultures have hunted and eaten whales and are now involved in international regulations and discussions about whales and whaling. Since environmental history, like many

¹ Some contributions to this topic include Christoph Spehr, *Die Jagd nach Natur: Zur historischen Entwicklung der gesellschaftlichen Naturverhältnisse in den USA, Deutschland, Großbritannien und Italien am Beispiel von Wildnutzung, Artenschutz und Jagd* (Frankfurt, 1994), and Peter Coates, “‘Unusually Cunning, Vicious and Treacherous’: The Extermination of the Wolf in United States History,” Mark Levene, Penny Roberts (eds.), *The Massacre in History* (New York, 1999), pp. 163-184. I include under this description histories of the control of pests; see Mark L. Winston, *Nature Wars: People vs. Pests* (Cambridge, 1997), and Edmund Russell, *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring* (Cambridge, 2001). For some examples of the literature on the symbolic meanings of animals in culture, see Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington D.C., 1996), Signifying Animals: Human Meaning in the Natural World, ed. Roy Willis (London, 1994), and Kay Milton (ed.), *Environmentalism: The View from Anthropology* (New York, 1993), Harriet Ritvo, *Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, 1987) and her *The Platypus and the Mermaid and other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge, 1997).

other fields of history, has often tended to have a national or regional focus on specific, localized environments, environmental historians have largely ignored global issues such as the history of whaling and of the oceans,² while the technological and economic aspects of whaling have received greater attention.³

This material history of whaling has been written largely separately from its cultural history, which has focused either on the folklore of indigenous peoples⁴, or on the role of the anti-whaling movement as part of the history and philosophy of recent environmentalism in the Western world.⁵ However, whales and whaling have also had symbolic significance, apart from their economic value, for other cultures besides the most ancient and the most modern ones. For example, the whales pictured on the seals of medieval Basque towns and the songs and dances that accompany the whale hunt in the Faroe Islands suggest that these animals and this hunt had – and continue to have in the Faroes – particular meaning for these societies. Whales had a different status than other animals, such as codfish and puffin, hunted by these people. They were more than just another source of protein, as these fishing societies used whales as self-representations in a variety of political and cultural contexts.⁶ However, such cultural associations have been insufficiently researched in the context of environmental history, and the tendency for the two histories – the cultural and the economic – to be separated from each other has perpetuated a

² Such an emphasis is beginning to change with the growing influence of world history; for recent examples of this type of scholarship, see John F. Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Berkeley, 2003), Richard P. Tucker, *Insatiable Appetite: The U.S. and the Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World* (Berkeley, 2000), Joachim Radkau, *Natur und Macht: Eine Weltgeschichte der Umwelt* (Munich, 2000), and J. R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth Century World* (New York, 2000) and J. R. and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: a Bird's Eye View of World History* (New York, 2003). The Richards volume includes a chapter on “Whales and Walruses in the Northern Oceans.” Although not primarily environmental history, Helen M. Rozwadowski's book, *The Sea Knows no Boundaries: A Century of Marine Science under the ICES* (Seattle, 2002), is extremely useful for thinking about the history of ocean environments.

³ For example, by J. N. Tønnessen and A. O. Johnsen, in *The History of Modern Whaling* (a translated and condensed version of *Den Moderne Hvalfangsts Historie: Opprinelse og Utvikling*, by R. I. Christophersen, Berkeley, 1982), John R. Bockstoce, *Whales, Ice, and Men: the History of Whaling in the Western Arctic* (Seattle, 1986), Bjørn L. Basberg, Jan Erik Ringstad, and Einar Wexelsen (eds.), *Whaling & History: Perspectives on the Evolution of the Industry* (Sandefjord, 1993), and Sune Dalgård, *Dansk-norsk Hvalfangst: en studie over Danmark-Norges stilling i eurpæisk merkantil expansion* (Copenhagen, 1962).

⁴ See, for example, the articles in Willis (ed.), *Signifying Animals*.

⁵ Niels Einarsson, “All Animals are Equal, but Some are Cetaceans: Conservation and Culture Conflict,” in Milton (ed.), *Environmentalism*, pp. 73-84, and Arne Kalland, “Management by Totemization: Whale Symbolism and the Anti-Whaling Campaign,” *Arctic* 46/2 (1993), pp. 124-133.

⁶ For example, the entanglement of Faroese whaling in the nationalist movement in the islands is discussed by Tom Nauerby, *No Nation is an Island: Language, Culture, and National Identity in the Faroe Islands* (Århus, 1996).

general dichotomy: that certain cultures have “harmonious,” “natural,” or “respectful” relationships with whales (and, by extension, with nature), while other cultures are merely in pursuit of technological advances in hunting and “exploit” whales. This duality has also been a theme in the literature of Greenpeace and other environmental organizations, which drew upon the “noble savage” image in Western culture to create the hero of the “sustainable savage” who respects nature.⁷ This figure, called the “warrior of the rainbow” after a Cree Indian legend in Greenpeace literature, is the moral opposite of the modern Norwegian or Japanese whaler, who, according to this world view, has no feelings for the creatures he hunts and fails to acknowledge that these animals can sing and communicate with each other, are intelligent and nurture their young. While it is undeniable that the near-extinction of certain species and families of whales was largely the result of the actions of people of Western European cultural background, and not of indigenous peoples, it does not follow that the cultures of whaling, and the writing of its history, should be split into two separate and distinct categories. The history of whaling can be better understood if it is not divided sharply in the manner in which the master narrative has been written to date; that is, into a long, pre-Western era of “indigenous hunting,” followed by a period of “commercial exploitation” by Western nations, brought to an end by “nature protection” championed by elite interest groups in developed countries. Rather, it is important to realize that the history of the human relationship with whales is continuous, and that several kinds of relationships between humans and whales have existed simultaneously, even within a single culture. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the categories “pre-modern/indigenous” and “modern/Western” is questionable, since indigenous peoples can also be interested in technological advances, while modern people can also have meaningful relationships with nature.⁸ Equating “modern” with “technological” and “indigenous” with “nature” overlooks the fact that simple

⁷ For an example of this type of association, see Michael Brown and John May, *The Greenpeace Story: the Inside Story of the World's Most Dynamic Environmental Pressure Group* (New York, 1991), a self-published history of Greenpeace. For a historian's perspective on Greenpeace, see Frank Zelko, “*Make it a Green Peace: The History of an International Environmental Organization*” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, Department of History, 2003). Other sources for the history of Greenpeace include, Robert Hunter, *Warriors of the Rainbow: A Chronicle of the Greenpeace Movement* (New York, 1979); David McTaggart with Helen Slinger, *Shadow Warrior: The Autobiography of Greenpeace International Founder David McTaggart* (London, 2002) and David McTaggart with Robert Hunter, *Greenpeace III: Journey into the Bomb* (London, 1978); Pete Wilkinson with Julia Schofield, *Warrior: One Man's Environmental Crusade* (Cambridge, 1994); Jim Bohlen, *Making Waves: The Origins and Future of Greenpeace* (Montreal, 2002).

⁸ The volume *Nature Across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures*, edited by Helaine Selin (Dordrecht, 2003), contains many examples that undermine the opposition between Western and indigenous views of nature. For the already classic theoretical treatment of this issue, see the introduction to William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground. Towards Reinventing Nature* (New York, 1995).

tools such as harpoons are also part of the history of technology, as much as guns and steel-hulled ships are.⁹ Furthermore, it also tends to disassociate fields such as urban history from environmental history, on the grounds that entities such as cities are human-constructed and therefore not “natural.”¹⁰ For the health of the field, and in order to expand its frontiers, both of these constructions should be critically re-examined. The case of the environmental history of whales and whaling provides an example of how such constructions have shaped the writing of this history, and of the advantages of dismantling them.

Whales: Some General Remarks

What are these animals that occupy this ambiguous historical position? Whales are scientifically divided into two types: baleen whales (*mysticetes*), including the blue, grey, right, fin, sei, minke, humpback, Bryde’s whales, and toothed whales (*odontocetes*), including sperm, bowhead, white, beaked, pilot, orca (killer whales), and dolphins and porpoises. Whales inhabit all of the oceans of the world, and some, such as the blue whale, have a global distribution, while others, such as the pygmy right whale, have a narrower range and have only been seen off the southern tips of Africa, South America, and Australia. The health of these whale populations also differs considerably. Right whales, for example, are extremely endangered. They received protected status in 1937, one of the first whale species to do so, and possibly as few as 500 northern right whales remain. They were one of the chief targets for hunters because they are large whales, slow swimmers, whose carcasses could be retrieved easily because they stayed buoyant when they were killed. The numbers of orcas, on the other hand, are unknown, but they have never been systematically hunted, as whalers generally preferred larger whales. Although marine parks such as Sea World often use trained orcas – the most famous of which was probably Shamu in San Diego in the 1970s – to draw attention to environmental issues such as the contamination of the oceans, orcas are in fact numerous and have never been believed to be endangered.¹¹

⁹ The relationship of technology to modernity is addressed by Leo Marx, “The Idea of ‘Technology’ and Postmodern Pessimism,” Leo Marx, Merritt Roe Smith (eds.), *Does Technology Drive History?* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 237-258.

¹⁰ Scholarship in urban environmental history has also done much to undermine this view; see, for example, Joel A. Tarr, *The Search for the Ultimate Sink: Urban Pollution in Historical Perspective* (Akron, 1996), Martin V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore, 2000), and Peter Brimblecombe, *The Big Smoke: A History of Air Pollution in London since Medieval Times* (London, 1987), among many others.

¹¹ A good general guide to the different whale families is Mark Carwardine, *Whales, Dolphins, and Porpoises. A Visual Guide to all the World’s Cetaceans* (New York, 1995). See also Richard Ellis, *Men and Whales* (New York, 1991).

Whaling Before the Environmental Era

Archeological evidence has shown that the consumption of whales by humans began as early as the first century A.D. around the Bering Strait and the fifth century B.C. in Korea.¹² The usual method of early whaling was by using several small boats with six to eight men each, armed with harpoons. The harpoon was made of wood or bone, with a blade of iron or slate that detached upon impact and lodged itself in the body of the whale. The shaft of the harpoon floated freely and could be retrieved later. The harpoon line, made of skin, was attached to the blade by one end and to floats made of wood or sealskin by the other, which both created a drag on the wounded animal and marked its position for the hunters. After the initial hit, the boats then surrounded the whale, using as many harpoons as necessary to kill it. Many whales escaped the hunters, but later died of these wounds. The Greenlandic Inuit in the North Atlantic, Siberian natives, Japanese and Korean coastal fishermen, native communities on the east and west coasts of North and South America, and the coasts of South Africa and New Zealand all used roughly this same technique to hunt whales. Whales were also eaten by people, such as the medieval Icelanders, who had no tradition of hunting whales, but occasionally found animals that had beached themselves accidentally. While this was a piece of good fortune for the local community, Iceland did not develop any traditions of hunting whales prior to the modern period. Another pre-modern method of hunting whales was to drive schools of whales with small boats towards beaches, where they could be killed in shallow waters with long knives, as was the practice of the pilot whale hunt in the Faroe Islands. This hunt is attested by written records in the sixteenth century, but is probably much older. Given the tools at their disposal, these early hunters preferred to take calves and immature animals, of which even one was a significant percentage of a village's yearly meat consumption. The total consumption of whales by peoples using all of these methods prior to the early modern period probably did not exceed several hundred yearly in the entire northern hemisphere, with perhaps an equal number in the southern oceans.¹³

The first European whalers were the Basques, who hunted migrating right whales off the Atlantic coasts of France and Spain perhaps as early as the

¹² Lowren Hacquebord, "'There She Blows': A Brief History of Whaling," *North Atlantic Studies: Whaling Communities 2* (1990), pp. 11-21. This entire volume is devoted to different disciplinary approaches to North Atlantic whaling. For the most recent research in the archeological origins of whaling, see, "Rock Art Hints at Whaling Origins," BBC News Online, April 20, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/ft/-/2/hi/science/nature/3628853.stm>, which places the origins of whaling as far back as the fifth century B.C.

¹³ Sam W. Stoker and Igor I. Krupnik, "Subsistence Whaling," John J. Burns, J. Jermone Montague, Cleveland J. Cowles (eds.), *The Bowhead Whale* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1993), pp. 579-629.

eighth and ninth centuries. Written records from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries document Basque whaling by roughly the same techniques as the hunters described above. Sometime before the sixteenth century, the Basques built larger boats and began to venture further afield to catch whales, reaching Ireland, Iceland, and Newfoundland.¹⁴ The main catch in these waters were bow-head whales in addition to right whales. Newfoundland and the Labrador coast quickly became one of the most productive whaling sites, with probably 25 to 30 Basque whaling boats catching about 12 whales per year each.¹⁵ By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Basques had to compete with other European whalers, including the English, French, Dutch, and Danish boats in the Davis Strait, off Spitzbergen, as well as on the North American coast. Of these groups, the Dutch were the most successful, pioneered by the Noordsche Compagnie until the end of its state-granted monopoly in 1642.¹⁶ The main product of European and North American whaling was not meat, unlike the native hunt, but whale oil produced from the blubber or fat and used for lighting. Oil of this type could also be obtained from walrus and seals, but a single whale could produce considerably more, around 14,000 to 28,000 liters of oil.¹⁷ Although various national companies were granted monopoly rights by nation-states, the early days of whaling were largely an arena of unregulated competition among various national or ethnic groups for access to whales, aside from the general rule that a state had the right to fishing within a 3-mile radius of its coastline. Beyond this was *aqua nullius*, free for the taking. Thus, there was no effort to legislate species conservation prior to the modern age, because whatever one nation did not take, another nation would.

When North Americans started to whale in the eighteenth century off the New England coast, their main target was the sperm whale, which gave less oil, but produced ambergris and spermaceti, used in perfume and candle making. Because sperm whales went further out to the high seas than the right or bow-head whales, whaling boats became bigger, and the Americans began to experiment with processing blubber on board ships, rather than at shore stations.¹⁸ This type of whaling continued to focus on the extraction of oil by boiling blubber, bone, and flesh in large cookers. A demand for other whale products, including sperm oil as a lubricant in machinery and whalebone for various uses in the fashion and home furnishings markets, also developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although kerosene, derived from petroleum production in the eastern United States, ultimately proved to be the cheaper

¹⁴ See Trausti Einarsson, *Hvalveiðar við Ísland, 1600-1939* (Reykjavík, 1987), pp. 9-16 on Basque whaling. Mark Kurlansky, in *The Basque History of the World* (New York, 1999), pp. 43-64, gives a reliable account of Basque whaling, although in a more journalistic style.

¹⁵ Richards, *The Unending Frontier*, pp. 585-589.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 597.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 600-604. For more detailed information on whale products, see Karl Brandt, *Whale Oil. An Economic Analysis* (Stanford, 1940).

¹⁸ Hacquebord, "There She Blows," pp. 18-20.

fuel, and the fashion for corsets made from whalebone passed, overall this period saw a tremendous expansion in whale hunting. After the mid-eighteenth century, the Americans found new whaling grounds in the Pacific and off the Falkland Islands, but the American War of Independence allowed British whalers to gain an upper hand in these territories. Gray whales began to be hunted off the western coast of North America after the settlement of California in the 1840s, but the American Civil War also dampened this trade.¹⁹

The technological turning point in the history of whaling came with the invention of the harpoon gun by Svend Foyn, a Norwegian whaler, in 1863.²⁰ “Industrial” whaling began in the nineteenth century with steamboats, which were replaced later by diesel engines, and armed with harpoons fired from a cannon. A grenade attached to the harpoon exploded inside the body of the whale, and line was fastened to the harpoon, so the whale could be towed back to the shore or to a factory ship for processing. This development made it possible to kill fast swimming fin whales, and intensified whaling in the North Atlantic, to the distress of Norwegian and Icelandic fishermen, who believed that noisy whaling vessels drove fish away from their waters. Bans on coastal whaling around Iceland and Norway backed by the fishermen drove Norwegian whalers into the South Pacific waters around Australia. Russian and Japanese whalers copied Norwegian techniques, and extended their range into Antarctic waters.²¹ By the 1910s and 1920s, so-called “factory boats,” that boiled the blubber and reduced it to oil on ship deck, made it possible to process entire whales at sea and considerably lengthen the voyages. This increased the extent of whaling so much that whales would often be lined up for “processing” along a factory boat.

The over-exploitation and decline of many whale stocks from this intensified hunting, especially of the bowhead, right, humpback, and gray whales, was apparent from the catch records at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the first international agreement in 1937 to protect humpback, gray, and right whales was disregarded because of the demands for meat and oil during World War II. In December 1946, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) was established with 14 member nations: the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, the Netherlands, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Argentina, Denmark, and France. The IWC came into being in a post-war spirit of international cooperation, with the United States taking the lead. It introduced the so-called “blue whale unit” as a measurement tool for whaling conservation, under which a total quota of 16,000 “blue whale units” (compared to a pre-war catch of about 30,000) were allotted to whaling nations in terms of the amount of oil produced by a blue

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Tønnessen and Johnsen, *The History of Modern Whaling*, pp. 25-32.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 35-40.

whale – two fin whales equaled one blue whale, etc.²² However, this scheme did not prevent the over-exploitation of the largest whales, which had also been the most heavily hunted over the previous century. A former IWC secretary has called this period the “Whaling Olympics,” during which IWC functioned as a “whalers club” to protect the whaling rights of nations, rather than whales. The continued threat to whale populations under the “blue whale unit” regime led environmental activists to regard the IWC as the enemy of their interests by the 1960s, and not a neutral forum where their views could be heard.

In 1972, the “blue whale unit” was abandoned, and the IWC adopted the New Management Procedure, based on the principle of Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY), in 1975. MSY, which allows the hunting of a species of whale when it reaches 50-60 percent of its historically estimated stocks, has never been abandoned in theory by the IWC. However, problems of implementation, including disagreements over scientific estimates, lack of information about many whale species, and growing environmental activism led to the total ban on commercial whaling in 1982, which set 1985/86 as the last season of whaling. An exception was made for “aboriginal subsistence whaling,” which was defined as “whaling for purposes of local aboriginal consumption carried out by or on behalf of aboriginal, indigenous, or native peoples who share strong community, familial, or social, and cultural ties related to a continuing traditional dependence on whaling and the use of whales.”²³ Four peoples now have an exception under the indigenous rights clause: the Greenlandic Inuit, the Alaskan Inuit (who share their quota of gray whales with the Makah tribe in the Northwestern United States), the Siberian Inuit, and the natives of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Today, the IWC has 52 member nations, including some countries like Austria and Switzerland that have no history of whaling, or even a coastline. Membership in the IWC is open to any nation that agrees to abide by the 1946 Convention. Members may leave at any time, as Canada did in 1982, and as Iceland did between 1992 and 2002, over disagreements about the commercial moratorium. Countries are also not bound by the regulations of the Commission if they declare by a formal objection that the regulation places their national sovereignty at risk, as Norway did in 1992 when it resumed its commercial whale hunt. The IWC regulates whale sanctuaries, methods of killing whales, and scientific research on whales, but has no enforcement capacity. Rather, maintaining the ban on commercial whaling relies on a coalition of like-minded

²² Figures from Robert L. Friedheim, “Introduction: The IWC as a Contested Regime,” Robert L. Friedheim (ed.), *Towards a Sustainable Whaling Regime* (Seattle, 2001), p. 33. A single blue whale might produce as much as 30,817 liters of oil, in the example cited in Brandt, *Whale Oil*, p. 27.

²³ *Report of the ad hoc Technical Committee Working Group on Development of Management Principles and Guidelines for Subsistence Catches of Whales by Indigenous (Aboriginal Peoples)*, IWC/33/14 1981.

nations, pressure by environmental activists, and the threats of economic sanctions against whaling nations, which are rarely carried out in practice.²⁴

Whaling in the Environmental Era

Whaling takes place today under a much more complex system than prior to 1985, when the moratorium went into effect. From a regulatory standpoint, it can be divided into five categories: indigenous hunting that is carried out under IWC guidelines by the exemption to the commercial moratorium; a commercial hunt conducted by Norway, which has lodged a formal objection to the moratorium; the hunting of whales for scientific purposes by Iceland and Japan, whaling by nations such as Indonesia and Canada that are not members of the IWC, and whaling of “small whales” by IWC members, such as Greenland and the Faroe Islands, over which the IWC has not asserted its competence to regulate. Despite the sometimes inflammatory rhetoric that surrounds some of these practices, especially the sale of the whale meat obtained from scientific whaling, none of these activities is illegal. Although environmental activists sometimes describe the pilot whale hunt and the Japanese sale of whale meat as “pirate whaling,” these are legal practices, and actual “pirate whaling” by unlicensed boats has been sharply diminished by international policing during the 1970s and 1980s.²⁵ Under the weak regulatory system in place, the only whaling that could be called “illegal” would be commercial whaling by an IWC member nation that has not registered an objection to the moratorium, and to the best of anyone’s knowledge, no such whaling is taking place in the world today. However, this does not make these five different types of whaling uncontroversial, and all of these practices have been criticized in public debate in one way or another since the beginning of the moratorium.

The whales that are hunted today include the minke whale, a smaller baleen whale.²⁶ About 500-600 are caught by Norway per year for commercial pur-

²⁴ For a discussion of the tactics of Greenpeace and other environmental organizations, especially their relationship with the media, see Sean D. Cassidy, “Mind Bombs and Whale Songs: Greenpeace and the News” (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, University of Oregon, 1992); Kevin Michael DeLuca, *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (New York, 1999); Paul Wapner, *Environmentalism and World Civic Politics* (Albany, 1996); Dieter Rucht, “Ecological Protest as Calculated Law-Breaking: Greenpeace and Earth First! in Comparative Perspective,” Wolfgang Rüdiger (ed.), *Green Politics Three* (Edinburgh, 1995) pp. 66-89.

²⁵ For an example of such rhetoric, see the website <http://cetacea.org>. There are many other examples of such websites, usually managed by individuals who are whale enthusiasts or environmental activists.

²⁶ The numbers listed below are subject to yearly adjustments and also under dispute by various parties, especially by environmental activists. For sources, I have relied upon the website of the IWC (<http://www.iwcoffice.org>), the website of the World Council of Whal-

poses, a comparable number by Japan under the scientific program, and about 200 by Greenland under the indigenous hunting exemption. Iceland began to catch minke whales again in August, 2003, under its scientific whaling program, after a hiatus since 1989, taking 36 during the 2003/04 season. The current population of minke whales is estimated at more than one million animals worldwide. About 20 fin whales, the second largest whale, after the blue whale, are also killed per year in Greenland, of a population estimated at 100,000 animals. In addition, the Greenlanders take white whales, which are not regulated by the IWC: about 700-1,000 beluga yearly, of a worldwide population that is believed to be 50,000-70,000 animals, and about 500 narwhales per year, of a population estimated at 25,000-45,000 animals. About 20 humpback whales are hunted per year off the coasts of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, of about 15,000-20,000 worldwide. As humpbacks have been otherwise protected since 1966, this is only permitted under the indigenous rights exception. The situation is similar with bowhead whales, which received protected status in 1975. Although their population is estimated at only 8,000-12,000 worldwide, about 280 animals per year are caught by Alaskan Inuit and the Chukotka people in the Russian Federation, under IWC guidelines. Siberian and Alaskan peoples also catch 620 gray whales yearly, from a population of 15,000-25,000; otherwise these animals have been protected since 1946.²⁷

Japan's scientific whaling program also takes about 10 sperm whales, 40 sei whales, and 50 Bryde's whales per year. None of these is believed to be endangered, although the populations are difficult to estimate: perhaps 90,000 Bryde's whales; 40,000-60,000 sei, and an unknown number of sperm whales remain. (Iceland has also proposed catching sei and fin whales along with minke as part of its scientific program, but did not do so during the 2003/04 whaling season.) Japan's short-fin pilot whale and beaked whale catch, of 100 pilot and 50 beaked whales per year, is outside of IWC jurisdiction because pilot and beaked whales are considered "small whales." Long-finned pilot whales are hunted in the Faroe Islands, about 900 per year. The size of this population is also unknown, but it is not considered endangered. The number of whales hunted in Canada, Indonesia, the Philippines, and in other countries that are not IWC members is more difficult to estimate reliably, but in all these cases the numbers appear to be no more than in the hundreds yearly, and more often considerably fewer.

ers, (<http://www.worldcouncilofwhalers.com>), the Japanese Institute of Cetacean Research (<http://www.icrwhale.org>), and Mark Carwardine's *Whales, Dolphins, and Porpoises*.

²⁷ Carwardine, *Whales, Dolphins, and Porpoises*.

Fat Mammals vs. Carnivorous Humans? Whaling Debates in the Age of Ecology

This complex and highly politicized situation has revealed profound philosophical differences between the pro-whaling and anti-whaling factions over the past thirty years of discussion. Who has been endangered, and whose rights should be protected? The answers are far from obvious. When the issue of “species protection” is raised, one thinks first and foremost of animals whose lives or environments are being threatened by human actions. Since the 1970s, when campaigns urged the citizens of wealthy, industrialized countries to donate money or to take certain actions to “save” this or that animal, it is tacitly understood that human actions have placed the animal at risk of extinction and in need of protection. We assume that the “rights” of this animal to survival should assume precedence over the desires of humans for meat, leather, fur, or other such products. However, the Greenlandic Inuit politician and indigenous rights activist Finn Lynge turned the usual formulation of this moral claim on its head when he identified “carnivorous humans” as an endangered population deserving of protection. Lynge, who made this statement in 1988 in response to the Greenpeace anti-sealing and anti-whaling campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, was not referring to carnivorous humans in general, but to indigenous peoples as a group with a particular relationship to meat consumption, to hunting, and ultimately to nature. According to this argument, indigenous peoples have a direct connection to nature, and this particular relationship is not accessible by people who have separated their consciousness from the natural world – that is, by most of the rest of the carnivorous and non-carnivorous humans on earth, who purchase their food from stores in exchange for money. The relationship of indigenous peoples to nature makes their cultures distinctive and deserving of protection from the threats to their traditional food supplies posed by industrialized nations and non-governmental organizations such as Greenpeace. Thus, in the first version of the argument people are seen as the enemies of animals (or the “friends” if we support the campaigns to save them); in the second version, a majority human culture is attacking a minority one, and we are called upon to defend the rights of the underprivileged.²⁸

The current IWC policy attempts to satisfy both of these moral demands: that animals deserve to be protected from humans, and that minority groups deserve to be protected from majority ones. This consensus, however, is not the result of philosophical agreement between the parties, but results from a history marked by negotiation, protests, even violent protests, and compromise in

²⁸ This argument is elaborated in Finn Lynge, *Arctic Wars, Animal Rights, Endangered Peoples* (translation of *Kampen om de vilde dyr*, by Marianne Stenbæk; Hanover, 1992). See also George Wenzel, *Animal Rights, Human Rights: Ecology, Economy, and Ideology in the Canadian Arctic* (London, 1991).

which the two sides not only disagreed, but misunderstood each other's philosophical positions. If we separate the sides into "pro" and "anti" whaling, there was a relatively long period – from the late 1970s to at least the mid-1980s – during which the "pro" whaling side failed to understand what was at stake in the "anti" whaling efforts to achieve a ban on whaling. They did not realize what it was about whaling that the anti-whaling protesters found morally objectionable, and as a result made gestures that were useless or meaningless to the other side, such as reducing their catch of whales, or hunting whales that were believed to be numerous, such as the minke and pilot whales. The anti-whaling side, for their part, did not see the symbolic role that whaling played for whalers, and that whaling had meaning apart from its economic aspects. Therefore, they made proposals that the other side found nonsensical and ridiculous, apparently suggesting to inhabitants of the Arctic that it was more morally correct to eat beef than to eat whale meat. Such ideas made it possible for the anti-whalers to be publicly labeled as either "sentimentalists" or "terrorists" – that is, people outside the realm of rational discourse and negotiation.²⁹

During the period from the late 1970s until the implementation of the moratorium in 1985/86, the pro-whaling factions, unlike the anti-whaling factions, were not organized. Supporters of whaling in many nations, such as Iceland, Norway, and the Faroes, where whaling was not a major component of the economy, did not perceive the anti-whaling factions as fundamentally hostile to their activities. They believed that the protests were mainly aimed against the larger whaling nations such as Japan and the Soviet Union, and did not affect small scale whaling of the type in which they engaged. Their assumption that larger nations should be held responsible for the declines in the whale populations, as well as for most of the environmental problems in the world, was tied to other environmental issues, and especially to the opposition to nuclear weapons, the issue with which Greenpeace first staked its claim in environmental politics. The largest Icelandic daily newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, reported in 1980 that Japan caught 99 of every 100 whales, and Icelandic articles on whaling until 1985 more typically discussed the effect that a whaling ban would have on the Japanese economy than the Icelandic economy.³⁰ Furthermore, since the United States and Great Britain were at the forefront of the anti-whaling movement and the main whaling nations were the Soviet Union and Japan, anti-whaling during the period before the moratorium was seen by

²⁹ For a discussion of the environmental movement's role in public discourse in the United States, see Hal Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?: Environmentalism in the United States Since 1945* (Fort Worth, 1998); Roderick Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison, 1989); Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington D.C., 1993) and Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Green Revolution: The American Environmental Movement, 1962-1992* (New York, 1993).

³⁰ "Hvalur í hættu," *Morgunblaðið*, 16 July, 1980, p. 1.

many pro-whalers as an expression of political opposition to the Soviet Union and economic fear of Japan. Nations such as Iceland and Norway who were friendly to the interests of the United States therefore had no reason to be concerned about their whaling practices. In Greenland, Greenpeace was interpreted as being opposed to commercial whaling and the industrialized seal pup hunt in Canada – issues that were assumed to be irrelevant to Greenlandic interests, as the hunts of these animals were carried out on a much smaller scale there.

Anti-whaling groups saw the matter quite differently. Because of certain perceived characteristics such as intelligence or maternal nurturing, they argued that whales should be treated as “human.”³¹ Since every whale was special and unique, killing even one, for any reason, was the moral equivalent to murder. Who killed the whales, for what purpose, the number of whales that were killed, and what species they belonged to, were secondary issues compared to the central charges of murder and genocide.³² According to the enormous amount of popular environmentalist literature produced about whales from the 1970s on, whales have a “mystique” that “inspires wonder and exhilaration among people from all races and all nations in a way that no other non-human species has equaled so widely.”³³ Whales “have a special affinity for human beings” and a “universal appeal.” This view of whales as unique and highly intelligent animals with a special relationship with humans was also a major theme in films such as *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, featuring the songs of the humpback whale, the three *Free Willy* films about a boy’s relationship with a killer whale, and, more recently, *Finding Nemo*, with a wise whale character who sees the solutions of problems. This way of thinking about whales is identified by some scholars as the logic of “charismatic mega-fauna”: a class of large animals also including elephants and panda bears who have been anthropomorphized into “poster children” for the environmental movement because of their perceived “human-like” nature.³⁴ In a 1983 conference, sponsored in part by the IWC and Greenpeace, the organizers acknowledged that whales, in addition to being of interest in their own right, function as “powerful symbols

³¹ Arguments for the intelligence of whales and dolphins are based more on brain size and structure than behavioral tests, which are usually the measure for intelligence in primates. See, for example, P. J. Morgane and M. S. Jacobs, “Comparative Anatomy of the Cetacean Nervous System,” R. J. Harrison (ed.), *Functional Anatomy of Marine Mammals*, vol. 1 (London, 1972), pp. 117-244. In more popular literature, the size of whale brains is commonly cited as a measure of whale intelligence, particularly the brain of the sperm whale, which weighs about 9 kilograms.

³² Scott McVay has been one of the most popular articulators of this claim in the popular press in the United States, see his “The Last of the Great Whales,” *Scientific American* vol. 215 no. 2 (August, 1966), pp. 13-21.

³³ Robbins Barstow, *Meet the Great Ones: An Introduction to Whales and Other Cetaceans* (Westersfield, Conn., 1987), p. 38. Barstow has been one of the most important advocates of the view that whales and dolphins are uniquely deserving of protection because of their special characteristics.

³⁴ Kalland, “Management by Totematization.”

of environmental concern.”³⁵ As symbols of endangered animals and threatened environments, their main role in popular discussions in recent years has been to draw attention to general environmental concerns about a range of causes, rather than specific debates over the health of certain species of whales, the issue in which the pro-whaling advocates are most interested.³⁶ By the 1980s, the efforts to “save the whales” became such an example of a successful environmental campaign *par excellence* that it began to provoke a cynical commentary that mocked the prominence of whales in environmental activism. Some examples of this type of tongue-in-cheek comments in the United States were the “Dilbert” cartoon drawn by Scott Adams with the slogan “shave the whales” as the punch line³⁷, and the bumper sticker, apparently ridiculing a perceived superficiality of the 1970s activism’s commitment to multiple causes: “Nuke a Gay Whale for Jesus” (several slightly different versions of this slogan exist). Such widely recognizable jokes only testify to the prominence and success that the anti-whaling campaigns have achieved.

After the moratorium went into effect, its “enforcement” was carried out by so-called Greenpeace “actions” where members placed themselves between whaling boats and whales, and by the destruction of whaling vessels and equipment by the Sea Shepherd group, founded by former Greenpeace member Paul Watson.³⁸ American, German, and British firms also threatened boycotts on Japanese, Norwegian, Icelandic, and Peruvian fish products. In the face of an opposition that was now inclined to take more dramatic steps, as they believed they had the consensus of world opinion on their side, the pro-whaling side saw the need to organize itself.³⁹ They formed the High North Alliance in 1991, the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission in 1992, and the World Council of Whalers in 1997, among other organizations that support whaling.

³⁵ *Whales Alive: Report of Global Conference on the Non-Consumptive Utilisation of Cetacean Resources* (Wethersfield, Conn., 1983), p. 19.

³⁶ Other contributions to this literature from the early period of environmental activism include, John Lilly, *The Mind of the Dolphin: A Nonhuman Intelligence* (New York, 1967), and his *Man and Dolphin* (New York, 1961); Karl-Erik Fichtelius and Sverre Sjölander, *Smarter Than Man: Intelligence in Whales, Dolphins, and Humans* (translated by Thomas Teal, New York, 1972); Robert Merle, *The Day of the Dolphin* (translated by Helen Weaver, London, 1967); Rex Weyler, *Song of the Whale* (Garden City, NY, 1986). In addition, Rachel L. Carson’s *The Sea Around Us* (New York, 1951) included a discussion of sea mammals in her comments on the conditions of the world oceans.

³⁷ This is also the title of the second collection of Adams’s newspaper strips; Scott Adams, *Shave the Whales* (Kansas City, 1994).

³⁸ For an account of Watson’s career and position on environmental activism, see Paul Watson, *Ocean Warrior: My Battle to End the Illegal Slaughter on the High Seas* (Toronto, 1994). The website of the Sea Shepherd gives further information about the organization’s current nature protection programs: <http://www.seashepherd.org>.

³⁹ On the “radicalization” of environmental groups, see Christopher Manes, *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization* (Boston, 1990) and Rik Scarce, *Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement* (Chicago, 1990).

The purpose of each of these various organizations is slightly different; for example, the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission, with members Norway, Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroes, envisions itself as a local alternative to the IWC's global authority, and conducts its own scientific research on North Atlantic whale populations in cooperation with Canada. The World Council of Whalers is primarily a group advocating for the rights of whaling peoples. These groups largely model themselves on various indigenous rights organizations that sprang up during the 1970s, such as the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, founded in 1977, and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, which held one of its first meetings in Copenhagen in 1975.⁴⁰

Although this is rarely made explicit in the programs of these organizations, much of the pro-whaling literature tends to treat groups like the Faroe Islanders, Icelanders, and Japanese and Norwegian small-scale whalers as a kind of "indigenous people" by referring to them as "coastal communities," "traditional cultures," "remote communities," "artisanal whalers," or "minorities." This language seeks to blur the categories of "Western/commercial whaling" and "indigenous/subsistence whaling" fundamental to the IWC's current policy. Thus, while arguing along with the IWC policy that, "some people are special," these groups have also attacked the "whales are special" notion by claiming that all whales are not particularly intelligent or nurturing, and, in any case, all animals are special in one way or another, and there is no reason to single out whales in particular. The later point is a rather odd apparent convergence of opinion between pro-whaling groups and animal rights organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), who attack "speciesism" that holds that "some animals are better than others."⁴¹

Thus, although the current IWC policy honors the general philosophical principles advanced by both the pro- and anti-whalers, it has not resulted in consensus on whales or whaling. Rather, it has introduced a new set of questions, among which some of the central ones have been: Should regulation on whaling govern the techniques or tools of hunting, the ethnic or cultural identity of the hunter, the species of animal being hunted, or all of the above? Furthermore, what is the distinction between "minority" and "majority" groups? What characteristics distinguish the one from the other, and who should make this distinction? Such a set of open questions has led legal scholars and political scientists to question whether the weak regulatory system of the IWC needs to be fixed in some way, and whether whaling could be better regulated. There is a good deal of literature on this question in favor of stricter regulations and

⁴⁰ More information about the programs and goals of these organizations can be found at the various websites: <http://www.worldcouncilofwhalers.com>, <http://www.nammco.no>, <http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com> and <http://www.highnorth.no>.

⁴¹ For a statement of PETA's philosophy, see its official website: <http://www.peta.org>. For another version of this philosophy, see Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York, 1990, 2nd edition).

granting genuine legal and regulatory powers to the IWC. However, one scholar argues that the current system, though flawed, is the best that could be expected: like the making of sausage, the process is unappetizing, but the final results are useful. As it makes most parties somewhat unhappy with the organization, while still allowing them enough room to pursue their aims within its structure, the system is described as *Pareto optimal* – the interests of most participants could not be better satisfied by any feasible alternative to the status quo.⁴² This neo-classical economic thinking, in which all the actors are assumed to be pursuing rational self-interest, tends to overlook the fact that the IWC is a meeting place for many nations that do not share the same cultural norms of negotiation or diplomacy, and are not all equally positioned to obtain their goals. An example of the appearance of unequal treatment is the IWC's repeated refusal to grant an indigenous rights exemption for the northern Japanese coastal whalers, while the United States succeeded in obtaining one for the Makah tribe, although the grounds were questionable and highly contested.⁴³

Conclusion

While whales may or may not be “special,” clearly the history and politics surrounding them is, in many ways, distinctive from the human relationship with other animals. Oddly enough, whales have become boundary creatures in anthropological terms – part human, part animal, part domestic and part wild. Usually, by “boundary animals,” anthropologists mean animals such as dogs or cockroaches – creatures that have a history separate from that of humans, but, either by human agency or in spite of it, cross over the thresholds where humans live.⁴⁴ The tourist industry of whale watching, which even sometimes offers opportunities to swim alongside whales or dolphins, encourages the participants to think of these large mammals as animals that they live with, can understand, and be in close communication with – something like pets, in other words. No one really lives with whales – although trainers at marine parks might be said to visit them⁴⁵ – but they have become nevertheless “domesti-

⁴² David G. Victor, “Whale Sausage: Why the Whaling Regime Does Not Need to be Fixed,” *Towards a Sustainable Whaling Regime*, pp. 292-310. See also Peter J. Stoett, *The International Politics of Whaling* (Vancouver, 1997).

⁴³ Namely, because the Makah no longer practiced whaling and had adopted other sources of protein which were easily available to them. The case is discussed at some length in Stoett, *The International Politics of Whaling*.

⁴⁴ For the classic treatment of this issue, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966), especially pages 196-210.

⁴⁵ For a study of some aspects of trainers' relationships with sea mammals, see Susan G. Davis, *Spectacular Nature: Corporate Culture and the Sea World Experience* (Berkeley, 1997).

cated” in a sense by their use as symbols of environmentalism, and “human” through new understandings of their brain capacity and species characteristics.⁴⁶ The use of animals to symbolize humans is a common theme in the history of ideas⁴⁷, and in many recent discussions of whales the analogy is taken one step further: whales are actually treated as people, as a minority group in need of protection. At the same time, they are also animals whose lives are mysterious to humans, who live in an environment where humans do not, and to which humans have no direct access without the use of sophisticated technologies.

Because it fits into this variety of categories, an environmental history of the relationship between whales and humans remains difficult to write. Most contributions to this story concentrate on the regulation of whaling and hunting sea mammals, as Kurk Dorsey does,⁴⁸ or on reconstructing the historical state of whale populations.⁴⁹ Therefore, the fundamental divide that noted at the beginning of this essay, between so-called “Western/industrial” histories of whaling and studies of “indigenous/cultural” whaling has not yet been bridged. In order to do so, scholars would have to take a closer look at societies that arguably contain both whaling cultures. Whaling, for instance, has a different meaning for a business executive in Oslo or Tokyo than it has for the resident of a coastal village in northern Norway or Japan. For the former, it may symbolically represent his nation’s sovereignty by its resistance to the standards imposed by larger nations, but is unlikely to be a major economic concern. To the latter, it is a matter of maintaining an independent local economy, a concern balanced by the fear that a tourist boycott on the whaling issue may damage the local industry. Although in many respects these two individuals do belong to different cultures, when Japan and Norway represent themselves internationally at IWC meetings and in trade agreements, they stand for both meanings of whaling, and the one is difficult to separate from the other. In fact, in the eyes of some anti-whaling advocates, the two cultures are indistinguishable, and one

⁴⁶ For an example of this type of discussion, see Joan McIntyre (ed.), *Mind in the Waters: A Book to Celebrate the Consciousness of Whales and Dolphins* (New York, 1974), one of the best-selling accounts to draw attention to the plight of sea mammals in the age of ecology.

⁴⁷ See Robert Darnton’s classic essay, “Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of Rue Saint-Séverin,” *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984), pp. 75-106, and Clifford Geertz’s “Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cock Fight,” *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973) pp. 412-453.

⁴⁸ Kurk Dorsey, “Putting a Ceiling on Sealing: Conservation and Cooperation in the International Arena, 1909-1911,” *Environmental History Review* 15/3 (1991), pp. 27-46. See also his *The Dawn of Conservation Diplomacy: U.S.-Canadian Wildlife Protection Treaties in the Progressive Era* (Seattle, 1998). Dorsey is currently working on a history of whaling legislation during the twentieth century.

⁴⁹ For example, Louwrens Hacquebord, “Three Centuries of Whaling and Walrus Hunting in Svalbard and its Impact on the Arctic Ecosystem,” *Environment and History* 7 (2001), pp. 169-185.

is not morally different from the other. While there are some scholarly studies that attempt to address the fact that peoples and nations can have multiple types of relationships with whales, such as Stein R. Mathisen's work on Norway and Arne Kalland's studies of Norway and Japan, none have taken up an environmental or multi-national comparative approach.⁵⁰ By doing so, historians could gain a more complex and nuanced understanding of the history of the human relationship with whales and whaling. This is a history that is distinctive in many respects, both because of the nature of the animals involved and the profoundly different ways in which individuals and different cultures perceive them and interact with them. When Clifford Geertz a generation ago identified some animals as being "good to think with," he mostly meant animals like cocks and dogs, animals that were close and familiar to the people that he was studying.⁵¹ While most people never see whales and know little about them, they are also "good to think with" in another sense – for whale protection advocates, for hunters of whales, and for environmental historians as well. For environmental historians, they provide an unusual example of a human-animal relationship that cannot be completely defined by the existing categories in the literature of "pet," "pest," "wildlife," or "beast of burden," but encompasses several of these. Their history encourages us to think across international boundaries, consider environments that are not landmasses, and look at several different cultural relationships with animals in a comparative way. Taking all of these perspectives into account surely would enrich environmental histories of many topics, including those of whales and humans.

⁵⁰ Stein R. Mathisen, "Real Barbarians Eat Whales: Norwegian Identity and the Whaling Issue," Pertti J. Anttonen (ed.), *Making Europe in Nordic Contexts* (Turku, 1996), pp. 105-136. See also Eyðun Andreassen, "Ordinary Europeans from Northern Norway to the Mediterranean: On Gender and Identity in the Faroe Islands," in the same volume, pp. 77-104, Arne Kalland and Brian Moeran, *Japanese Whaling: End of an Era?* (London, 1991), and Mats Ris, "Conflicting Cultural Values: Whale Tourism in Northern Norway," *Arctic* 46/2 (1993), pp. 156-163.

⁵¹ Geertz, "Deep Play".