

Land of the Free – Why not ‘Sea of the Free?’

Commercial whaling has become an increasing problem in countries such as Norway, Iceland, and Japan.¹ Since the placement of the moratorium by the International Whaling Commission in 1986, countries have been required to halt whaling with few legal exceptions (“Whaling”). For various traditional and economic reasons, however, whalers have been able to use these loopholes as a means of continuing whaling at alarming rates. The whaling industry, as a whole, has been declining recently (“Whaling”), and yet, these nations continue to do a disservice to the whales. Since the whaling industry is declining anyway, how can whalers be convinced to stop killing whales? How are whales an important part of the ocean’s ecosystem and national economies, and what benefits would arise if whaling came to a halt, allowing whales to live freely in the oceans?

While whalers may have grounds to argue for the harvest of whales, there are also a considerable number of reasons to halt whaling altogether – many of which outweigh the argument in favor of whaling. Not only has commercial whaling been banned for nearly thirty years, but whaling methods are inherently cruel, and whales also prove to be beneficial attributes to the environment and generate ample funds in living form which far outweigh the funds generated from whaling.

One of the biggest concerns expressed by anti-whaling nations and scientists around the world is the obvious decline in whale populations in the centuries that have followed the birth of the whaling industry. As a result of this nearly eliminatory hunt, seven of the thirteen “great whale” populations have been included on the international “Red List of Threatened Species” because of high concerns that these populations will become extinct (“Do Whales Need

¹ On Monday, 31 March 2014, the International Court of Justice ruled that “Japan can no longer continue its annual whale hunt, rejecting the country’s argument that it was for scientific purposes” (Ahmed).

Protection?”). During the mid-nineteen hundreds, for roughly a fifty year period between 1920 and 1970, whalers in the Antarctic harvested over 350,000 blue whales, “the equivalent of about 400 million humans in weight” (Chadwick 53). In the Southern Hemisphere, the blue whale population has plummeted “from [nearly] 240,000 in 1900 to less than 2,000 now” (“Do Whales Need Protection?”), a reduction greater than ninety-nine percent (Pershing et al. 2). Humpback, western gray, and North Atlantic gray whale populations have also been strongly affected. Humpback whale populations have been reduced from “an estimated 115,000 to 25,000,” western gray whales have been reduced to an approximate total of 150 individuals, and North Atlantic gray whales are now extinct (“Do Whales Need Protection?”).

The drastic decline in whale populations led to the establishment of the International Whaling Commission in 1946. The role of the International Whaling Commission is to “ensure the sustainable continuation of the trade through management of global whale stocks” (Lieberman, Gray, and Groom 524). In 1982, with whaling populations continuing to decline, the members of the commission agreed upon the placement of a moratorium to ban commercial whaling internationally, and in 1986, the moratorium was put into effect (Lieberman, Gray, and Groom 524-525). There are, however, “five legal loopholes through which member countries can continue to carry out whaling,” which include aboriginal subsistence whaling, an objection, a reservation, “special permit” or scientific whaling, and small-scale coastal whaling (Lieberman, Gray, and Groom 526). After the results of the 1982 vote on the moratorium, Norway placed an objection to the ruling allowing the nation to opt out of the moratorium and, therefore, continue commercial whaling (Lieberman, Gray, and Groom 526), currently “killing around a thousand minke annually and is steadily increasing its takes” (Chadwick 54). In 1992, “Iceland left the IWC... and rejoined in 2002 with a reservation,” allowing the nation to continue its commercial

whaling (Lieberman, Gray, and Groom 526). Finally, Japan, prior to losing its court case in the International Court of Justice,¹ bypassed the moratorium under ‘special permit’ circumstances (Lieberman, Gray, and Groom 526) and, since then, has “killed nearly 10,000 whales” (Lieberman, Gray, and Groom 526), “harpooning more than a thousand minkes annually, [now including] 50 fin and 5 to 10 sperm whales” (Chadwick 54).



Cartoonist, Paresh Nath, depicts Japan's, Iceland's, and Norway's exploitation of the loopholes in the moratorium set by the International Whaling Commission (Nath).

Due to conflicting beliefs from member nations, the International Whaling Commission's members are now divided into two opposing groups: the anti-whaling nations, known as the “Modernisers,” and the pro-whaling nations, known as the “Normalisers” (Lieberman, Gray, and Groom 528) both holding different views on how the commission should be run and on the acceptability and continuance of commercial whaling.

Anti-whaling nations argue for the benefits of living whales, for the disadvantages of whaling, and about the increasing issues that whales face in addition to whaling. Arguments for the benefits of living whales include the sequestering of carbon through whales and the economic value in whale watching; the disadvantages of whaling include the cruelty of ‘the chase,’ and the costliness of whaling fleets and weaponry; and, finally, the other issues faced by whale populations include pollution, entanglement, and global warming, among other things.

The whales' greatest contribution to the environment is related to the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Large marine animals, especially whales due to their large sizes, contribute to the reduction of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere in two very important ways. Firstly, though it may seem odd, whale excrement is a vital factor in the reduction of carbon

dioxide. Whale feces are loaded with iron, a delicacy for phytoplankton – marine plants which process carbon dioxide in a cycle known as photosynthesis (“Whale Poo”). Focusing solely on the Southern Ocean, “an estimated 12,000 sperm whales” still in existence excrete nearly fifty tons of iron annually (“Whale Poo”), which contributes to nearly 400,000 tons of carbon dioxide being drawn from the atmosphere by the phytoplankton thriving on ‘whale poo.’ The second important way that whales contribute to the reduction in carbon dioxide amounts is more direct in nature. Whales have an innate ability to store carbon dioxide in their bodies, greatly reducing the amount of carbon dioxide contaminating the Earth’s atmosphere (Pershing et al. 1-2). Unlike phytoplankton, however, “whales and large fish live for many decades;” as a result, the carbon dioxide stored in such creatures will “remain out of the atmosphere for the [animals’ lives]” (Pershing et al. 2). The whaling industry, reducing whale populations in large sums, has caused a great flux in the whale population’s ability to sequester carbon dioxide. According to Pershing et al., “The direct removal of carbon by whaling and fishing... mean[s] that marine ecosystems now store less carbon than they once did” (4). Ceasing whaling in all forms would allow for a restoration in whale populations; allowing whale populations to regrow, specifically “southern hemisphere blue whales,” to their pre-whaling numbers would account for massive amounts of carbon reduction in the atmosphere, an amount “equivalent to preserving 43,000 hectares of temperate forest, an area comparable... to the City of Los Angeles.” Allowing all of the whale populations to grow to their former glory would account for the preservation of “110,000 hectares of forest or an area the size of the Rocky Mountain National Park” (Pershing et al. 4).

Whales also have economic value; in fact, “local communities can derive huge economic benefits from whales without killing them” (“Do Whales Need Protection?”). Operating in more than ninety countries, whale watching has become a booming business, attracting “over 10

million people worldwide” each year (“Whaling”). Whale watching does not only promote tourism, however; it also provides jobs to coastal communities which participate in whale watching excursions and “annually generates 1.25 billion US dollars, making it far more profitable than whaling” (“Whaling”). In some countries, such as Australia, whale watching is more advanced and interactive than in other countries, allowing whale watchers to snorkel while holding on to ropes connected to tour boats. In Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, for example, minke whales have been known to spend hours intriguingly observing snorkelers, even in unfavorable conditions: “one lingered, gazing curiously for 11 hours, swimming against the current to stay close” (Chadwick 53). Since abandoning whaling in 1978, Australia has become an active anti-whaling nation and employs numerous efforts to end whaling in their waters; and, because they are no longer a whaling nation, Australia focuses their efforts to saving their whale populations (Peace 6, 9). Their affection empowers them to work tirelessly to protect their “gentle giants” as they strive to save the whales not only for themselves to admire, but for future generations to admire as well (Peace 6).

When analyzing the disadvantages of whaling, the cruelty in the methods used is of great concern to anti-whaling nations. Modern whaling fleets use weapons known as “penthrite harpoons,” which have grenades attached to the ends; these modern weapons are designed, literally, to “explode inside the whale’s body” (“Whaling”). With vast improvements in whaling weaponry, even aboriginal whalers have turned to the use of harpoon guns; however, even a weapon as lethal as such fails to do justice to a quick death for such a large species, resulting in “death agonies” for the whales which could last for hours (Chadwick 54). Due to the conditions which whalers are exposed to, it is nearly impossible to “ensure a swift and humane death” (“Whaling”). Sea conditions often make visibility inadequate and the whalers fire harpoons

“from a moving ship at a submerged, moving target,” frequently resulting in a second harpoon being fired or multiple gunshots (“Do Whales Need Protection?”). When asked to describe what she witnessed during a “whaling expedition,” ship physician Dr. Lillie stated: “If we can imagine a horse having two or three explosive spears stuck into its stomach and being made to pull a butcher’s truck through the streets of London while it pours blood in the gutter, we shall have an idea of the present method of killing. The gunners themselves admit that if whales could scream, the industry would stop, for nobody would be able to stand it” (“The Cruelty of Whaling”). More often than not, the whales suffer from “massive shock, blood loss and internal injuries”



Mother whale and calf dragged on to Japanese ship (Australian Customs Service).

(“Whaling”), each of which do not result in an instantaneous death, but rather an ongoing struggle for life. In 2002 and 2003, Norway reported that “1 in 5 whales (20%) fails to die instantaneously,” and Japan disclosed that an estimated “60% of whales... failed to die as soon as they were shot” (“Whaling”). With so many whales failing

to die upon initial impact, anti-whaling nations have strong support for their argument.

Whaling, as opposed to its economic counterpart, whale watching, is not economically beneficial. Although the meat harvested from whale catches is sold on markets in whaling countries, “the return from meat sales is meagre” (Peace 5). Whaling also employs few workers – those who work on whaling ships and in factories – as opposed to whale watching companies who employ far more workers for various other jobs. In addition, whaling fleets face “recurrent costs [which] constantly escalate” (Peace 5). When dealing with whaling fleets, owners and managers face payments for upkeep, fuel, and employees, as well as the maintenance, rent, and employment in factories which process whales. Funding for the continuance of whaling is

heavily reliant on the national governments of participating nations; “[it] is heavily subsidized, generates no profit, employs few workers and faces rising cost” (Peace 8). When weighing the options – whale watching versus whaling – in terms on economic benefits, the better choice should be clear: an industry generating over one billion dollars annually (“Whaling”) rather than an industry which “generates no profit” (Peace 8).

In addition to whaling, whale populations face a number of other threats, primarily caused by humans. According to a study conducted in 2008 and published by the *Science* journal, “few, if any, areas of the oceans are free from human impact” (ctd in Rieser 405). Whale populations are also threatened by noise pollution, contact with ships, fishing line entanglement, “ecological interactions with fisheries,” and climate change (Rieser 405). Noise pollution affects whale populations by “degrading the underwater acoustic environment” which whales use to communicate with others and in order to hunt for prey (Rieser 405). Whales migrating through the Atlantic, from the shores of the southern United States to the northern United States, swim through “some of the world’s busiest shipping lanes and densest fields stationary fishing gear” (Rieser 405). The potential for impact, therefore, is greatly increased during migratory months and too many whales are being affected by passing ships and fishing lines. In addition, commercial fisheries aimed at raising species of zooplankton and krill force whales to need to search longer and harder to find prey and maintain their health (Rieser 406). Climate change, “the greatest long-term threat to... all cetaceans” is effecting the everyday lifestyles of the whale populations, causing “acidification, changing oceanographic conditions, [and] reduction in habitat for prey species” (Rieser 407). These alterations in the whales’ habitat will ultimately cause a great reduction in the prey species which whales depend upon to survive, forcing the whales to travel farther in search of food, which “could affect mating and reproductive success”

due to lack of energy and resources (Rieser 407). Whales, being some of the “slowest-reproducing of all animals” (“Do Whales Need Protection?”), already face difficulty in rebuilding population sizes; adding other threats to the mix does not produce favorable odds for allowing whales to regrow their population sizes to their former glory.

Pro-whaling nations, on the other hand, argue that there are disadvantages to living whales and that there are benefits to whaling, an argument that revolves heavily around tradition and declining fish stocks. Japan, especially, constantly justifies whaling with two main points: whale meat has long been part of their cultural diet, and the whales are “vacuuming” up the fish populations (Chadwick 54).

One of Japan’s key arguments which justified their ongoing ‘special permit’ whaling was that it is traditional, in Japan, to consume whale meat. The current demand for whale meat, however, is much lower than in previous times, with only small portions of the population continuing consumption of whale meat (“Whaling”). In other whaling countries, too, the demand for whale meat is considerably low. With supply far exceeding demand, stockpiles of whale meat have been on the rise, going to waste and yet, still being added to (“Whaling”) and, in some countries, it has been discovered that the excess whale meat has been “render[ed]... mainly for pet food” (Chadwick 54). Those who do continue to consumer whale meat should take precaution: “contaminant levels are dangerously high in whale... meat, blubber, and organ meats” (Freeman). Because whales contain high levels of fat, which is where “many of the contaminants accumulate,” those who consume whale meat are at a greater risk of poor health than those who do not (Freeman). Contaminants reported to have been found in high levels in whale meat include “DDT, PCBs, HCH, dieldrin, and chlordane” which are “highly toxic, [exceed] safe levels, and would consequently threaten the peoples’ health” (Freeman). Those

who chose to consume whale meat are cautioned against doing so, as the contaminants found in whale meat could lead to “developmental and neurological abnormalities, and reproductive, kidney, liver, circulatory, and immune system disorders” (Freeman).

Declining fishing stocks, Japan’s second key argument, is also being examined by scientists around the world. Japan, and other countries, have claimed that whales are “vacuuming up” the world’s fish populations, causing a major drop in fish stocks left for human consumption. The primary cause, however, of the decline in fish stocks is largely due to “the countless nets sweeping the world’s waters,” many of which hail from Japan. In addition, “most whales eat krill, plankton, and squid, not fish” (Chadwick 54). Those whales which do consume fish, though, often eat fish species which are not specifically targeted by fisheries; rather, they prey on other major predators which do consume “commercially important fish” (“Do Whales Need Protection?”). When previously analyzing other threats to whales, researchers had noted the decline in the availability of whale food due to commercial fisheries which targeted species of zooplankton and krill sought by whale populations. Japan’s argument, therefore, is backwards.

The arguments opposing whaling are overwhelming, and those promoting whaling overwhelming under-supported; but the lack of awareness among the general public is of even greater astonishment. In 2008, a study was conducted to analyze the awareness of whale conservation and whaling policies of the United States. Two-hundred and twenty student volunteers from George Mason University were asked to fill out a questionnaire to reflect their belief of what policies were actually held by the United States government (Parsons, Rice, and Sadeghi 123). On the questionnaire, four questions pertained to conservation issues and whaling policies:

- 1) What did the participants consider to be the most threatened whale species worldwide?

- 2) Had the participants heard of the International Whaling Commission (IWC)?
- 3) What did the participants think the IWC did?
- 4) What did the participants think the United States Government's current policy was with respect to whaling? (Parsons, Rice, and Sadeghi 123).

The results from the survey revealed an extreme lack of public awareness among the public of the United States. Less than five percent (4.8%) of respondents chose the correct answer to the

"Awareness of Whale Conservation Status and Whaling Policy in the US" (Parsons, Rice, and Sadeghi 124).

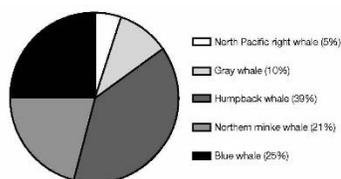


Figure 1. The opinions of participants as to which whale species is most endangered, by percentage of respondents.

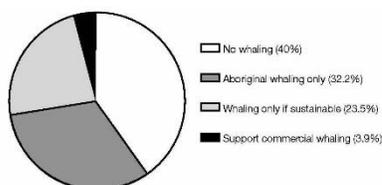


Figure 2. The opinions of participants as to the US government's policy on whaling, by percentage of respondents.

first question, being unable to identify the most threatened

whale species from a given list (See Fig. 1); less than one quarter of the respondents had knowledge of the

International Whaling Commission, of those who did,

however, approximately ninety-three percent had correctly

identified the function of the International Whaling

Commission; and approximately twenty-four percent of

the respondents could identify the option closest to the

United States Government's policy on whaling (See Fig. 2)

(Parsons, Rice, and Sadeghi 123-125). Regardless of their

belief of United States' policy, a study conducted by Kellert revealed that seventy percent of

Americans disapprove of commercial whaling. In addition, another study conducted by Freeman

and Kellert revealed that forty-eight percent of Americans are "opposed to whaling under any

circumstance" (ctd in Parsons, Rice, and Sadeghi 122). The public sees no changes being made

to policies and no evident desire to change the standing policy on whaling: "this is why

government failure to realize a satisfactory outcome grates so badly with the public: having

promised so much, those in power have failed to deliver and lag behind public opinion" (Peace

7). The lack in public awareness is evident; “government agencies dealing with whaling issues... need to increase their outreach campaigns” and be able to reach more isolated populations of the nations, such as those in the mid-United States not located near the coast (Parsons, Rice, and Sadeghi 126).

The abundance of support provided to aid the anti-whaling arguments and the apparent lack in awareness of whale conservation and whaling policies is a desperate cry for help, calling for the government to bring an end to the harvesting of whales. The environmental and economic values of living whales, coupled with cruelty in whaling methods and the costliness of maintaining whaling fleets, far outweigh the arguments that whaling is traditional and that whales consume too large of amounts of the world’s fish stocks. Whale populations are in dire need of help from the same people putting them in danger; the governments needs to put an end not only to whaling, but also to the other dangers to whale populations. Douglas Chadwick concludes: “[Whales] have the power and majesty to change how the game is played... the juice to change ideas about us being the pinnacle of creation. If they do, we’ll have no choice but to abandon our self-imposed isolation chamber and enter into a true communion with nature” (72). It is time for humans to realize the negative impacts they have on the environment, specifically to the marine environment, and work together to bring peace to marine life; it is time to save the whales.

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