

## **Cetacean hunting: known and unknowns**

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Symposium on the State of the Conservation of the Whales in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: New York 12th-13<sup>th</sup> April 2007

There are over 80 species of cetaceans, whose habitats ranges from the open ocean, to the coastal environment and even to estuarine and fresh water environments. Yet, despite the seemingly ubiquitous nature of this group of animals, our understanding of a great many aspects of their life cycles remains a mystery.

There are also many practical challenges to accurately estimating cetacean abundance. These difficulties are further compounded by the challenges associated with drawing a line around biologically significant cetacean populations. Probably the greatest conservation challenge for cetaceans is to define and then properly protect these populations.

Individual cetaceans and cetacean populations are also vulnerable to a range of anthropogenic threats. These include:

- habitat loss and degradation;
- chemical pollution;
- marine debris;
- noise and disturbance;
- fisheries interactions & bycatch;
- hunting;
- ship strikes;
- mass mortalities and infectious disease; and
- climate change.

How these threats impact individuals and population, both in isolation and cumulatively, remains a matter of much research. Among these threats, climate change - and oceans acidification - may prove to present some of the most significant pressures on cetacean populations in the current century. Whilst the impacts of climate change may initially impact cetacean populations living in or coming to feed in polar regions most dramatically, it is also likely to present pressures on a number of levels across the full range of aquatic ecosystems on which cetaceans depend.

In addition to the many pressing conservation issues that may influence the future success of cetacean populations which are targeted by hunting, there are also a number of welfare issues related to cetacean hunts which render whaling practices inherently inhumane. There are certain variables associated with hunting cetaceans for which it is extremely difficult to take mitigating action. These include the difficulties associated with accurately striking a moving target from a moving vessel, the influence of sea state and other weather conditions, variation in marksmanship skills, the inadequacy of the killing

methods used relative to size and morphology of the targeted animal, the difficulty associated with accurately assessing when a hunted cetacean is dead and the possibility of some individuals being injured and then escaping to suffer an unknown fate.

The welfare of hunted cetaceans should be considered from a scientific perspective, but the paucity of complete datasets for cetacean killing presented to the International Whaling Commission (IWC) by whaling nations undermines the ability to undertake independent empirical assessments of cetacean killing.

Science is beginning to shed new light on the cognitive abilities of cetaceans and cultural transmission of information across generations. This has repercussions for how we interpret welfare issues, the importance of individuals (and their potential loss) within populations and for our assessment of the complexity of cetacean societies.

Ethical concerns relating to the hunting of cetaceans relate both to the issue of conservation impacts on populations (which when inhabiting areas beyond exclusive economic zones are considered to be part of the global commons) as well as the inherently inhumane nature of cetacean hunts which are conducted for primarily commercial purposes.

Furthermore, 'Scientific' or special permit whaling resoundingly fails to meet the commonly accepted '3R' objectives for animal experimentation.

- There has been no **Reduction** in the number of cetaceans killed under special permit; to the contrary the number of individuals and the range of species killed under special permit have increased in recent years.
- There has been no **Refinement** of the techniques used: to the contrary the methods used to kill minke whales during the Japanese hunt in the Antarctic, which reportedly render only approximately 40% of minke whales dead 'instantaneously', are now used to kill considerably larger species, in what could instead be described as an 'un-refinement' of methods.
- There has been no **Replacement** of lethal research with other non-lethal methods, despite the best efforts of scientist to raise the viability of other available options.

Fundamentally, nations conducting special permit whaling are failing to meet their ethical obligations in relation to the more recently coined 4<sup>th</sup> R – '**Responsibility**'.

There is a growing public interest in the whaling issue once again. Concerned non-governmental organisations are beginning to detect a groundswell of public interest in some whaling nations, particularly in relation to the conservation of whale populations, the welfare of hunted cetaceans and human health issues associated with eating whale meat.

There is currently both an international moratorium on whaling and a ban on international trade in whale meat. The moratorium is being undermined through legal loopholes in the treaty. However, the work of the IWC Scientific Committee over the last two decades has been very valuable to cetacean conservation, for example, the

exploration of possible environmental threats to cetacean populations, the monitoring of whale watching and the assessment of the conservation status of many small cetacean populations. The advice of the Scientific Committee in such matters is widely followed all around the world and its role in this respect needs to be maintained in the face of calls from some whaling nations to limit or extinguish such work.

Limited understanding of cetacean life cycles, coupled with: the uncertainty associated with estimating cetacean populations; the potential impacts of increasing anthropogenic threats; and demonstrated aversion of the industry for robust monitoring and compliance mechanisms, cast significant doubt over the notion that cetaceans can ever be hunted in a sustainable fashion.

Growing understanding of the compounding threats to cetacean populations, in addition to the fact that cetaceans cannot be guaranteed a humane death, renders the killing of cetaceans, whether in coastal areas or in the deep ocean, an anachronistic undertaking which should be resigned to the catalogue of human follies associated with the last century.

Whaling by any name, whether it is 'scientific', 'coastal', 'commercial' or 'community' is inherently cruel and the lesson of history is that it is most unlikely to be sustainable. Visionary thinking is required for the global protection of cetacean species in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A bold strategy for preserving cetacean populations is required which does not yield to unsubstantiated minority opinion, but is instead informed by modern scientific understanding.