

## **RAY GAMBELL**

# **Whaling—a Christian Position**

---

*Whaling has a long history of depleting successive stocks and the whale has become the symbol of our mishandling of environmental matters in general. The biblical foundation for man's dominion of nature should be the source of a sound conservation ethic. It implies responsible stewardship, including the taking of no more than sustainable harvests. In the case of the whales this has not happened, through ignorance and greed. The problem of humane killing of animals is highlighted. The question of whether or not whales are 'intelligent' is left open; but they are not made in the image of God as is man, and are not his equal. Certain Arctic communities are dependent on whales for their subsistence, with no reasonable alternatives available, while some other coastal villagers have a long whaling tradition, so that its prohibition causes them hardship. We need to be responsive to these human needs.*

**Key Words:** Conservation ethic, dominion of nature, human need, humane killing, intelligence, image of God, stewardship, subsistence, sustainable harvests, whaling.

---

### **Introduction**

Whales have been hunted by man since the earliest times for the food, oil and other products which their bodies yield. As soon as the capacity and technology to drive ashore, net, or pursue and harpoon these animals was developed, so the various members of the whale family became prey to hunters around the world.

Commercial whaling, dating from the 12th century or earlier, led to the successive depletion of one stock of whales after another over the years. Hunting initially was confined to the slow swimming species of whales which float when they are dead. It started in the more sheltered near-shore waters, but as the whales which frequented these coastal areas became scarcer and the ability of vessels to range safely over the wider oceans increased, so the whale fisheries expanded into a world-wide industry. However, the catching power always became greater than the reproductive capacity of the whale stocks. In the latest phase of whaling, during the last 100 years, explosive grenade harpoons fired from a cannon mounted on the bow of a fast steam or motor driven catcher boat permitted even the swiftest of the whales to be successfully pursued and killed. The history of commercial whaling has therefore been one of repeated discovery, over-exploitation and collapse, encouraged by the short-term profits to be made from the large carcasses.

## The Issues

The whale has become the symbol in recent years for much of what is generally thought to be wrong with our handling of environmental matters. Particularly since the 1972 United Nations Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment the issues raised by whaling have been an important focus for the whole conservation community. More recently the widespread concerns over the physical damage we are causing in the world, such as the greenhouse effect and global warming, have taken the headlines, but with respect to biological renewable resources, the whale is still a powerful image. The issues which whaling itself raises can be considered under the following headings:

- over-exploitation and depletion of a resource, and disturbance of the marine ecosystem
- the humane killing aspect of the whale hunt
- the ethics of killing a sentient, large-brained mammal

Whaling also brings to the fore a number of questions for the Christian about our responsibility under God for the world in which we live, our utilisation of natural resources, and the way in which we manage these matters.

The story of Creation in Genesis 1 makes it plain that in the beginning God created everything in the world, including 'great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm.' (verse 21)

In addition, God gave his human creation a positive mandate and responsibility to manage the rest of the creation:

'So God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over everything that moves upon the earth." ' (verses 27,28)

The key question then is, how is this dominion to be exercised? Does dominion mean domination, or does it carry with it a sense of wise and responsible use? The latter must be the case for when God gave the animals into Noah's care he said 'I shall demand an accounting.' (Gen. 9:5).

Since man is created in God's image, it is inconceivable that we should be meant to behave in a way which clearly will spoil what God saw as good in his creation. We are put on earth to manage all the resources on God's behalf. A picture of this responsible approach is given in God's command to Adam to tend the garden (Gen. 2:15), and this God-given role is one of enhancement and utilisation, but not despoiling, of the world in which we live and on which we depend. The fact that we have not lived up to this high calling in no way negates this interpretation of God's intention, but demonstrates both our folly in ignorance and our wilful neglect of a proper approach to the natural world, often through greed or in pursuit of short-term gain.

---

## Whaling—A Christian Position

---

There is no scriptural warrant for regarding whales as any kind of 'special' animals, to be treated in a way different from the rest of the created order. They should therefore exemplify our general approach and attitude towards responsible stewardship of the earth's resources, but with some particular features due to the fact that they are such large, spectacular creatures living freely in the wild.

### ***Over-exploitation***

Whaling reached its peak during the twentieth century. Most of the whale stocks in the Northern Hemisphere had been depleted, and the centre of the industry moved to the newly discovered and previously untapped grounds in the Antarctic. The wealth of the whale resources there was so great that the whalers, with their greatly increased catching and processing capability brought about by the introduction of the floating factory fleets, were able to produce more oil (the primary product at that time) than the world could consume. The major whaling companies therefore set production limits for themselves to maintain both the market and price for the oil, and the governments of the whaling nations started to establish the legal framework for a proper international system to regulate the industry. This led to the formation of the International Whaling Commission as the inter-governmental body charged with the conservation of the whale stocks and the regulation of the whaling industry world-wide.<sup>1</sup>

However, the economic pressures from the whaling companies largely outweighed any scientific advice available until recent years. Thus, despite the setting of increasingly restrictive catch limits over the last quarter century, many whale stocks are now significantly reduced in abundance and have been progressively put under total protection from commercial catching. There is considerable uncertainty and indeed controversy about the precise abundance of the various stocks and their status and trends. This resulted in the call for a pause in all commercial whaling with effect from 1986 by the member nations of the International Whaling Commission, to allow a respite for the stocks and to give time for the scientists to carry out a comprehensive assessment in greater breadth and depth than previously possible.

The whaling nations argue, with some justification, that there are certain stocks which are still sufficiently abundant for a reasonable harvest to be continued. They point to the human social and economic hardships which result when an industry which is often very localised is suddenly terminated. The proponents of the opposite view maintain that the industry and the governments concerned have had sufficient time to adjust and take appropriate measures for the workforce and the investment involved. Given the past history of whaling, and the uncertainties which exist over

---

<sup>1</sup> N. A. Mackintosh, *The Stocks of Whales*, Fishing News (Books) Ltd, London, (1965), pp. 144–159.

the sizes and trends of the whale stocks, they believe that the whales should now be given the benefit of the doubt.<sup>2</sup>

The biblical basis for harvesting is clearly one developed on a conservative approach to nature:

'If you chance to come upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting upon the young or upon the eggs, you shall let the mother go, but the young you may take to yourself; that it may go well with you, and that you may live long.'

(Dt. 22:6, 7).

In other words, the hunter may take a harvest, but he should allow the provider of that harvest to continue to be able to produce the eggs or young into the future.

The difficulty, with respect to the whales at least, lies in the fact that we have insufficient knowledge to be sure of what any particular level of harvesting will do to the stocks. If there was certainty that a particular catch was within the reproductive capacity of a whale population to sustain, then there would be less cause for concern. As it is, given the lessons of over-exploitation in the past when the scientific evidence was not irrefutable, there is a strong argument now for more-than-prudent conservatism.

Apart from the direct impact of whaling on the whale stocks themselves, there is some evidence that removal of a significant proportion of the baleen whales from the Antarctic has had an indirect effect on the other members of that ecosystem. The baleen whales are filter feeders which consume large quantities of the shrimp-like krill which is abundant in the region. These animals are also the primary food source for many other Antarctic species, and it has been suggested that crabeater and fur seals, as well as several species of penguins, are all increasing in numbers in the absence of the whales with which they previously competed for food. Reduction of the baleen whale stocks has altered the balance of the species in the ecosystem, and it is doubtful if it can return to its former position; certainly we have no way of directing such a reversal in our present state of ignorance of the competitive factors which must exist.<sup>3</sup>

Thus whaling appears to have had a profound effect on at least one major ocean ecosystem as well as on the whale stocks themselves. Many people would argue that there must be a much greater degree of understanding of the level of whale stocks and their integration into the marine ecosystems of which they are a part before whaling is permitted to resume. Vegetable and synthetic substitutes for whale products are available, and the commercial users have already turned to these alternative and more reliable sources of supply.

The fact remains, though, that there is a market ready and waiting for

---

2 'Chairman's Report of the Fortieth Annual Meeting', *Rep. Int. Whal. Commn.*, (1989), pp. 5-29.

3 R. Gambell, 'Birds and Mammals—Antarctic Whales', in W. N. Bonner and D. W. H. Walton (eds). *Antarctica*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, (1985), pp. 239-40.

whale products, which is now chiefly meat for human consumption. In Japan, the primary market, whale meat was a cheap form of foodstuff deliberately encouraged as a way of helping to alleviate the severe shortages immediately after the second World War. It was a staple element in school meals, but with the decrease in availability it has become much more expensive and something of a gourmet item in a few selective restaurants, as well as continuing as an important component in the traditions of the whaling communities.

### ***Humane Killing***

Modern commercial whaling is carried out by fast catcher vessels which chase the whales first detected by sighting the blows as the animals surface to breathe. The chase ends when a harpoon is fired and the explosive grenade on the tip shatters inside the body of the whale.<sup>4</sup> The intent is to cause death instantly by the concussive force of the explosion, through dislocation of the spinal cord, or massive laceration of major blood vessels leading to rapid loss of consciousness.

However, due to the technical difficulties of accurately shooting the harpoon into the whale, death is not always instantaneous, and additional harpoons may be used. Depending on the whaling operation concerned and the skill of the individual gunners, median times to death for the large whales have been reported ranging from two to six minutes.

Humane killing standards for animals on land in many countries generally require unconsciousness or death to occur instantaneously or within seconds. Trapping standards for wild animals may require this to happen within three minutes. The nervous system and parts of the brain which relate to the perception of pain are as well developed in whales as in humans. The death times for whales are therefore considered by many people to be unacceptably long, especially when added to the fear and terror of the chase.

Hunting of the small minke whales, which constituted the greater part of the catch in the last few years before commercial whaling was ended, was carried on without the use of the explosive grenade in the harpoon, because of the amount of damage caused to the meat—the main product. The International Whaling Commission banned this technique with its even longer death times, and as a result both Norway and Japan developed harpooning systems which have significantly improved the times to death. These advances in explosive and fuse technology are now being transferred to other whale hunts, including the aboriginal subsistence catches in the Arctic.

The American philosopher Tom Regan has argued that since the objectives of the whaling industry (to generate products or ingredients for

---

<sup>4</sup> E. D. Mitchell, R. R. Reeves and A. Everly, 'Bibliography of Whale Killing Techniques', *Rep. Int. Whal. Commn.*, Special Issue 7, (1986), pp. 1-161.

products that can compete successfully in the market place) can be achieved by means that do not cause significant pain, the pain caused by that industry is gratuitous and the activity that causes it, whaling, is morally unjustified when viewed from this vantage point.<sup>5</sup>

The biblical view on care for animals, including the limitation of stress or pain, can be deduced from passages such as

'A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast.'

(Prov. 12:10)

'What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?'

(Matt. 12:11)

There is no suggestion that keeping animals with the intention of using them for meat is wrong for the Christian, and there is no general biblical prohibition on the use of animals for food, nor on the fact that they will have to be killed for that purpose.

However, whilst the present techniques for killing whales are thought to be the best available, they clearly leave much room for improvement when set against any acceptable standards of assessing humaneness used on land.

### ***The Ethics of Killing Whales***

Whales are mammals—suckled by their mothers for some months following birth and with continuing social bonding within groups, the extent and duration varying between the different species. There are numerous accounts of whales aiding injured or weak members, and behavioural observations suggest that whales often relate to one another and appear to establish and experience social inter-actions which are meaningful to them.

The adaptations and specialisation of the body suit whales uniquely for their marine environment. The brain is also developed to a large size both in absolute terms and in proportion to body weight. The area of the brain (the neocortex) which corresponds in humans to the part controlling emotions and cognitive activity is well developed and differentiated in whales, as in many other social animals. Much of the complex brain is undoubtedly involved in the very highly developed capacity for sound communication and echo-location, which is the primary sense in these animals. The brain must be used in the storage and interpretation of large amounts of information obtained in the form of sounds, echos and repeated patterns of vocalisation or 'songs', although the full meaning and use of all these acoustic signals is as yet unclear. However, there is also some evidence that cetacea may lack the latest stage of brain cortex development characteristic of primates and many other mammals.<sup>6</sup>

---

5 T. Regan, 'On the Ethics of Whaling', a submission to the Conference on Cetacean Behaviour and Intelligence and the Ethics of Killing Cetaceans, Washington, D. C., (April 1980), p. 13.

The ability of some small members of the whale family in particular—the dolphins—to learn and initiate novel behaviour when trained for display or other activity, both in captivity and when released back into the wild, has been interpreted by some people as further evidence that whales are 'intelligent' animals. However, others are more sceptical. Perhaps this is a question best left open, while recognising the highly evolved brain of the whale, and the potential for high cerebral activity and intelligence.

What cannot be left open for the Christian is the common extrapolation from the popular view that the whale is one of the

'two mountain peaks of evolution on planet earth—on land . . . human beings and in the sea, cetacea.'<sup>7</sup>

This thinking leads to the conclusion that whales and dolphins are so special that they have a standing and importance in the web of life on earth at least equal to that of man.<sup>8,9</sup> But for the Christian, man stands alone and separate from the rest of creation as being made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27)

Regan extends his position against whaling because of the pain it involves to argue that since the products of the whaling industry are unnecessary because they are available from other sources, then the killing of whales itself is morally unjustified. He believes that even if painless killing were possible, the loss suffered by the whale through being killed still makes that action immoral.<sup>10</sup> He imputes to whales, amongst other living organisms, a right-to-life whereby what matters to them, as experienced by them, makes a difference to their quality of life. Thus, death is harmful because it deprives them of life itself, and so killing them in the absence of compelling justification is wrong.

Regan's case is based on his view that all moral agents have equal inherent value, but Jesus certainly places people higher on a scale of worth than sparrows and sheep (Luke 12:6; Matt 12:12). The Christian position is rather one where we have both a duty to God and to his creation, in which man has a special place and responsibility for his use of all that is in the world. This includes the whales, and Christians believe we have the right in principle to use these animals, along with all the other natural resources, for the benefit of mankind. There must be the proviso, though, that we adequately consider all the factors which qualify this right. Some modifying

---

6 P. J. Morgane, M. S. Jacobs and A. Galaburda, 'Evolutionary morphology of the dolphin brain', in R. J. Schusterman, J. A. Thomas and F. G. Woods (eds), *Dolphin Cognition and Behaviour: a Comparative Approach*, Lawrence Erlbaum & Assocs., London, (1986), pp. 5-29.

7 T. Ogawa, quoted in *Whales and Whaling—Report of the Independent Inquiry* conducted by The Hon. Sir Sydney Frost', Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, (1978), vol. 1, p. 202.

8 C. Sagan, 'Some of My Best Friends are Dolphins' in C. Sagan *The Cosmic Connection*, Doubleday & Co. Inc., New York, (1973).

9 J. McIntyre, 'Re-Creation', in J. McIntyre (ed.) *Mind in the Waters*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, (1977), p. 237.

10 T. Regan, *op. cit.* ref. 5.

conditions which can impinge on us in making our decisions on the manner of use have been mentioned already—the danger of extinction, disturbance of the ecosystem, painful methods of killing and the availability of alternative sources of the products which can be derived from whales.

This inevitably gives rise to conflicts in certain circumstances and leaves us to employ our God-given minds to make the decisions concerning the benefits from the use of a particular animal in a particular way. The question then remains—should animals such as whales with the characteristics of extensive brain development noted be considered as a target for harvesting of their bodies for food or other products? This is an area where there can be genuine disagreement between individuals, but the important point to stress is that the decision for each person must be based on considered thought and judgement rather than unthinking obedience to some possibly non-Christian ethic.

### **Aboriginal Subsistence and Coastal Whaling**

There is one situation where the indigenous populations who hunt whales have no alternatives which they find satisfactory. For centuries the native inhabitants of the Arctic zone, where there is little or no vegetable food available to sustain the human population, have depended on a totally meat diet. Hunting of whales by these native peoples is still permitted for subsistence purposes by the International Whaling Commission, but the matter poses some additional problems.

The Siberian Aleuts are provided with a modern whale catcher by the Soviet government as an aid to efficiency, and the Greenlanders use small modern vessels in their hunt, which is part of a wider multi-species hunting strategy including whales, seals, birds and fish. The Alaskan Eskimos catch bowhead whales, the most endangered species of whale still hunted, with hand harpoons from sealskin umiaks. This hunt is relatively inefficient, with some whales struck and probably killed but not landed. The times to death are generally long compared with commercial whaling, although they are being improved by the introduction of more reliable and effective explosives.

The life-styles of all these peoples have been dramatically impacted by western civilisation, but to a large extent they still consider themselves culturally dependent on the whale. In many cases they would prefer to try to distance themselves from the worst aspects of western society which are having negative impacts on their traditional standards and values, and to retain or return to their former community mores.

A further twist to this problem is the close similarity in a number of ways between these aboriginal subsistence hunts and the communities from which they take place, and the rather similar small-type coastal whaling carried out from a few Japanese villages. The meat and other products from the latter enter a commercial market, whereas the aboriginal communities traditionally share the results of their hunt and there is no

---

## Whaling—A Christian Position

---

monetary element involved. The Japanese operations are at present diverted, during the pause in commercial whaling, to other unregulated smaller species which probably cannot sustain this increased level of catching for long. The whalers and the Japanese government argue strongly that they should be given due consideration because of the resulting spiritual, psychological, physical and cultural dislocations which are evident. Should the element of monetary economy make any difference between a whaler seeking to support himself and his family, either in the Arctic or on the coast of Japan?

There are, of course, all manner of problems created when an industry supporting a community is closed down—be it a coalmine, steelworks or whale fishery. It is particularly hard for the local population when the decision is imposed by some distant authority, rather than as the result of a natural decline which can be recognised by the people most affected. Measures to offset the devastating effects on a community of such closures may be more easily found and implemented in industrial areas, whereas a comparable closure would threaten the very survival of Arctic peoples.

From the Christian perspective, the issue is essentially a question of 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (Gen. 4:9). We surely do have a responsibility for those around us, people with a different way of life who are being adversely affected by the decisions we make based largely on a set of values which are foreign to them.

The solution for the Christian theologian and animal rights proponent Andrew Linzey is to propose that if there are people who rely totally on catching animals for their subsistence, then they should move to a part of the world where they can become vegans as he would have the rest of the human population become.<sup>11</sup> This seems an extreme position, and presumably is an attempt to return to the pre-Fall diet of both man and animals:

'God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to every thing that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food."'

(Gen. 1:29, 30)

But after the Flood it was legitimate for meat to be eaten, for

'God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything."'

(Gen. 9:1-3)

---

11 A. Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals*, SPCK, London, (1987), pp. 125-8.

Our Lord certainly ate fish after his resurrection (John 21:9–13) and presumably also meat along with everyone else at the Passover celebrations (Matt. 26:17a, 26). Thus Linzey's position is both unbiblical and unrealistic.

### **Conclusion**

Whaling highlights a number of aspects of our relationship to and care of the natural world around us, including over-exploitation, ecosystem disturbance, and the infliction of painful deaths on social, large-brained mammals.

Some cultures have a long tradition of whaling and the use of whale products. While alternatives are now readily available, replacing the meat in particular is not always considered acceptable by certain communities, and the ending of commercial whaling has had major economic consequences.

Just as there is uncertainty about the precise status of the whale stocks, so too there is no unequivocal evidence on the intelligence of whales. Whilst recognising this possibility, we must resist the implied and un-Christian corollary that whales rank and have a status equal to man.

We must also have good reasons for imposing the newly voiced environmental ethic of the comfortable, industrialised and developed nations on other less advantaged communities around the world, especially when this is cloaked with an apparently ethical, but non-Christian, veneer.

For the Christian, the guiding principle must be that our actions are taken in the knowledge that God has said through the Psalmist

'Every beast of the forest is mine  
the cattle on a thousand hills.  
I know all the birds of the air,  
and all that moves in the field is mine.'

(Ps 50:10, 11)

**Dr. Ray Gambell is the Secretary of the International Whaling Commission. He has been involved with the biology and management of whales since 1963.**