



Smoke and Whales

According to the Pew Foundation, the campaign against whaling is akin to the campaign against tobacco. At its press conference on Sunday morning, the analogy was made that while smoking is not the only cause of lung cancer, stopping smoking is the most obviously identifiable means to reduce deaths from this disease. Stopping whaling, according to Rémi Parmentier, is the most obviously identifiable means to reduce whale deaths. Does this analogy have any validity?

By far the biggest cause of whale deaths is natural mortality. An estimated 69,000 die each year. By-catch and accidental ship strikes account for hundreds of whale deaths and, if you believe WWF and the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, man-made greenhouse gas emissions are making an increasing contribution too. Whale hunting by Iceland, Japan and Norway (as opposed to whale hunting by the United States, Russia, Greenland and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which apparently is ok for Pew) add around an additional 2,000 deaths per year. As a percentage of total whale deaths, however, this is small change. Pew is focusing on the cause of less than 3% of whale deaths, whereas smoking is the cause of around 87% of lung cancer fatalities.

Pew's analogy also assumes that we want to reduce whale deaths by 3% by eliminating those that are sustainable. Yet if we are to be logical conservationists, it is whale deaths that are not sustainable that should be of more concern, particularly ship strikes of Atlantic right whales, a species that is teetering on the edge extinction. By contrast, the whale populations hunted by Iceland, Japan and Norway are carefully managed. They reproduce faster than the rate at which they are hunted, which means that overall stocks are maintained. It is an environmentally sound practice.

Clearly, a moral case can be made for saving human lives from avoidable cancers by encouraging people to stop smoking. But Pew's analogy only holds up if you believe that is always morally wrong to deliberately kill a whale. Many countries do not believe that this is the case and our guess is that there aren't too many takers of this philosophy in Alaska.

The IWC is not supposed to be an ethics-based organization. Its job is to "provide for the proper conservation of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry." Pew's analogy is just smoke and mirrors.

Whither the IWC...?

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) was founded by serious people who believed that only the honest cooperation of nations and the advancement of scientific knowledge about whales would result in a halt to the terrible decline of all species of great whales. While the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) was created as the best model for saving whales, it simultaneously advocated using them in a sustainable manner. That sustainability was to be achieved through advancements in the science of counting these animals, and through better understanding of their habitat requirements, their migrations, breeding patterns, natural mortality, and feeding habits. Towards that end, the IWC formed its Scientific Committee, which “provides information and advice on the status of the whale stocks”. That information and advice from the Committee was intended to be “the basis on which the Commission develops the regulations for the control of whaling”. The culture of the time assumed that whaling could and should continue through a regulated system of quotas for species that could withstand certain levels of harvest. No one then imagined that whaling would one day be halted because of cultural preferences of powerful nations in a voting block, disregarding science and proving that they could force their value system on others.

One unfortunate weakness inherent in the ICRW management model is that it does not contain any means to require the Commission to heed the recommendations of the Scientific Committee. It simply says that decisions should be based on scientific findings. Therefore, when political preferences and pressures are felt by the members of the IWC to be overwhelming, the historical pattern has been to vote accordingly, in some cases in contradiction to the opinions and recommendations of the Scientific Committee.

The focus now is on a demonstration of the balance of power in the IWC, between those members who wish to institute regulated, safe levels of commercial whaling and those who insist that it must never happen again, for “moral” reasons.

Even former US Commissioners to the IWC have gone on record, stating that the moratorium is a political and moral expression, and is not supported by science.

IWC member nations that have a tradition of using whales for food have continued to object to the moratorium on commercial whaling, noting that present moderate harvests of certain abundant stocks of whales for human food are nothing like the historic “Whaling Olympics”. Only when it cost more to procure whales than was realized from the sale of the oil did whaling ground to a halt. Petroleum and its refined products then became the substitute for whale oil, even replacing it in the transmissions of automobiles and trucks. A new era had begun.

What will happen to the IWC once Japan accepts that the moratorium will never be lifted and takes the only course open to it? Member states will no longer have a pro-whaling opponent to debate, disrespect or publicly abuse. There will be no serious decisions to make. How eager will news editors be to send journalists across the globe to report on new safety guidelines for whale watching boats? Without the political benefits to each member nation from continuing its “fight to save whales” all funding for Scientific Committee meetings and deliberations will come to a halt. There will be no point in continuing this international effort.

Even then, it is expected that Japan will continue its rigorous scientific and productive research on a number of different whale stocks, their migrations, levels, reproductive statistics, and stock reactions to the ecological changes that are part of the global climate shift. The nation will feed its people, and perhaps some others, through sustainable harvests of those stocks abundant enough to withstand moderate use.

Certain NGOs will continue to deplore any use of whales, and may turn against indigenous harvests, which they have historically and grudgingly tolerated. Their objections will most likely focus on “cruelty” and the “unnecessary” nature of the activity by people who, they will argue, “don’t need that anymore” given that modern societies now have access to a secure global food supply. Once again, the cultural preferences of outsiders will impact the food options of the few.

It is ironic that it is the objections to scientific research on whales, and objections to proven sustainable whale use, that will most likely lead to the end of the functions of the IWC. The whaling convention was built on a growing optimism that science and cooperation of sovereign states would result in an end to mindless greed and disregard for future supplies of the whale resource.

We hope that the history of this experience will convince nations of the need to examine anew the relative priorities of resource conservation and domestic political concerns, and the role of unelected outside groups in influencing international relations.

The time has come to mend these cultural differences with honest dialogue about the role of science in global food security, so that the mistakes made in this whaling issue can be avoided in the developing debates on global fishery conservation. Wake up, World. It is time to get serious about science, honesty and the conservation of global fishery. We should all let the progression of the whaling debate be a valuable lesson as we look forward to the continued sustainable use of living marine resources.

Satirical Conference Sketch - The Malcolm and Chris Show: Commonality

Scene: A bar somewhere in Anchorage

Hey Chris, what's this "commonality" thing that Sir Geoffrey keeps talking about?

Beats me, Malcolm. I think he's got some sort of strategy, if you know what I mean. Keep the whalers guessing.

Good one, mate. Hey, look what's the deal with this press conference tomorrow? We can't both say the same thing, you know. I want to talk about humpbacks, Chris. There's lots of votes in humpbacks back home.

Get out of it. Humpbacks are for me.

I said it first.

So what?

Look we just won the World Cup didn't we? You Kiwis couldn't win a coin toss.

OK, I'll toss you for it...

Darn, heads it is... You win Chris. Look, if you get the humpbacks, I'm speaking before you. All right?

It's a deal. Who says we don't know how to negotiate? (Chuckle)

Well what can I talk about then? Something that'll really wind up the Japanese and get me in the newspapers...

Easy one, Malcolm. Scientific whaling. You can say it demeans science.

I like it, mate. No worries. How's this one: "It does not add to our knowledge of whales."

Good one, Malcolm. Could be viewed as a little bit pompous, but highly quotable. Perfect! It sounds like you know what you're talking about.

Hey, here's another. Let's make out like we're real good friends with Japan and make out like they are being the insensitive ones. We can complain they're being provocative.

I like it, Malcolm. Can't believe this is your first meeting. You're a real pro! I can tell the journos about that sick Japanese sailor we took care of.

That won't work, will it? Didn't you have to do that anyway, what with those maritime regs?

Yeah, but keep that quiet Malcolm. We need to look compassionate. Hush hush, mate.

Well I've got a better one. Seems we found an old wartime sub and we just gave Japan a bag of sand from it or something...

Crikey, Malcolm, that *is* insensitive! Sounds like a winner!

Hey, how are we gonna justify supporting the Alaskans, Chris? It's a hard sell to the media when we're constantly going on about how bad whaling is. Did you see those whale crafts in the shops? Those things are selling for thousands of dollars.

Good point, Malcolm. Let's just talk about the whale meat. I've got this great sound bite: "Whales for survival, not whales for cash." It's all we need to say.

Tasty, Chris. You could be in PR! Masterful.

Hey, and do you think anyone'll notice if I buy one of these baleen bowls and hide it in my suitcase? (Chuckle)

Sir Geoffrey's gonna love these messages, mate. This must be what he means by commonality...