Whaling: History, Threats, and Conservation

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Abstract

Whaling is the process of killing and harvesting whales for their meat, oil, or bones. Whaling has been practiced for centuries and has had huge impacts on whale populations. Whaling was first practiced by indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest and the Basque regions. Indigenous cultures would hunt whales for food and their bones. At the beginning of the 19th century whaling was practiced for oil. In recent times whaling has been practiced for food and scientific research. With the advancement of ship technology along with the rapid increase of whaling fleets, whale populations dramatically declining by the early 1900's. Because of this the international whaling commission passed a commercial ban on whaling in 1985. Whaling is still practiced by cultures in the Pacific Northwest and Scandinavian regions and is heavily regulated. Unfortunately whaling is still being practiced today by Japanese whaling fleets that have been killing thousands of whales (Halldórsson).

Pre-Historic Whaling

Whaling during prehistoric times was done to obtain meat and bone materials from whales (Halldórsson). The Basque cultures were the first culture to engage in organized commercial whaling and would predominantly hunt the right whale. The Basque eventually hunted right whales to extinction in the Bay of Biscay and then expanded their whaling campaigns to the northern coastal regions of Iceland, Newfoundland, and Labrador. Right whales were the preferred whales to hunt since they couldn’t swim very fast and possessed a large amount of blubber causing them to float after being harpooned (Halldórsson). Whaling fleets during prehistoric times did not have the technology to hunt vast amounts of whales. As a result whale populations were not as greatly affected by whaling as they are now. Whale populations have shown to have been substantially higher during prehistoric times than now (Halldórsson).

Whaling in the 20th Century

The emergence of the steam powered vessels along with the increase of whaling fleets had resulted in devastating declines in whale populations. By 1915 over 17,000 whales had been killed. It was at this time a national law was passed by the Icelandic government banning all commercial whaling in an effort to protect remaining species. This was considered to be the first ban on whaling in history. This law was later repealed in 1928, when it was believed that the whale populations had recovered (Halldórsson).

During 19th century whaling was performed mainly to obtain oil from their blubber (Halldórsson). Whaling in Pre-historic times was extremely dangerous. Whaling used to be performed using hand held harpoons with our driven small boats. During the mid-19th century steam powered ships had emerged giving whaling fleets the ability to hunt larger faster swimming whales such as the Sperm or Blue. Steam powered vessels also gave whaling fleets the ability to harvest a greater quantity of whales as well (Halldórsson).

Present Day Whaling

In 1946 several countries had joined together to form the International Whaling Commission (IWC), in an effort to prevent the overhunting of whales. (Marrero) In 1985 the IWC released a commercial ban on whaling (Halldórsson) in doing so they established whale free sanctuaries in the Indian ocean and Antarctica. However Norway and Japan voted against this. Today Norway continues to hunt minke whales in their own waters claiming the IWC does not have jurisdiction over their waters (Marrero). Whaling is also still performed by aboriginal groups as well. Indigenous groups in Denmark, Russia, Greenland, United States, and the Caribbean are still allowed to hunt certain types of whale for cultural reasons. Canada allows Inuit communities to hunt bow and beluga whales claiming that they do not fall under the IWC jurisdiction and that these communities are entitled to do so for the reason that they are hunting whales for a food supply (Shikata). While all of the present day whaling listed above has had impacts on whale populations today the biggest threat to whale populations today is the deceiving scientific research whaling performed by Japan. Japan continues to hunt whales in Antarctica claiming that they are legally killing them for scientific research (Marrero). Since the commercial whaling ban of 1985 Japan has killed over 20,000 whales, more than The United States, Norway, Greenland, Iceland, Denmark, and South Korea combined (Shikata). In response to this small groups of sea shepherds have taken it upon themselves to fight against the Japanese whaling fleets in the open water by colliding with ships, saving vessels, etc (Enders). With this has come much controversy, there have been several incidents in which the two have collided ships causing lawsuits and attention from mass media (Enders). The future of the war between the sea shepherd’s and Japanese whalers is uncertain for the reason that both claim to have the law on their side (Enders).

Effects of Whaling

Whales play an extremely important role in marine environments. Whales help regulate the flow of food by maintaining a stable food chain and ensuring that certain animals do not overpopulation the oceans. If whales were to become extinct their prey would eventually overpopulate and eventually destroy other species (Why Whales Are Important). Whale feces also stimulates the growth of phytoplankton, which are organisms that pull carbon from the air. It’s estimated that whale feces helps take out roughly 800,000 tons of carbon out of the earth’s atmosphere every year (Lian). In fact during the whaling era many environmental changes had occurred from increased CO2 emissions (Why Whales Are Important). Phytoplankton also create the baseline in the marine food web. If whales were to become extinct phytoplankton populations would steadily decrease as well resulting in a significant balance in the marine food web. Another factor that needs to be taken into consideration is how whaling will affect humans in general. Having environmental changes such as CO2 emissions will certainly affect humans, but how else? For one the extermination of whales as mentioned before will have devastating effects on marine environments, this is a problem because roughly 50-85% of the earth’s oxygen is produced from the ocean (How Much Do the Oceans Add to the Earth’s Oxygen). If the ocean were to become a dead body of water the earth would become inhabitable for humans. So in reality if the whales go extinct the human race will be soon to follow.

References


