

The Cruelty of Whaling

Fundamental to WDCS's objection to whaling is the inherent cruelty of modern whaling practices. Whaling is often described as a 'numbers game' since there is a great deal of concern that commercial whaling will prevent the number of whales from threatened or endangered populations ever recovering to their pre-exploitation abundance. However, also of significant concern is the suffering of individual animals at the hands of the whalers, irrespective of the conservation status of their population.

Due to the inherent difficulties under which whaling take place, which involves aiming weapons at a moving target on a moving sea from a moving platform, and the fact that there is often an element of pursuit involved, WDCS believes that whaling can never be conducted in a humane fashion and that commercial whaling should cease on welfare grounds alone.

Time to death

Whaling nations are reluctant to provide full data sets on the time it takes for hunted whales to die or the full details about whales that are struck with harpoons or rifles and lost before they can be landed. This reluctance to cooperate in providing data indicates that the whaling industry may have something to hide and that the full data sets would expose the terrible fate of the 'outliers' (i.e. the whales that take the longest time to die). Instead, average 'Times to Death' are reported, masking the details of the whales that suffer the longest, and protecting the whaling industry from fully informed criticism. From the limited amount of data that have been supplied to the International Whaling Commission (IWC) it is evident that the average 'Time to Death' for whales killed in commercial and 'scientific' hunts is over two minutes. For whales killed during Aboriginal Subsistence hunts the average time it takes to kill whales is often much greater.

Struck and lost whales

Very little is known about the whales that are struck by a harpoon or rifle, but then escape injured. These whales are known as 'Struck and Lost' and it is hard to imagine that any nation would tolerate a comparative percentage of animals in a slaughterhouse being 'struck and lost' and escaping to an unknown fate. Yet, 'Struck and Lost' whales are a persistent feature of all whale and dolphin hunting operations. For example, in Greenland's narwhal hunts, a combination of underreporting and stuck and lost animals adds an average of 42% to the harvest statistics for 1954-1998. 'Struck and Lost' whales that survive may either die slowly or live with painful or debilitating injuries and associated infections. The magnitude of the welfare issues associated with 'Struck and Lost' whales should not be underestimated.

Killing methods and accuracy

Back in 1978, Sir Sydney Frost concluded, in his report to the Australian Government on humane killing and whaling, that '...there is a significant difference in the methods used for the killing of whales and the humane practices required by law for the slaughter of cattle, sheep and pigs. In abattoirs and most slaughterhouses, the animal is stunned instantaneously and then immediately killed, dying while still unconscious...'

Nearly, thirty years later, very little has changed. Whales are neither effectively stunned before a killing method is applied, nor are they guaranteed a humane death when they are either struck with a harpoon, or shot with a rifle.

The very existence and the frequent use of 'Secondary Killing Methods' during all whaling operations is testimony to the difficulty of making an accurate, and immediately effective, initial strike using a harpoon or a rifle as a method for killing whales at sea.

Killing whales with underpowered weapons

In recent years the number and range of species killed during so called 'Scientific Whaling' has increased, but there has been minimal effort to adapt the weapon used to kill the range of species (of various sizes) now hunted.

As many as 510 to 529 minke whales could be expected not to die instantaneously in the newly expanded Japanese hunts in Antarctica (JARPA II), based on the reported Instantaneous Death Rates for minke whales killed in previous Japanese Antarctic hunts,

A case study presented to the IWC Whale Killing Methods Workshop in 2006, used data from previous Japanese 'Scientific Whaling' hunts to raise concerns in relation to killing fin whales (the largest species currently killed in any commercial or scientific whaling operation). Fin whales are the second largest species of whale; they are renowned for swimming at high speeds (which may compound difficulties associated with making an accurate 'strike') and are twelve times heavier than minke whales, the more common quarry of the Japanese Antarctic Whaling Research Program (JARPA).

The case study noted that:

- other harpoon and grenade specifications, besides penthrate explosive charge, may affect efficiency (such as harpoon diameter, mass and velocity, which all influence penetration); It was also noted that although Japan may have increased the penthrate charge for killing fin whales, 90mm harpoons were used on larger species during commercial whaling before the moratorium. But it remains unclear whether Japan has re-instated these new larger harpoons and cannons for killing fin whales and other large species, or if it continues to use the smaller harpoons which are used to kill the much smaller minke whales;
- species specific characteristics, in addition to size, such as blubber thickness and composition, skull anatomy etc. may influence the efficiency of a particular weapon;
- welfare issues should be the primary consideration in any proposal to kill whales for 'scientific purposes' and the humaneness of the kill should be of paramount importance;
- and the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (the treaty which governs whaling and under which the IWC was established) empowers the IWC to adopt regulations regarding the weapons used during whaling activities.
- It then goes on to recommend that urgent attention should be given to the use of underpowered weapons to kill large whale species during 'Scientific Whaling'.

When is a whale dead?

One question the IWC has grappled with for some time, but which remains unresolved, is the question of suitable indicators for determining when a whale is insensible to pain and when it is dead. Whales are adapted for holding their breath and the usual indicators that might be applied to determine the level conscious and vitality of a terrestrial mammal cannot easily be applied to whales during whaling operations. The current criteria used by the IWC (and whalers) for determining when a whale is dead are:

- Relaxation of the lower jaw;
- Or, no flipper movement;
- Or, sinking without active movement.
-

There is significant concern within the scientific community that these criteria are inadequate to determine either levels of consciousness in hunted whales, or the onset of death. Until robust and practical methods are developed to determine death in hunted whales it is difficult to validate any data on 'Time to Death' which are provided by whaling nations. Therefore, the true extent of the welfare

problems associated with hunting whales may currently be underestimated.

Previous WDCS (and joint) publications on the issue of the cruelty of whaling available on the website:

Animal welfare in Norway. An inconsistent truth.

The report 'Animal Welfare in Norway: an inconsistent truth', published during the 59th International Whaling Commission (IWC) meeting in Alaska, highlights the contradiction in Norwegian regulations which means that farm animals are protected from pain and prolonged suffering at slaughter but whales are not. Meanwhile, Norwegian whale hunts continue to supply meat for sale on the same supermarket shelves as pork, beef and chicken.

Published: May 2007

Troubled Waters

The release of 'Troubled Waters', marked the launch of an international campaign against whaling. Within the report, key scientific and practical evidence is brought together for the first time to highlight the true extent of the cruelty inherent in the modern day killing of whales.

In his foreword, naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough describes how the report contains "hard scientific dispassionate evidence that there is no humane way to kill a whale at sea."

Published: March 2004

Hunted Dead or Still Alive - A report on the cruelty of whaling

WDCS and HSUS highlight the inadequacy of the IWC's assessment of the cruelty involved in whaling.

The report, "Hunted Dead or Still Alive", launched by WDCS and The Humane Society of The United States (HSUS) reveals that the suffering caused by whaling is much greater than previously thought. In particular there is currently no adequate way to judge when whales are no longer able to feel pain or when they are dead.

Published: 2003

An Anatomical Perspective of the Electric and Mechanical Methods for the Humane Killing of Whales

Author: Sential A. Rommel

Report detailing the inadequacies of the electric lance as a means of killing whales.

Published: pre 2000