

Save Whales Not Whaling

Why Save Whales

An essay by Patricia A. Forkan, HSUS executive vice president

***From space, the planet is blue.
From space, the planet is the territory
Not of humans, but of the whale.***

***Blue seas cover seven-tenths of the earth's surface,
And are the domain of the largest brain ever created,
With a fifty-million-year-old smile.****

Blue whales are the largest mammals known to have lived on Earth since the beginning of time. Sperm whales dive deeper into the murky ocean depths than any other mammal. California gray whales migrate 7,000 miles, along the North American coast, the longest migration of any mammal. Humpback whales sing songs that can be heard for hundreds of miles. Humpbacks have been called great winged angels when they soar high out of the water and frolic and leap in the moonlight.

We humans evolved millions of years later with our complex brains and desire to explore and discover more about our planet. But humankind has been far from kind to these ancient and benign citizens of the sea. Indeed, we may still preside over their final demise.

Whales seem at once mysterious and unknowable. Yet when we have a chance to see them, to glimpse into their eyes, they seem oddly familiar. Who cannot marvel at a mother gray whale and her calf moving alongside a tiny boat, presenting her massive head to visiting tourists, inviting them to stroke and perhaps even scratch it?

In return, humankind has ruthlessly and cruelly hunted them down—some to extinction, others to the brink of extinction. Some species may still never recover. Why has this happened? At first, out of need for food, then for other products like whale oil, and now for profit only. There is no need for commercial whaling. The only reason to kill whales today is simple greed. Simply putting economics first. During earlier eras, we could forgive such behavior because of ignorance. But what excuse is there today?

Today we know full well the history of whaling, which has been to kill those easiest to find (near coastal waters), and when they are all gone, move elsewhere. Early in the 20th century, with the advent of the explosive harpoon, whales in the vast Antarctic region became the new targets. They were mercilessly hunted down by the hundreds of thousands. And well through the 1960s, the full force of fleets equipped with modern technology moved rapaciously throughout the world's oceans.

The method of killing of these leviathans remains the same to this day. Let me take you out on a hunt:

The chase is not silent. The ping of sonar, whirring of helicopter blades, and the screaming of catcher boat motors close in on their next victim. The fleeing whale swims quickly and silently, but he loses breath and strength as his predators with their unflinching tools of death relentlessly pursue. A cannon-like boom sounds—it is a strike. The deep bellowing of the wounded bull-whale fills the air as blood and water foam and fountain around his thrashing form. The great and gentle giant splashes and pounds the surface with his powerful tail in agony and fear.

Now there is silence. The lifeless form is inflated with air so it will float, and a buoy with a radar reflector is stuck in its side. The factory ship will find the corpse this way and make the pickup. This largest of all animals on Earth will be processed and butchered, its parts stripped, sorted, canned, crated, and the leftovers dumped—in less than an hour's time. Meanwhile, the modern whaling army prowls the sea again, searching the horizon for its next prey.

Unbelievably, this scene continues regardless of the moratorium. Japanese factory ships still prowl the Pacific Ocean and the Antarctic. Norwegian whalers are killing minke whales using not only the explosive harpoon but also a rifle to “finish them off.” ➡

Promoting the protection of all animals

**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

2100 L Street, NW ■ Washington, DC 20037
202-452-1100 ■ Fax: 202-778-6132 ■ www.hsus.org

The gory, sordid business of whale killing has in the past been glorified and romanticized. Today it is seen as medieval and defiant.

Worse, whales have new modern enemies to face. Ocean pollution and over-harvesting of the fish stocks of the sea lead the pack, followed by ozone depletion and the resulting yawning hole in the ozone over the Antarctic, which threatens to impact krill, their food supply. Modern-day contaminants flowing into all our oceans are literally polluting their tissue. Some die-offs and strandings are suspected to be caused by immune system failures. With these kinds of pressures threatening the long-term viability of our oceans and their inhabitants, how foolhardy to add even greater pressure on whales by hunting them down for expensive cuts of meat.

However, knowledge is not wisdom. Life on Earth is ancient, and humans and our science are still very young. By comparison, the whales are an ancient tribe. For 30 times as long as humanity has existed at all, the whales have been the largest brained, most intelligent beings on this planet. Carl Sagan, in his *Dragons of Eden*, wrote: "The brain mass of a mature sperm whale... is almost 9,000 grams, six and a half times that of the average man... What does the whale do with so massive a brain? Are there thoughts, insights, arts, sciences and legends of the sperm whale?"

In the first summer of the new century and the new millennium, Japanese factory ships have resumed killing sperm whales. What will those deaths teach us about sperm whales? Certainly nothing we don't already know. We do know we are all citizens of an ever-shrinking globe, and we occupy a privileged position due to our strength and intelligence. Don't we also now have a duty, on our watch, to preserve where we humans once destroyed? Or are we in the final stage of an age-old process of callous disregard for any life that is not our own? Hopefully not. Let's hope we are in the beginning of a new era, in which the relationship between humans and whales hearkens back to that mother gray whale who puts her trust in those little humans in the boat, when they reach out to forge a bond between two unique life forms who really, in the end, need each other.

Patricia Forkan has attended meetings of the International Whaling Commission since 1973.

*Reproduced with the permission of Curtis Brown, Haymarket House, 2829 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4SP, England. From *Whale Nation*, by Heathcote Williams, ©1988.