

## Influencing the contemporary narrative on whaling heritage

Bradley W. Barr

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, 175 Edward Foster Road, Scituate, MA 02066, USA

Email: [Brad.Barr@noaa.gov](mailto:Brad.Barr@noaa.gov)

### Abstract

*Whaling heritage is a significant part of the world's maritime history, and its landscape footprint is global. In the 19th Century, the Pacific and adjacent Arctic waters were the epicenter of whaling, where both many of the most productive whaling grounds were located as well as the primary ports that serviced this industry. The most compelling stories of whaling heritage occurred in these waters, and the names of the storied whaling ships, and the perils they encountered, are well known. These are stories that not only illuminate significant events in our collective maritime past, but contain lessons learned that can inform and offer knowledge relevant to current, yet similar, problems we face today. The contemporary whaling narrative is dominated by the more recent history of whaling, and the divisive atmosphere created by the controversy surrounding the few countries that continue to have active commercial whaling industries. Efforts need to be directed at changing this contemporary narrative, perceptions of the public that whaling heritage is more than killing these giants of the sea. Increasing awareness of the many influences, positive and negative, that whaling, throughout its history, has had on shaping our geo-political system, societies, cultures, economies, and even expanding our knowledge of the oceans and their resources is essential. Through this expanded awareness and appreciation of how whaling helped shape the world we know, we can acquire some needed support for continued historical research and documentation of this part of our maritime heritage. Changing this narrative may also help in preserving the significant places in our global whaling heritage landscape, and hopefully inform wiser decisions about contemporary issues through learning from the past.*

**Key words:** Whaling Heritage, Global Whaling Heritage Landscape, Contemporary Narrative, Public Acceptance, Lessons Learned

### Introduction: Blood in the Water

The predominant perception of whaling in modern society is all about killing whales, animals viewed as intelligent and social creatures that are brutally murdered for no particularly good reason. Except for a dwindling number of cultures, we no longer kill whales for meat, have little contemporary use of the oil rendered from their blubber, and have persisted in pursuing leviathan largely for political reasons related to preserving

nationalistic prerogatives and traditional subsistence. This perception of whaling is a surprisingly recent phenomenon (Epstein, 2008), arising quite rapidly from a confluence of ideas, and a well-crafted campaign by environmental non-governmental organizations, related to the worldwide emergence of an ecological ethic in the mid-1960's. Epstein (2008) suggests that "Save the Whales" became a syllogism for the idea of saving the environment more generally, which led to this rapid and paradigmatic shift in the prevailing perception of whaling, and its nearly universal adoption by both society and particularly countries that had previously been very active advocates for the whaling industry throughout its history. When we think of whaling, what some see in their mind's eye is the blood in the water. However, the whaling industry has, historically, contributed much to society and our collective well being. It has given us products that have illuminated our cities at a time when urban crime was epidemic (Starbuck, 1878), made the machines of the industrial age run smoothly and efficiently, and significantly influenced the global geo-political landscape. It was one of the first truly global industries, was a driver for opening up international trade and diplomatic relations, and was an economic engine for the global economy throughout most of the 19th Century.

Whalers, somewhat like the Internet today, connected the world, and made it seem a bit smaller. The public learned about the world vicariously through the whalers' experiences, covered extensively in the newspapers and magazines of the time. The whaling ships brought with them goods from their home countries and infusions of money to ports around the world to supply their operations and service their ships. They took away from these ports both local products and information about these places and their life ways. Popcorn, for example, is likely one of those products brought back to America by the whalers (Smith, 1999). They helped to increase our understanding of not just whales, but the oceans they live in and the other creatures that share these waters, illuminating a deeper knowledge of ocean currents and winds, weather and climate. They were, as described by Rozwadowski (2005), the first blue-water oceanographers. Not all the historical contributions of the global whaling industry were positive. In many far-off ports and places whalers put ashore to resupply, they introduced diseases to aboriginal cultures and often the deleterious effects of alcohol on

these societies were exacerbated by visits from whaling ships. For example, it is believed that, quite unintentionally, the American whaling ship *Wellington* introduced mosquitos to Hawaii while restocking their water supplies during a visit to the islands in 1827 (Sedgwick, 1901). The introduction and influence of alcohol in Hawaii, after the first whalers began to arrive in Hawaii in 1819, was identified as a increasingly significant problem in Hawaii's whaling ports through the latter part of the 19th Century, and has been attributed, beyond simply the intoxication of both Hawaiians and sailors, as a contributory factor in colonialism and its effects on Native Hawaiian society in this period (Brown, 2011). And, indeed, whale populations were decimated in many places around the world, leaving a legacy of impacts that remain on still recovering populations, which now face other challenges. In their wake, whalers undeniably left a host of environmental and societal impacts that often had severe and long-term deleterious effects. However, this was balanced, to one degree or another, by the economic benefits and geopolitical implications of their activities in these places.

The dominant and powerful contemporary discourse surrounding whaling is quite definitively negative, as Epstein (2008) has observed. Notwithstanding whether the whaling industry is deserving of this widely-held public perception or not, one of the challenges this creates is that it makes raising public awareness about the positive aspects of whaling heritage far more challenging. To achieve some success in effectively reaching contemporary audiences with this more expansive, comprehensive and balanced view of whaling heritage, to help them be more open to receiving information that conflicts, perhaps deeply and with moral and ethical implications, with this prevailing discourse, offering some historical context is essential. To understand and appreciate the past, and to learn the important lessons this history offers, we need to find a way to overcome this contemporary perception of whaling as simply "blood in the water".

### **Whaling heritage and places**

Maury's 1851 map whaling grounds and the more recent map of whaling voyages and species observed by Smith et al., (2012), taken from 19th logbooks and other documents, clearly demonstrate the global geographic reach of whaling in the 19th Century. While the extent of whaling during this period may have been global, it is the

particular places in this landscape that help to tell the story of whaling heritage. The whaling grounds, such as the Japan Grounds, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Western Arctic, were the places the whalers travelled to in search of whales, and spent time at sea catching and processing their quarry. These are places visited when the whales were plentiful and the profits were favorable, and inextricably linked with the storied whaling ports like Honolulu and Lahaina in Hawaii. Such port cities served the industry, offered provisioning supplies, ship repair and maintenance facilities and skilled craftsmen, often men to supplement whaling crews, and other less socially acceptable amenities, like grog-shops and prostitution (Daws, 1967). These ports, and all the whaling grounds, are places where whaling is a part of their history and heritage. As Barr and Delgado (in press) have suggested:

...we live in a world of places, created in the perceptions of people who are often deeply attached to these places and imbue them with special meaning. The landscape of whaling heritage and the significant places that are part of that landscape therefore also warrants some consideration in our collective efforts to interpret and inform, to educate and excite the imaginations of the public, as well as to increase and expand the awareness and appreciation of the importance of whaling heritage in our collective history.

To effectively preserve and protect these places, we will need to be aware of and address the prevailing contemporary perception of whaling.

### **Hawaii's Whaling Heritage: What whaling contributed.....**

It has been suggested that whaling had a profound effect on the economic, cultural and social history of Hawaii (Barr and Delgado, In Press; Lebo, 2010; Raupp and Gleason, 2010). In the late 18th Century, as whaling began its global expansion, larger whaling ships began to be built that were capable of multi-year trips to new whaling grounds. With the discovery of the "Offshore Grounds" off Peru, the Sperm whaling grounds off Japan (LaCroix, 2002), the "Kodiak Grounds", off Southeast Alaska (Burcin, 2005), and ultimately the Western Arctic whaling grounds North of the Bering Strait (Bockstoe, 1986), trips from the New England home ports to the Pacific were routinely three to four years by the mid-1800's (Davis et al., 1987). Given such long voyages to the Pacific,

the Hawaiian Islands were strategically located to provide ports to service this growing fleet. By 1822, approximately 60 whaling ships were routinely visiting Hawaiian ports, and by 1846, almost 600 ships were arriving each year (Juvik et al., 1998). While this impact gradually diminished over the next fifty years (Raupp and Gleason, 2010) it left a legacy of change in Hawaii.

During the 1820's to the 1830's, the population of Honolulu tripled, from 3000 to 9000, and with this came the building of roads, housing, and other needed infrastructure (Daws, 1967). The waterfront area of Honolulu harbor also expanded: "The harbor made the town...by the middle of the 19th century Honolulu had grown from a tiny village to a busy Pacific port of call, the metropolis of the islands and the capital of the kingdom" (Daws, 1967). Given the substantial quantities of fresh water needed by ships, the first water supply system in Hawaii was installed in Honolulu harbor (Nellist, 1951). The existing water supply in Honolulu had become "impoverished and polluted" (Daws, 1967) and this new water system offered not only potable water to the ships, but to the residents of the harbor area. Whaling became an economic engine for Honolulu and the Islands (Daws, 1968; cf Raupp and Gleason, 2010). One of the most important interactions between the whalers and the Native Hawaiians was their service as crew on these ships. Lebo (2010) reports that by 1860, Native Hawaiians comprised upwards of one half of such crews in the Pacific and Arctic.

As the influence of the expressed needs of the whalers for resupply of types of foods familiar to Yankee crews increased, the agriculture of the islands also began to change. The Hawaiian economy of the 1820's was transformed from a trade-based to cash-based system. While not an uncommon occurrence in colonial systems (Feyrer and Sacerdote, 2006; Settles, 1996), this transition to the cultivation of foods to supply the whaling fleets visiting Hawaii changed the face of Hawaii's agricultural landscape. One interesting example, offered by Daws (1967), of the impact of changing cultivation practices related to the increase in use, for a period of time in the 1840's, of the port of Lahaina. Maui had begun to grow white potatoes, which were favored by the whaling crews over the native sweet potato. While there were other factors that contributed to the enhanced use of the port Lahaina, particularly the more liberal nature of the port with regard to prostitution and grog-shops, now that "Lahaina sported both the potato

and the prostitute...the combination was all but irresistible” (Daws, 1967). Daws concludes, “In the mid-50’s, the potato boom ended but the prostitutes remained. Other things being equal, Honolulu's better shipping facilities prevailed again”.

Finally, a speculative argument could be made that this change in Hawaii’s agricultural practices may have set in motion later changes, like the rise of the sugar, pineapple, and coffee cultivation that brought even greater political influence of non-Hawaiian interests that ultimately contributed to the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893. Daws (1967) discusses the sociological phenomenon of the perception of the working and personal habits of Native Hawaiians, and how this prevailing western perception was used to influence the actions of the American government with regard to Hawaii and its economic future. While clearly there were many other contributory social, cultural, and economic factors that may have had considerably more impact (Kuykendall, 1967), this fundamental change in the political power structure in Hawaii may have been facilitated not only by this change in the agricultural landscape of the Islands to accommodate the visiting whaling fleet, but also the subjugation of the Native Hawaiians that resulted as part of the colonial occupation of Hawaii. There is little doubt that Hawaii, and its essential ports of call, is a critically important place in the global whaling landscape. Not all these stories of the interaction between the whalers and the people of Hawaii may have represented particularly positive contributions, but they undoubtedly had a significant influence on Hawaii and its history.

### **Whaling and Diplomacy**

The 19th Century was a period in American history that saw the emergence of this new country on a potential trajectory toward becoming a world power, foretelling the political hegemony of the United States in the 20th Century. The diplomacy of this fledgling country at the end of the 1700’s, right after its war of independence with England, was just beginning to develop. However, the American whalers had already been traveling to far off lands, making port calls with their ships, and forging commercial relationships with their counterparts in these countries for many years. As Fredrick Jackson Turner (1920) has suggested, it is the trader, what he called the “pathfinder of civilization”, that most often is earliest at the threshold of the frontier, and in this whaling was no exception. According to Starbuck (1878), the first ships sailing under the new American

flag to enter a British port after the revolutionary war, in 1787, were the whalers *Bedford*, *Industry*, and *Speedwell*, all out of Nantucket. They had gone to England to try and recommence trade in whale oil and bone with the British. Starbuck (1878) also makes mention of another event where whaling was driving American diplomacy (and war). During War of 1812, Peruvian privateers, as allies of England in this war, were seizing US whalers. The US deployed a “diplomatic” envoy to address this issue, but securing the support of the Chilean army, the envoy led the fight to free captured whalers from their captivity in Peru. The history of whaling is rife with stories of first encounters with remote civilizations, sailing into unknown and uncharted waters, forging commercial relationships with ports where no American ship had visited previously. They were, indeed, Turner’s “pathfinders of civilization”. One particularly important event that was largely driven by the need for the whaling fleets to have ports in the North Pacific readily available was the opening of Japan by Admiral Perry in 1853. Burcin (2005) summarizes the event, and the intimate connection between Perry’s mission and the whaling fleets, which ultimately compelled the Japanese to permit vessels from other countries to enter their ports. Burcin (2005) recounts that the contemporary reports of the mission did indeed emphasize the importance of that mission in meeting the pressing needs of the whaling industry, but in subsequent historical analyses of the mission, the connection is often not mentioned or mentioned only in passing. By the mid-1800’s, America had a virtual monopoly on whaling in the Pacific, and with the Russians openly hostile to American whalers in their territorial waters, access to the ports in Japan was strategically essential. Indeed, as Burcin (2005) concludes “Commodore Perry’s expedition relied upon whalers’ experience in Japan not only for information about a little understood society but also as a political justification to sail into Edo Bay in July 1853”. Not only was whaling considered a justification for Perry’s expedition, but also for two previous Naval missions to Japan in 1846 and 1849, and a key justification for the American Exploration Expedition in 1836 commanded by Charles Wilkes (Burcin, 2005). There is little doubt that America’s whaling interests were driving diplomacy in the Pacific region. If American “whaling hegemony” in the 19th Century (Basberg, 2006) did serve an important role in the

development of the American political hegemony in the 20th Century, this is an important story to tell.

### **Conclusion**

Rudyard Kipling (1941) said, “If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten”. Therefore, telling the compelling stories of 19th Century whaling should be an effective way to not only expand the awareness and appreciation of this influential human activity that has helped to shape the modern world, but perhaps assist in empowering the protection and preservation of the essential places in that history for future generations. However, storytelling requires both a good story to tell, and a willing and appreciative audience. There is little doubt that whaling can provide many suitable stories, but finding a willing audience may present a more significant challenge.

This may be a bit of an overstatement, as places like the New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford Whaling Historic Park, and Mystic Seaport seem to attract many visitors. Recent books on whaling, such as Dolan’s (2008) *Leviathan*, have received multiple awards and are bestsellers, while readers young and old continue to be drawn toward Melville’s (2001) story of Ahab and Ismael in *Moby Dick*. Certainly, the discovery of the *Two Brothers* near French Frigate Shoals in the Papahānoumokuākea Marine National Monument attracted an extraordinary amount of press coverage and generated considerable public interest. However, while it is one thing to attract visitors, read a bestseller, or follow a news story, its quite another to recognize and act on supporting the preservation of our collective whaling heritage, particularly to actively support protecting the particularly important places in the global whaling landscape. Perhaps encouraging public appreciation that whaling has helped to shape what the world is today, and the many contributions this industry has made to society, our economic well being, and to our rich maritime heritage, is the greatest challenge. There are many things that have happened throughout history, viewed through the lens of today that may not seem something about which we should be very proud. Through these experiences, however, we have learned a great deal and should not dismiss these lessons of history because contemporary perspectives diminish their perceived importance. We, as the conservators of this heritage, should not just tell the stories, but offer some sense of the historic context of the stories we are telling, helping the listener



not only understand and interpret the implications of this powerful contemporary anti-whaling discourse on that history, but to suggest the need for acting to support and encourage the preservation of the global whaling heritage landscape so that what remains is not lost. Time is a powerful enough opponent in the efforts to preserve heritage resources, as they are ephemeral, degrading through natural process in the environment. However, the places in this global whaling heritage landscape, the stories they tell and the lessons they provide, are enduring. They are also worthy of preserving for future generations.

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## **Biography**

**Brad Barr** received a BS from the University of Maine, a MS from the University of Massachusetts, and PhD at the University of Alaska. He is currently a Senior Policy Advisor in the NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, Adjunct Professor at the School of Marine Sciences and Ocean Engineering at the University of New Hampshire, and a Visiting Professor at the University Center of the Westfjords in Iceland. He is a member of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, the International Committee on Marine Mammal Protected Areas, and IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force.