

The Scale of Tasmanian Sail Whaling:

Establishing Base Lines and Global Comparisons

Everyone here knows that thousands of southern right whales were killed around Tasmania. Everyone here knows that a remnant of survivors is increasing. But no-one else here knows the speed or level of the recovery. That can only be established if one has a base line of how many whales existed before human, commercial, sail whaling began. Without a base line, one cannot begin to calculate a recovery rate. This talk is about carefully estimating base lines of the number of whales killed in Tasmanian waters, or the 'pre-exploitation abundance,' so that estimates of whale recovery can be better based. And global comparisons can follow. Remember throughout that the precise statistics matter little, it is the scale they reveal that is very important.

The evidence lies in the historical records. In this case, the behaviour of the whales and the behaviour of the whalers, as recorded in the logbooks, newspapers, books and other records of how many whales were killed and how much whale oil was taken. I am talking about observed behaviour, not models or population dynamics. The sail whalers killed only two species of whales, the southern right whales, *Eubalaena australis*, and the sperm whales, *Physeter macrocephalus*, and only very rarely a humpback whale.

The southern right whales that visited Tasmania lived in cold Antarctic waters where they fed off tiny copepods and krill strained through the baleen sieves they have in their mouths in lieu of teeth. They migrated due north, in narrow lanes, so that the pregnant females could drop and feed their infant calves in less turbid waters. Their bodies are smooth and streamlined, so the new-born calves cannot suckle well in turbulence, and they drown. Consequently the mother right whales sought to calve in sheltered bays.

From 1803 till 1900 the whalers killed thousands of right whales. The number after 1827 is well recorded but the high number from 1803 to 1827 is a new discovery. Together these figures provide a new basis for estimating the original stock before whaling began.

The sperm whales are a very different species with a very different story. Sperm whales live in equatorial and tropical waters in large harem groups of all ages except not many old males as the harem masters drive out competitors. These old bachelor losers move to subtropical waters where they feed off deep sea squid—the deep oceans' largest single source of food.

Their favoured feeding grounds were where vast ocean currents meet land and are forced upwards taking squid closer to the surface. Steep-to places like southern Tasmania, and the Solander grounds and the Chatham Islands. The sail whalers followed these old males there seeking out the haunts of the famous hundred barrel whales. If they could they also took any smaller sperm whales where they strayed into cool waters, such as around Tasmania, off the Kaikoura deep and at the Kermadec Islands, but most of their catch was in the Tasman sea, between Tasmania and New Zealand. Their most favoured grounds were mainly south of 40 degrees latitude, extending as far south as 50 degrees, into the very cold atrocious limits in which sail whaleships and their crews could only just survive. Tough ships and tough.

Hobart's pelagic sperm whaling began in 1826 and built the port of Hobart into a major whaling port in the 1860s and 1870s. Whaling continued to 1900 with a clear statistical record. The conclusion drawn is that by 1876 the Tasmanian based sail whalers had killed about 3.3% as many sperm whales as the entire American whaling fleet.

This broad figure for the sperm whalers of Hobart is far in excess of the very limited attention accorded Tasmanian whaling so far by United States and other international whaling historians. Add to that that about 5% of all the right whales killed globally before 1850 were slaughtered by Hobart whalers. It is to be hoped that this conference will help put Hobart's sail whaling into a better global context.

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