

Whaling in Western Australian Waters-A History

For the general public Australian whaling history can be an unsettling and inconvenient truth; an unwanted reminder of the devastating environmental affects human beings have had on whales and also on other species around the world. As a consequence, in a country that currently prides itself on promoting the protection of whales, it is not surprising that this history is perhaps ignored, side lined from the mainstream and fragmented in its telling.

This paper focuses on Western Australia and unites a variety of histories from different periods, which show how whaling has helped sustain and advance local coastal communities, connect them to others, and promote the exchange of ideas and knowledge. It is also a history that can be recognised, debated and celebrated, words indicating a considered understanding of the past, present and the future.

Whaling on and off the west coast of Australia dates from the arrival of Aboriginal peoples. Drift whaling, the seasonal windfall arrival of whale carcasses on beaches, sandbars and reefs provided a valuable maritime resource. These places and the adjoining seabed were invariably owned, forming part of estates, ranges and countries occupied by families, groups and wider communities. In this context a whale carcass on the shore became property to be exploited as a social, economic and political resource.

The arrival of non-aboriginal peoples brought change. Drift whaling continued, albeit sometimes in a different form to what had previously existed. At the same time the rise of a local sealing industry created the preconditions, at least on the south coast of Western Australia, for the establishment of a shore whaling industry that, in various forms, would continue, with intervals, from 1836 to 1978.

The arrival of American and French whaling ships, engaged in pelagic and bay whaling, led to the creation of the idea of the New Holland Whaling ground, an amalgam of the bays along the coast and the areas of sea extending: southward from the Recherche Archipelago; southeast of present day Albany; west and north of Carnarvon and Shark Bay; and amongst the waters of the Dampier Archipelago. These waters, principally off the south and west coasts, were also exploited by Tasmanian whaling ships.

The American presence, sometimes resented, but the most dominant and important for many isolated coastal communities, lasted from 1834 to 1888. In addition to whaling, the Americans provided transport, offered employment and were floating emporiums, trading goods not readily available from other sources.

Illustrative of this influence was the decision in 1873 by a group of merchants in Albany on the south coast to purchase the American barque *Islander*, which operated under the command of her American captain until 1884. Proposals were even made to develop direct trade with New Bedford, the principal whaling port on the east coast of the United States.

The arrival of Norwegian whalers in 1912 was pre-planned and influenced by their experience of whaling in British territorial waters off South Georgia and off the coasts of east and West Africa. Aiming to create a monopoly, the Norwegian whaling company, Christian Nielsen and Co of Larvik, secured three Western Australian government licenses and defacto economic control of whaling resources in Western Australia's coastal waters from the Recherche Archipelago, west and then north to the Dampier Archipelago.

The Norwegians closed their operations at the end of the 1916 season. They returned to the northwest in 1922 and, more controversially in 1937 and 1938, when American owned, but Norwegian financed pelagic fleets, crewed by Norwegians, operated in international waters off Shark Bay. At the same time Western Australians read regular media reports about the possibilities of Australian Antarctic whaling; ideas promoted by the renowned Antarctic explorer Sir Douglas Mawson and others.

World War Two interrupted the Australia's supply of strategic whale products. A similar shortage confronted Australia's allies, the United States and Britain. This prompted an international proposal to develop a shore whaling station at Albany and an invitation from the Australian government inviting New Zealand whaling experts, to come to Australia and develop a shore station at Eden, in New South Wales.

After the war Australian government development policy, an international shortage of food and edible fats and, opportunities created by changes to the 1944 International Convention of Whaling, raised hopes of developing a new whaling industry; a national plan that would involve Antarctic pelagic whaling, re-establish modern shore whaling on the Western Australian coast and introduce it to the east.

In, sometimes acrimonious debates between Australia and its allies and, between Western Australia and Commonwealth governments, the reality of these possibilities was tested. Out manoeuvred by the United States, Britain and Norway, Australia withdrew its Antarctic whaling proposal. Instead it was left to the Western Australian Government, the newly established Australian Whaling Commission and private enterprise to develop a shore whaling industry. Four shore stations were established in the west, the first started operating in 1946, and two in the east. Initially reliant on agreed humpback quotas five of these stations were forced to close, their parent companies shifting, or returning their operations to other trades, as humpback whaling became unfeasible. By 1964 only one station survived. The Cheynes Beach Whaling Company, near Albany on the south coast of Western Australia had switched to catching sperm whales.

This company eventually succumbed to the same cycle of change that had seen the demise of whaling in the 19th century, advances in science and technology leading to the development of cheaper whale substitutes. Underlying was a change in social and cultural perceptions and attitudes towards whales, now seen as a different form of economic, social and environmental resource, most pointedly in the form of a commercial tourism attraction.

Adam Wolfe
28th February 2019

