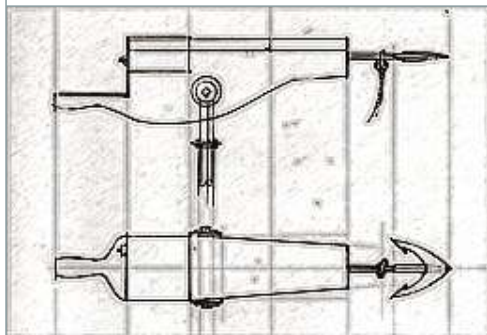


JÓNAS BLONDAL

Modern Whaling



The Norwegian Svend Foyn from Tonsberg developed the harpoon gun in 1864 and ushered in the age of industrial whaling. When employed on steamships, this new technique now made it possible to hunt fast swimming Rorquals:

Blue whales were also included ...



... as well as humpback whales and other types. In the last century alone more than two million large whales were killed. Humans have almost managed to wipe out most types of large whales. Once there used to be about 250,000 blue whales. Today there may be less than 8000 animals

The chapter of modern whaling is not closed yet. A summary is therefore not possible: It would be as if you were trying to look back on a war that has not yet finished. At best, a provisional appraisal can be made. An appraisal, that can give an inkling of further developments – together with the casualties that the “war” of modern whaling claims.

“Modern whaling” is the title of this section. But when did whaling stop being “historic” and became “modern”? That is certainly a debatable point. But even if this question has to remain unanswered, one event has had such a significant influence on the developments in the whaling business that it can be viewed as the beginning of a new, modern era:

The Invention of the Harpoon Gun

Whether whalers were successful or not was always dependent on the techniques employed. Technical developments not only facilitated better or refined hunting methods but occasionally opened up completely new hunting grounds (see also [about whaling](#) > [about the history of whaling](#) > [The Hunt for Doeglings](#))

The most far-reaching event in this technical development was and is the invention of the harpoon gun in 1864. Several attempts had been made to kill the sea mammals with explosives, but this particular new technique wasn't ready for production until 1864. The inventor was a Norwegian, called Svend Foyn.

With his idea, to employ harpoon guns on steamers, he not only revolutionised the current fishing techniques: With his new invention Foyn actually ushered in the age of industrial whaling. Now for the first time even the fast Rorquals, the “strong whales”, as Foyn called them, could be hunted – a venture that had been impossible using rowing boats, manual harpoons (hand harpoons) and other old-fashioned methods. One problem was that the animals were too fast for the whaling ships at the time, and the other was that they started sinking as soon as they stopped breathing. This would normally frustrate any efforts to salvage the body.

With the introduction of the harpoon gun these times were over for good. Now the deadly missiles could be shot directly from the fast and agile ships. Since the ships were large and heavy, the sinking cadaver was no hindrance when tied to the boat. Now warfare was declared on whale species, that had once been left in peace: blue-, fin-, Bryde's- and humpback whales, as well as sei-, minke- and gray whales, just to name a few.

From the Hunt to the Slaughter

Rapid progress, since the days of Foyn has turned modern whaling into a mass slaughter on an unprecedented scale. Once this trade supplied their staple diet and was important for survival, it even had the character of a fair fight: Because of the comparatively primitive fishing techniques, the whales had a good chance to defend themselves and often got away from their pursuers.

There was no question of the sensible use of resources in whaling anymore. The problem of overfishing had already reached serious proportions at the time of the Basque whaling but only with the development of the modern whaling industry has it reached such an alarming degree, that the survival of some whale species are now threatened.

The peaceful sea mammals have no chance against huge factory ships with electronic positioning systems, accurate harpoon guns, and explosive devices, which explode in the animals body.

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JÓNAS BLONDAL

Modern Whaling | Page 2

The following scenes were photographed by the German sailor Paul Bauer, who as a youth worked on the "Unitas" whaling fleet from 1937 to 1939.

During those years the whalers of the British-Dutch "Unilever" company group sailed the Antarctic under the German Flag.

The fishing grounds had also been extended. Soon there were no oceans, were the whales could live in safety – not even in the Antarctic. In 1910 there were already six whaling stations, 14 factory- and 48 catching ships in the area. Over 10,000 whales were killed that year.

The first ship with a stern slipway arrived in the Antarctic in 1925/26. This slipway – a large ramp in the back of the ship permitted whale processors to haul the entire catch on board and process it immediately. Over forty of those "motherships" existed in 1930. Over 75,000 blue whales were cut up on the flensing decks of these "floating factories" between 1925 and 1930.

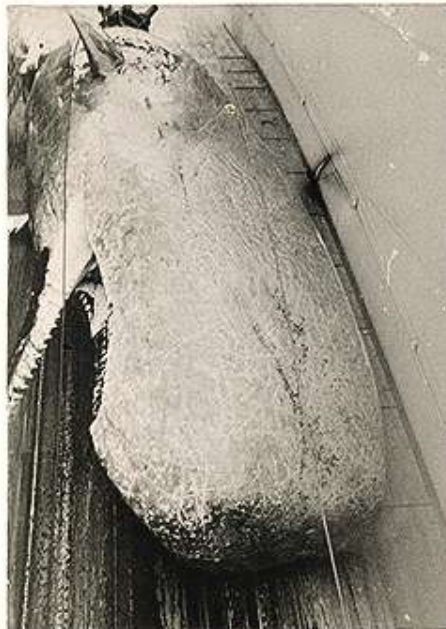


A flensed blue whale bull lies on deck (above). In view of a penis length of 1,50 m it is not too difficult to tell his gender

The catch is dragged aboard the floating factory ship through the "slip" (below). Norwegians invented the "stern chute" in 1925

The "flensing deck" of the mothership "Unitas" (above): Here the caught animals were cut to pieces. On the right you can see the backbone of a whale. The smell on board is not hard to imagine

A worker sits between the jaws of a blue whale (below). The tongue has already been removed



The sperm whale (left) can stay submerged under water for up to an hour and dives up to 3000 m deep. How whales handle the difference in pressure is not fully researched yet. Maybe the "spermaceti" plays a role in this – a creamy substance found in the animal's head. This was once believed to be sperm – a mistake which gave the whale its name

JÓNAS BLONDAL

Modern Whaling | Page 3



Swimming on his back, this humpback whale almost seems to smile – although there isn't really any reason: These whales are also rare now

Rusty blubber ovens and other fishing equipment – just left behind on "Deception Island" and Grytviken (South Georgia Island). Cleaning up doesn't bring any profits ...



A sad provisional Appraisal

It is estimated that 2,7 million whales were killed between 1890 and 1990. This means: Until today humans have "succeeded" in destroying 90 to 95 percent of the most commercially used whale species by whaling and pollution of the oceans. Other species, like the Atlantic and the Okhotsk-Korean gray whale, as well as the North Atlantic right whale are already extinct.

The current population of blue whales is estimated to be less than 8000 animals. The future of the right whale looks even bleaker: There are maybe 1500 whales left world-wide – from the "right whale" to the "raided whale" ...

The continuous existence of the current whale population would still be threatened, even if no more whales were shot. The pitiless hunt of larger breeding-age males has lead to an imbalance in the male-to-female ratio, leaving many of the still living without a partner. Pollution of the oceans and the ruthless use of drift nets are doing their part, so that according to the "International Whaling Commission" [IWC](#) annually over 300,000 whales, bottlenose dolphins and other dolphins die an untimely death.

The facts are tragic enough but they become inconceivable with the knowledge that there is not a single product derived from whales that could not be substituted by an alternative product. Jojoba oil, synthetic lubricants and plastics have made Spermaceti, Ambra grisea, or whalebone superfluous as raw materials.

So why are the whales still slaughtered? Not taking into account the internationally regulated aboriginal subsistence whaling, it is claimed that whales are hunted for "scientific purposes". However, the fact is that more often whale meat can be found as an expensive delicacy on Japanese plates as opposed to in laboratories. Or, as reported at the 55th meeting of the IWC, in tins of animal food ...

Protection Measures

The "International Whaling Commission" IWC was founded on 2nd December 1946. Oddly enough, first, as a lobby for several whaling nations. The purpose of the amalgamation was the regulation of international fishing quotes – but not so much to protect the whales but to protect the interest of the fishing industry. Currently the IWC has 49 member states.

In the past decades the IWC has orientated itself more and more towards the protection of species. There has been a continuous tightening of catch limits, and the permitted quotas have been reduced accordingly. Unfortunately the IWC has had little influence on the uncooperative whaling nations, due to lack of control- and sanctioning mechanisms.

Example: the IWC "Moratorium". This ban was voted on in 1982 and came into force in 1986. Although whaling was banned internationally, some countries like Japan, Norway, the former USSR, Korea and Iceland soon took up whaling again. Norway still ignores this decision. After a short break, Norway took up whaling again in 1993. To this day they especially target the population of minke whales.

In 1973 the "Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species" ([CITES](#)) was ratified by 121 countries, which also prohibits the import and export of products derived from whales. However, more than 1,7 million whales were killed between 1946 and 1986 and not a small portion after the ratification of the CITES treaty.

At present mostly private organizations are concerned about the protection of the remaining whale population. In the past few years efforts were successful in bringing the alarming situation of these sea mammals into the public eye. >>

JÓNAS BLONDAL

Modern Whaling | Page 4



A dead seal. Humans are still destroying the habitat of many marine creatures

Organizations like “[Greenpeace](#)” helped, also the “World Wildlife Fund” ([WWF](#)), the German organization [GSM](#), who are fighting for the conservation of marine mammals, the “International Fund for Animal Welfare” ([IFAW](#)), the “Sea Life Resources Institute”, the “International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources” ([IUCN](#)) as well as other organizations.

At a convention of the IWC in 1992 members upheld the existing Moratorium. The European Parliament also repeatedly formulated resolutions to ask IWC-member states to keep to the Moratorium and to create appropriate sanctioning mechanisms.

There are many non-political ways to support the protection of the whales. Books, exhibitions, TV reports (and even Comics ;->) can make people aware of the need to act with a view to conservation. On a more personal level: “Whale-Watching Tours” give people the opportunity to experience these amazing giants of the sea close-up, to touch and look them in the eye. Such direct contact helps to foster appreciation for the beauty of these animals. The rule is: What humans care about they protect.