

Rachel  
Carson  
Center  
Perspectives

How to cite:

Wadewitz, Lissa. "The American Animal Welfare Movement and Pacific Whaling."  
In: "New Histories of Pacific Whaling," edited by Ryan Tucker Jones and  
Angela Wanhalla, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and  
Society* 2019, no. 5, 11–16. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8957.

*RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* is an open-access publication. It is available online at [www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives](http://www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives). Articles may be downloaded, copied, and redistributed free of charge and the text may be reprinted, provided that the author and source are attributed. Please include this cover sheet when redistributing the article.

To learn more about the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, please visit [www.rachelcarsoncenter.org](http://www.rachelcarsoncenter.org).

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088  
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

© Copyright of the text is held by the Rachel Carson Center.

Image copyright is retained by the individual artists; their permission may be required in case of reproduction.

SPONSORED BY THE



Lissa Wadewitz

## **The American Animal Welfare Movement and Pacific-World Whaling**

The American whaling fleet shifted its operations to the Pacific Ocean in the 1830s and thousands of mixed-race whaling crews moved into the far reaches of that ocean in pursuit of whales and other animals. In the process, they caught, tormented, maimed, and killed thousands of creatures. Given the nature of our contemporary relationships with animals, the violence that infused the commercial whaling industry is striking. Indeed, the sheer volume of animal blood that was shed over the course of the nineteenth century is a critical part of Pacific World history that deserves more systematic analysis.

Although mainly produced by literate Euro-Americans, available sources indicate that crew members' attitudes toward whales, in particular, could be surprisingly nuanced; in fact, many seafarers of this era expressed a level of wonder and sentimentality toward whales that was at odds with the violence usually associated with the industry. This suggests that the inchoate American animal welfare movement spawned by the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s and 1830s had filtered—albeit incompletely and imperfectly—into the Pacific whaling fleet. And yet, the goals of these ventures, in addition to the strict social and economic hierarchies that emerged on nineteenth-century American whaling ships, ultimately held sway in determining whalers' interactions with the animals in their midst.

### **Anthropomorphizing Whales**

Whalers viewed most animals as lesser beings, sources of food, potentially life-threatening, and/or fully expendable. Sailors caught porpoises and turtles for food variety, toyed with albatrosses and other birds, and took great pleasure in catching and tormenting sharks. In contrast, many seafarers recognized the intelligence and human-like qualities of whales. Although the American animal welfare movement largely focused on domesticated species that lived in close proximity to humans, the campaign's "gospel of kindness" ideal appears in nascent form in the nineteenth-century whaling world. Given the aims of the commercial whaling industry, it is easy to overlook the capacity of whalers to express appreciation for the mammals they pursued and killed, but the sentiments are there.

Whalers observed and marveled at the whales' sociability and intelligence. In the spring of 1840, for example, Francis Olmsted witnessed the lancing of a pilot whale that, minutes before, had been playing about the bow. When the boats towed the bleeding animal to the ship, they were "accompanied by all his companions spouting and foaming around the boats like attendant tritons. So affectionate are these poor fish, that when one of their number is struck by the whaler, the school continues around the sufferer, appearing to sympathize with him in his agonies. Even when dead, they do not desert him, and it was not until a long time after the victim had been hoisted upon deck, far from their sight, that they abandoned him."<sup>1</sup> Whales were obviously more animated and companionable than other animals that were more easily captured and killed.

Notably, whalers also regularly recorded the touching maternal behavior of female whales. By the 1840s, for instance, American whalers found that attacking gray whales on their birthing grounds (which sailors called "the nursery") was a highly effective way to kill female whales, because, according to one whaler, the calf's mother "will not readily desert her offspring, and in her extreme solicitude for her young, is a frequent victim. The taking of one of a school, almost always ensures the capture of another, for his [or her] comrades do not immediately abandon the victim."<sup>2</sup> On observing a right whale, Reverend Henry Cheever noted that "its immediate recourse is to flight, except when it has young to look out for, and then it is bold as a lion, and manifests an affection which is itself truly affecting."<sup>3</sup>

The expanding American animal welfare movement directly tapped into such concerns about maternal behavior and familial relations; in fact, children's literature and Sunday school curricula increasingly presented anthropomorphized stories of animals with human-like feelings and animal families that showcased maternal love.<sup>4</sup> These emphases in popular culture back home may have prompted Euro-American whalers in particu-

1 Francis Allyn Olmsted, *Incidents Of A Whaling Voyage To Which Are Added Observations On The Scenery, Manners And Customs, And Missionary Stations Of The Sandwich And Society Islands* (New York: D. Appleton And Co., 1841; Rutland, Vermont, Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1969), 155. Page number refers to the 1969 edition.

2 Charles Melville Scammon, *Journal Aboard the Bark Ocean Bird on a Whaling Voyage to Scammon's Lagoon, Winter of 1858-1859*, ed. David A. Henderson (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1970), 27.

3 Henry T. Cheever, *The Whale and His Captors; or, The Whaleman's Adventures, and the Whale Biography, as Gathered on the Homeward Cruise of the "Commodore Preble"* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1850; Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1991), 110. Page number refers to the 1991 edition.

4 Katherine C. Grier, "'The Eden of Home': Changing Understandings of Cruelty and Kindness to Animals in Middle-Class American Households, 1820-1900," in *Animals in Human Histories: The Mirror of Nature and Culture* (Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2002), ed. Mary J. Henninger-Voss, 340-41.

lar—especially those of upper-/middle-class origins who were more likely to be literate—to pay closer attention to these behaviors among the whales they encountered.

### **The Hunt Proceeds**

Whalers thus often admired whales, but this reverence ultimately did not interfere with the hunt for several reasons. Some of these motivations are straightforward given the demands of the industry and the economic goals of individual workers. To fully grasp whalers' ability to both revere whales and then purposely kill them, however, requires a more in-depth examination of the ways in which social relations aboard ship were changing as the American whaling fleet moved into the Pacific.

Perhaps the most compelling driver of whaler behavior was the desire to make money. When whalers signed onto a voyage, they agreed to both a specific position on board and a set "lay," or percentage of the ship's total profits at the conclusion of the trip. Because the length of the voyage and the crew members' final pay were both directly related to how much whale oil and baleen a ship accumulated, whalers kept careful track of the ship's total supplies. The need to return home with a specific amount of oil and bone in the hold to make the voyage profitable could provide tremendous incentive for whalers not to succumb to sentiment when it came to the animals around them.

The fact that chasing and harpooning whales was also a highly dangerous and often frustrating experience most certainly helped whalers rationalize their behavior. Every time whalers engaged in the chase, they knew their lives were at risk. Stories about angry whales smashing boats and summarily tossing men into the sea were common. Whalers regularly broke bones, suffered from exposure to the elements, and, of course, lost their lives. Crews also often hunted whales for days on end, with nothing to show for the effort. Even if a harpooner managed to fasten to a whale, the animal could escape by diving or by sinking; many vessels lost thousands of dollars of equipment when this happened, which then affected the ship's profit margins.

Less obvious motivations likely emanated from the class tensions that pervaded most whaling ships in this period. Like most marine vessels, whale ships were organized according to a strict hierarchy based on status and skill that directly correlated to wage

rates. The captain and the ship officers tended to hail from more privileged backgrounds, were more highly skilled, and earned the largest returns on the ship's profits. Such class and status hierarchies sharpened as the industry expanded. If the captain or an officer were also prone to corporal punishment and cruel behavior, as many were, these tensions were often exacerbated further.

As the American whaling fleet more regularly entered the Pacific, racial tensions grew in overall intensity as well. Finding adequate hands became difficult, so whaling captains started leaving New England ports with mere skeleton crews, seeking to hire enough laborers *en route* to distant whaling grounds. The result was that American whaling crews grew strikingly diverse. Between 1803 and 1860, over 3,000 African Americans worked whaling ships out of New Bedford, Massachusetts, for instance, and one in six whale-ships had at least one Native American on board. After leaving New England, these ships made for the Azores, or "Western Islands," whose population was Portuguese, Catholic, and mixed-race. Next was the Cape Verdean archipelago, which had a darker skinned population that Euro-Americans often referred to as "Portuguese blacks." Once in the Pacific, whaling captains next took on additional islander crew members, particularly Hawaiians and Māori from New Zealand.

Given that the crews were so diverse and the dominant nineteenth-century racial discourse so predicated on Euro-American men's sense of cultural and biological superiority, tensions between racial groups were bound to erupt. Historians have found that African American men, due to white racism, stereotypes about their abilities, and the fact that they were often hired to do "women's work," fared the worst in the American whaling fleet. Racial animosities were so pronounced on some vessels that living spaces were segregated by race.

Despite instances of violence and inter-racial tensions, whaling still generally offered thousands of men of color a way to achieve some sense of freedom, self-respect, and a chance to advance in their careers. According to historian Nancy Shoemaker, rank trumped race. "That a man of color as an officer had special privileges could have fueled white foremast hands' resentment," she argues, "but ship rules protected and legitimated those privileges."<sup>5</sup>

5 Nancy Shoemaker, *Native American Whalers and the World: Indigenous Encounters and the Contingency of Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 66.

Did this inverted world of race relations affect whalers' relationships with the animals of the Pacific World? It is difficult to say with certainty, but the lines between animal and human were definitely blurry, especially for Euro-Americans thrown into new situations and places inhabited by "exotic," dark-skinned people who were rumored to eat human flesh. That Euro-American ideas about the proximity of non-whites to the animal kingdom were evolving over the course of the 1800s, and that many Americans remained unsure about how to classify whales (fish or mammal?), merely added to the confusion about the accuracy of existing taxonomies of the natural world. It is certainly possible that these uncertainties influenced how whalers' perceived and acted toward the animals they so readily killed.

The Pacific whaling grounds thus presented a racially mixed-up world where Euro-Americans continually articulated deeply held beliefs about their superiority and the clash between "savagery" and "civilization," despite the racially diverse reality of the whaling fleet and the actual power structures they lived with every day. Unable to freely lash out at the men of color aboard their ships and seeing the special privileges afforded all officers regardless of skin color may have pushed Euro-American whalers to channel their frustrations at the animals they did have license to harm.

But what about whalemens of color? Because they left behind so few written sources, their motivations have to be carefully teased out of the records we do have. Men of color may have felt compelled to join the hunt due to their frustrations with racist treatment or abuse. Although whalers of all ethnicities also saw the whale hunt as a way to distinguish themselves as men and prove their worth to their fellow crew members, men of color may have more acutely felt a need to prove themselves, to appear brave, skilled, and so worthy of their positions. Surrounded by potentially hostile white crewmates, some men of color may have more zealously pursued the animals they encountered as a result.

Unlike spontaneous and more individualistic approaches to animal slaughter involving birds, turtles, and sharks, the whale hunt was also an inherently collective enterprise. No man would pursue a whale on his own—that would be sheer folly. The whaleboat required all hands to act in concert as they determinedly rowed toward their quarry on the open water. That their prey was revered as intelligent and powerful heightened the challenge. Although the hunt itself had the potential to unify men across lines of race and class, perceived social and biological distinctions may have instead spurred whalers' actions when confronted by angry leviathans and thrashing flukes.

### **A Failed Gospel of Kindness**

Nineteenth-century whalers had a tremendous impact on many of the animal populations of the Pacific. However, their attitudes and actions toward whales appear to have been based on complicated and evolving understandings of human/nonhuman relations and perceived ethno-racial hierarchies. Emerging debates about slavery, taxonomies of nature, and the proper treatment of animals also seem to have combined and percolated into the whaling world of the 1800s, particularly for whalers of Euro-American descent. Whales' intelligence, curiosity, sociability, and especially the maternal instincts and actions of female whales, all struck a chord with many of the men engaged in this industry. Yet, at the end of the day, such sentiments did not deter the harvest of these creatures for financial gain; the "gospel of kindness" may have given Euro-American whalers pause, but it ultimately failed to interfere with the hunt.

### **Further Readings**

Bolster, Jeffrey. *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Creighton, Margaret. *Rites & Passages: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830–1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Dolin, Eric Jay. *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

Grier, Katherine C. "'The Eden of Home': Changing Understandings of Cruelty and Kindness to Animals in Middle-Class American Households, 1820–1900." In *Animals in Human Histories: The Mirror of Nature and Culture*, edited by Mary J. Henninger-Voss, 316–62. Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2002.

Rosenthal, Gregory. *Beyond Hawai'i: Native Labor in the Pacific World*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.

Shoemaker, Nancy. *Native American Whalemen and the World: Indigenous Encounters and the Contingency of Race*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.