

# Whales

Bob Nirkind

1977

The point is that man is literally undoing the work of organic evolution. By creating vast urban agglomerations of concrete, metal and glass, by overriding and undermining the complex, often subtly organized ecosystems that constitute local differences in the natural world—in short, by replacing a highly complex, organic environment by a simplified, inorganic one—man is disassembling the biotic pyramid that supported humanity for countless millennia.

— Murray Bookchin, *Ecology and Revolutionary Thought*

For issue upon issue over the past year we've bombarded the readership of the *Fifth Estate* with article after article dealing with humanity's indirect efforts to wipe humankind off the face of the earth, be it through the dangers of chemical disasters, liquid natural gas explosions or nuclear-generated radioactive leakages, seepages or plant accidents. In noting and discussing these dangers to our existence, we've continually neglected the fact that we're by no means the only living organisms on this planet poisoned by the stratagems of capitalism.

Although we may not always think in these terms, it should be glaringly obvious to us all that everything that lives and breathes—be it humans, plant or animal life—is directly affected by “economic growth.” The dioxin which fouled the air at Seveso, Italy also wiped out all plant life in the area as well as taking its toll on the town's citizenry. The thermal discharge system to be constructed for the Seabrook, New Hampshire nuclear power plant will destroy marine life for miles as it returns the 1.2 billion gallons of sea water it takes in per day to cool its two nuclear reactors at a temperature 39 degrees warmer than normal ocean temperatures. The hazards to human life we've already duly noted at great length in past stories.

Marine life particularly appears to be losing ground in its efforts to survive the ravages of humanity. Great schools of small fish are washed ashore regularly, helpless victims of the numerous oil slicks we've created...or at least attached our tacit approval to. Dolphins are currently the subject of considerable concern as hundreds of thousands are slaughtered annually by multi-million dollar purse seiner ships hunting for tuna, but indiscriminately trapping and destroying anything caught within their boundaries.

## Extinct Before Science Knew It

Vastly more imperiled, though, are the whales, the mighty mammals of the sea whose very existence has been threatened by capitalism's rapacious simplification of all “non-human” things from distinctive objects and beings unto themselves to mere articles of commerce. Whereas the eight species of Great Whales once numbered over four-and-a-half million, they've now been reduced to what has been liberally estimated as less than three hundred and fifty thousand survivors.

In an excellent book on the subject entitled *A Whale for the Killing*, author Farley Mowat wrote that of the eight species: “One race, the Atlantic Grey, which was known as the Scrag Whale to the New Englanders who destroyed it,

became extinct even before science realized it existed. Four others, the Southern Right or Biscayen, the Northern Right, or Bowhead, the Blue and the Humpback, are now so close to extinction that, despite nominal protection, it is doubtful if they will endure. Three species, the Fin, the Sei and the Sperm, now bear the brunt of our unremitting assault on the whale nation and their numbers are melting away with appalling rapidity. Only one race, the Pacific Grey, which has been protected for more than forty years, seems to be tentatively edging away from extinction, rather than plunging toward it.”

At one time no more than the occasional target of a primitive tribe hunting for food—a tribe which was doing exceptionally well if it managed to bag two or three whales a year—the whale felt no real danger from humans until the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century, when Europeans began building whaling boats capable of staying afloat in turbulent waters. Once killed only for food, the whales were now hunted down solely for the oil and baleen (whalebone), leaving the butchered carcasses to be cast adrift by the whalers. The oil would ultimately, in the words of Farley Mowat, “fuel the lamps of an increasingly urbanized European society,” and the baleen would be used “for the manufacture of ‘horn’ windows and utensils.”

As the whale became a vehicle for the production of commodities, the means of destroying them became more efficient. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Basques—who had already nearly obliterated the Biscayen Right Whales and exterminated the eastern population of Atlantic Grey Whales—had perfected ship-borne tryworks, meaning that now whales could be cut up and rendered while still at sea.

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were as many as two thousand whaling vessels sweeping the North and South Atlantic, both Pacifics, and the Indian Ocean. Men from the New England States, Holland, the Baltic States, Norway, France and England, amongst other areas of the world, took to the seas to make their fortunes, though in reality they only made fortunes for the money-men who stayed behind.

By the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the whalers had done their jobs so well that whaling was in danger of becoming an ex-occupation. Although there were still great numbers of whales of the rorqual variety, rorquals being the largest, fastest and most intelligent of all whales—they had always proven to be too difficult to catch. Not only were they usually too fast for whaling boats, but should they be snagged, they would unceremoniously sink to the bottom.

## **Technological Advance and Overkill**

With disaster staring them in the face, humanity’s extraordinary ability to create death-dealing technological advances again came forth in the form of the Norwegians, the most relentless and vicious sea-marauders of all time, and three new weapons were unleashed. One was a whale gun which fired a heavy harpoon with a line attached deep into the 116-foot whale’s vitals, where a bomb exploded and ripped the animal apart internally, while strengthened barbs on the harpoon prevented it from tearing loose. Another was a steam catcher, or small steam-powered boat whose speed and maneuverability enabled it to keep pace with rorquals. The third was a hollow lance which, once buried deep into a dead whale, would pump compressed air into the body until it became buoyant.

As ruthless as these methods sound, they were by no means the worst. During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Norwegians were killing off Seis and Fin Whales by driving them into long fjords with boats, then blocking off the entrance with nets and spearing the mammals with lances whose blades were dipped in the decaying flesh of whales killed previously. Infection would soon set in and the trapped whales would ultimately die painful deaths induced by septicemia or gangrene.

As factory ships were invented, doing away with on-shore processing plants, and weaponry was refined, more and more whales fell victim to humanity’s blood sacrifice to capital. By the early 1930’s, as many as 80,000 great whales were being killed annually.

Although the International Whaling Commission (IWC) was set up in Norway in 1946 to give protection to the rapidly diminishing herds of whales and to regulate the hunt, in effect they did little but divert attention from the slaughter. Typical of the ineffectiveness of the IWC was a quota system it set up whereby—each nation was allowed to kill only so many whales per year. That quota turned out to be set at a level higher than the whale population could conceivably support.

## Humanity Wiping Out Other Life Forms

Contrary to popular opinion, commercial whalers haven't been the only cause of whale slaughter either. During World War II whales came under constant attack from depth charges and bombs guided by sonar systems employed to detect and follow underwater objects. In the mid-1950's it was even discovered that aircraft crews in the U.S. Navy used whales as targets, instructed by officers to pretend that they were Russian submarines.

Science has taken its share of whales as well, killing them and dissecting them for the anatomical knowledge of the huge creatures, then handing their carcasses over to whaling companies, who process them commercially for profit.

Due to the incredible numbers of great whales hunted down and destroyed each year and the threat of their imminent extinction, most nations which were at one time involved in the whaling industry—among them the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Germany—have dropped out, characterizing the industry as having no further economic interest. Of those which remain, Japan, the world's largest whaling nation, Russia and Norway stand out as the most determined butchers of whales. Running neck and neck with Russia, Japan recently asked for world action on catch quotas and the preservation of whales' territorial waters in a thinly disguised effort to retain its commercial superiority. Relying on the sea for more than half of its protein, Japan produces 45,000 tons of whale meat per year and imports yet another 30,000 tons, mostly from Russia.

In a single-minded attempt to progress economically, humanity is slowly but surely, with every means at its disposal, wiping out all life forms around it. Upsetting the ecological balance of nature and bringing us all just that much closer to our' finish. A number of animal species have already been rendered extinct, whales are well on their way and humankind surely follows somewhere behind.

“Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate in having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren; they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.”

—from *The Outermost House* by Henry Beston

# fifth Estate

Bob Nirkind  
Whales  
1977

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/284-july-1977/whales>  
Fifth Estate #284, July, 1977

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**