



[Save Whales]



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Executive Summary

Who's Eating All the Fish?

The Food Security Rationale for Culling Cetaceans

By Wilf Swartz and Daniel Pauly



HUMANE SOCIETY
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IN RESPONSE TO THE GLOBAL FISHERIES CRISIS, characterized by falling abundances of resource species, falling catches, increasing habitat destruction, and extremely high subsidies, the advocates of whaling have been advancing a new rationale for hunting of marine cetaceans. They claim that marine mammals, particularly the great whales, compete with humans for fish resources; that efforts to protect these whales from extinction have led marine ecosystems to be “out of balance;” and that such balance can only be re-established by large-scale culling.

This argument flies in the face of numerous observations on the widely different ecological impacts of fisheries (which tend at first to concentrate on large fishes wherever these can be caught) and marine mammals (which, if they feed on fish, tend to consume smaller individuals). Thus, the decline of the mean trophic levels of fisheries catch over the past 50 years (which is largely similar to mean sizes, as big fish eat smaller ones), is a signature of “fishing down marine food webs” and leaves marine mammals exonerated.

Although scientific support for the claims that whales are causing the decline of the world’s fisheries is nonexistent, these claims may appeal to officials in various developing countries, where the difficulty and cost of addressing the real causes of the declines of their fisheries resources and fisheries may appear overwhelming. Hence, the reframing of the long-running whaling debate as a global food security issue has proven to be a powerful lobbying tool in enlisting the support of developing countries,

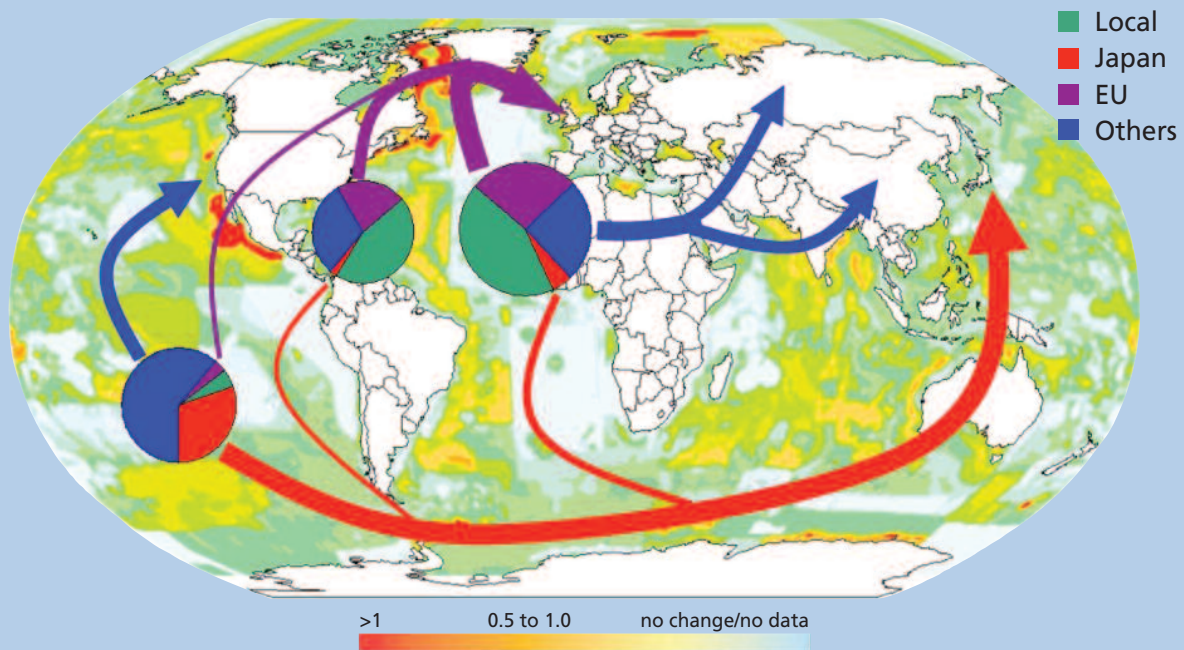
although most have no direct interest in whaling.

Here, we present another framework for understanding why developing countries experience diminishing supplies of fish: competition from the international market. The rapid economic integration of the world fisheries market over the later half of the 20th century, combined with the expansion of the distant-water fisheries of the developed countries, fuelled by government subsidies, has resulted in the acceleration of the trend wherein fish caught along the coast of developing countries gravitate toward the markets of affluent developed countries. Indeed, one can speak of fish migrating from “the more needy to the less needy.”

Our analysis, which identified the final destinations of the fish caught within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of the coastal countries in the South Pacific, Caribbean, and West Africa, shows that in all three regions, domestic markets accounted for less than half of the catch, with a majority of the catch supplying markets of affluent countries in the EU, Japan, North America, and increasingly China.

The issues of economic development and food security in developing countries are multifaceted. The necessary debates, however, do not benefit from the confusion that the “whales-eat-our-fish” argument generates. On the contrary, the scarce scientific and administrative resources of developing countries are invested in a non-issue, their public media are being misled, and a tremendous amount of ill will is generated for no reason.

It is time to put this non-issue to rest.



Final destinations of the marine food resources caught in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of the countries in the South Pacific, Caribbean, and West Africa, based on 2000 landings data (searoundus.org) and UN Comtrade trade statistics (comtrade.un.org). Note that in all three regions, local populations consume less than 50% of the catch. The background map represents the mean trophic level change from 1950 to 2000. The map demonstrates that the global fisheries are undergoing considerable “fishing down,” i.e., large predatory fishes are first to be depleted when fisheries develop. This mode of “predation” is the converse of the predation by marine mammals, who, to the extent that they prey on fishes, tend to target the small ones.

Worrying about Whales Instead of Managing Fisheries:

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF A MEETING IN SENEGAL

ON MAY 8 AND 9, 2008, I had the opportunity to attend, in Dakar, Senegal, a workshop organized by WWF and the Lenfest Ocean Program (LOP), devoted to the interaction between the great whales and fisheries of northwest Africa, and titled *Whales & Fish Interactions: Are Great Whales a Threat to Fisheries?* The workshop was attended by officials from the fishery ministries of half a dozen countries in the region, from Mauritania to Guinea; WWF and LOP staff; a few scientists; and, most interestingly, parliamentarians from the host country.

Most of the great whales in that region of the world come to reproduce and feed at higher latitudes, which is in line with what is known about great whales elsewhere in the tropics. Baleen whales, when they feed, rely mostly on krill and other small plankton organisms, and thus they would not, in any case, interact with the demersal and tuna fisheries prevailing off northwest Africa. So why a workshop on this outlandish topic? Why not Fisheries vs. the Martians?

The reason for the workshop was not only the fact that the countries in the northwest African region increasingly vote with Japan at meetings of the International Whaling Commission. Rather, their delegates justify such votes on the grounds that their fisheries are negatively impacted by baleen whales. Indeed, they argue that the whole ecosystem is “out of balance,” a balance that can be re-established only by killing whales—which flies in the face of everything known about the fisheries of the region, whale biology, and common sense. And it does not get better when it is tailored for local consumption.

This was a very awkward situation for me to be in. I have worked for years on West African fisheries with colleagues from the region and supported their countries’ interest vis-à-vis people justifying the activity of EU-based or other distant-water fleets operating in West Africa on the basis of questionable “agreements” that the coastal countries were blackmailed into signing and through which their fisheries resources are made available at less-than-bargain prices. These distant-water fleets, jointly with the local, totally unmanaged, and overgrown “small-scale” fisheries, have reduced the fisheries resources off West Africa to shadows of their former selves, which makes the management of these fisheries, and especially a reduction of their aggregate effort, a priority. This, in fact, was the main result of the EU-funded international research project called *Système d’Information et d’Analyse des Pêches de l’Afrique du Nord-Ouest (SIAP)*. This project provided West African scientists and others an opportunity to collaborate on the analysis of half a century of catch time series and other data, with the results presented at an international conference held in Dakar in 2002, amidst a flurry of articles in the local press.

This was not the first time, obviously, that such findings were reported. In fact, the SIAP project was largely based on gathering and analyzing the vast literature, spanning several decades,


that tracked the declining trajectory of the fisheries off West Africa. This literature, and the syntheses which resulted from the SIAP project, are available to inform local policy makers interested in reforming fisheries policies.

The most crucial reform would be moving from a situation where West African waters are seen as a larder from which an endless supply of fish can be extracted to supply foreign markets to one where West African countries could build on export and processing of fish to strengthen their own economy and benefit their own people.

The government positions that I heard at this meeting suggest, however, that such reforms are not being contemplated. Instead, the top fisheries officials of West African countries appear to have thrown their lot with their Japanese advisers and their “whales-eat-our-fish” mantra, for reasons that are either obscure or too obvious to mention.

The excellent scientific presentations at the workshop, by Drs. Kristin Kaschner and Lyne Morissette, dealt with the identity of the great whales off West Africa, their behaviour, their incorporation in (Ecopath) trophic models, and the result of some preliminary simulations (with Ecosim), which suggested that killing all the whales off West Africa—even if it could be done—would have little effect on the fishery resources and catches.

At every step, their finding and assumptions were questioned by one or the other government officials, using concepts (such



So why a workshop on this outlandish topic? Why not Fisheries vs. the Martians?

as “ecosystem balance”) and arguments (“you have not studied the stomachs of newborn calves off West Africa, so you don’t really know that they don’t eat our fish”) originating in the Tokyo-based Cetacean Research Institute. The only evidence they presented was evidence of bad faith, the whole line of arguments being based on absent data. These purely negative arguments are never accompanied by a positive argument for the case they attempt to make.

There was a ray of hope, though. The participating Senegalese parliamentarians, from both the Senate and the Lower House, were united in their questioning of their government’s position, and they mentioned their surprise at a government policy that has never been publicly debated and that is actually alien to the culture of their constituents. Indeed, this very point was emphasized by a parliamentarian and mayor of a fishing town, who mentioned that her constituents, far from considering whales to be their competitors, consider whales to be their guardians and want to see them protected. This view was echoed by participants from other West African countries.

Still, I left Dakar with a heavy heart. To see that such a great country as Japan has twisted its entire development aid and corrupted fisheries officials of an entire region for the sake of its tiny, heavily subsidized whaling industry, is sad. It will probably be years before the countries targeted by these delusional policies see through these manoeuvres and free themselves from the officials who mislead them. Also, the real potential of whale ecotourism is not being explored,

Wilf Swartz is a graduate student at The University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre.

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although it has become a serious source of foreign currency in various other countries, e.g., in Argentina.

Foremost, however, the countries successfully targeted by the “whales-eat-our-fish” delusion fail to concentrate on the real problem. This was brutally recalled by the senior parliamentarian at the workshop, who put the issue of the mismanagement of fisheries in the general context of food production in Senegal. He recalled that only a few years ago, his country allowed its own rice production to be destroyed by cheap imports from Taiwan, only to be hit a few years later with massive price increases that have put the now imported staple out of the reach of most of his compatriots. And he warned that the “whales-eat-our-fish” issue could have similar effect, by diverting attention from the task of putting Senegalese fisheries on a sustainable basis.

—Daniel Pauly

Daniel Pauly is professor and director of The University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre.

For the full report, with references to the relevant scientific literature, and for more on the international effort to protect whales, visit hsi.org/protectwhales.

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