



Practical perspectives from a whaling nation

Presentation by Laila Jusnes, information adviser High North Alliance, at the seminar “The Future of Whaling in the 21st Century”, 26th May 2004, Oxford, United Kingdom, organised by the World Society for the Protection of Animals and Green College Centre.

First, let me thank the World Society for the Protection of Animals for the invitation to this seminar.

I must admit that when the invitation first came, we hesitated a little bit. Were we invited only to give an anti-whaling event credibility? But we did not hesitate long. Actually, it was easy to accept the invitation with great pleasure. The High North Alliance has always promoted debate, dialogue and the exchange of arguments so that interested parties can form an enlightened judgement on the whaling issue. I hope today’s seminar will be useful for that purpose.

Just a few words about the High North Alliance. Our objective is to work for the future of coastal communities, and the sustainable use of marine resources, with a special emphasis on seals and whales. We disseminate information to the public, we have a website, we distribute brochures, and we have extensive contact with the media. We also engage in some political processes.

Our geographic scope is the North Atlantic, with member organisations from Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Norway and Canada. We are based in the Lofoten islands in Norway. We receive funding from various sources. The most important is the funding received from the National Budget in Norway.

I have been asked to speak on “Practical perspectives from a whaling nation”. Just to make it absolutely clear, I speak here on behalf of an NGO. I do not represent any government. I will limit myself to Norway, the only nation conducting commercial whaling. It can be argued that Norway is a locomotive on the whaling issue.

Last week, the Norwegian Parliament finished their work on a White Paper on Norway’s policy on marine mammals. I will get back to this new management policy later.

The whaling season goes on right now. This year’s quota is 670 minke whales. About 130 animals have been harvested so far. This is an ordinary, commercial hunt. It is not for scientific or cultural purposes. The whale hunt takes place all along the coast, from the southern part of the North Sea and to the areas north of Spitzbergen, on 80 degrees north.

About 33 boats participate, in average they are 65 feet long, carrying a crew of 5-6 men. These are combined fishing and whaling vessels. A normal annual cycle is herring in the autumn, cod in the winter and minke whales in the summer. This cycle is an adaptation to nature’s cycle – where the herring arrives from the large ocean to the coast in autumn to hibernate, where the cod arrives to the spawning grounds, and where the minke whale goes north for feeding.

The Norwegian culture and psyche are strongly rooted in the sea. There is a very close relationship with the sea. We have a long coast line, more than 2000 kilometres. Most people live at, or very near the coast and the use of marine resources has been extremely important to the Norwegian economy. Fishing, whaling and sealing have been carried out for thousands of years.

Another link to the sea is the shipping industry and, in modern times, the exploitation of oil and gas. For us it is hard, or practically impossible, to envisage a life without the sea. So not surprisingly, there is broad support for whaling.

Norwegian whaling is based on the modern and internationally recognised principles of conservation and sustainable use of renewable natural resources, as embraced by the world community in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and embedded in Agenda 21. These principles were reconfirmed at the world summit in Johannesburg ten years later.

Another important framework is the UN Law of the Sea. The establishment of exclusive economic zones was of great importance to countries like Norway and Iceland. It gave us and other countries sovereignty over huge economic resources and large areas of the sea.

Norway's sea area is five times bigger than the land area. It is therefore obvious that Norway will resist any attempt to weaken what has been achieved through the Law of the Sea. Norway believes opposition to its whaling policy is an attack on these established rights.

A more specific legal framework is The International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. The objective of the Convention is to promote sustainable whaling on the basis of scientific knowledge. Sustainable whaling is in full compliance, both to the letter and the spirit of the Convention. We find it totally unacceptable that there are members to the International Whaling Commission that set aside these and completely ignore the purpose and objective of the Whaling Convention. The UK is one of these countries – it opposes whaling no matter what.

We accept that some countries are opposed to whaling in principle. But then they must promote such a policy through the correct channels. For instance, some years ago there was a discussion in Switzerland whether that nation should leave the Whaling Commission. Their problem was that as a contracting party they were obliged to accept the treaty. On the other hand, they wanted to promote their opposition to whaling. Switzerland decided to remain a member, but has adopted a somewhat more neutral attitude that is able to be defended with respect to the Convention.

It is sad to say, but the current way the International Whaling Commission works serves only one purpose and it is a shocking example of how international cooperation must not be conducted. The International Whaling Commission is following a path now that completely undermines the importance of international treaties. If this absolute disregard for international treaties is to spill over to other agreements, the end result can only be complete anarchy.

As mentioned earlier, a White Paper on Norway's policy on marine mammals was presented by the Government to Parliament in March this year. It is a coalition government and does not control the majority in Parliament. In general, the White Paper was informative and represented a good basis for Parliament to deliberate and make decisions.

A key concept is the establishment of an ecosystem-based management regime for marine mammals. While groups represented here today will no doubt disagree, there is great concern regarding the interaction between fisheries and marine mammals.

Marine mammals consume vast amounts of fish and other seafood. Minke whales and harp seals alone consume almost 5 million tons of seafood each year, almost twice the amount of Norwegian fisheries. They eat fish that are of commercial interest, such as herring, capelin, cod, haddock, and also other seafood that serve as a food source for fish, such as krill. While some consider the concerns for this interaction between fish and marine mammals as preposterous, absurd and absolutely irrelevant, I can assure you that this is not the case in Norway. Whales don't eat potatoes and carrots. They eat food that is available in the sea. Scientific simulations indicate that if one more minke whale is added to the stock, it will reduce the yearly cod quota by 5 tons and the herring quota by 5 tons.

Before anybody should be attempted to jump to the conclusion that we wish to eradicate whales from the sea, that is not the case. We wish to have strong and viable populations of whales and it is certainly the case that we do not blame whales for failures in fisheries management. Whales are not scapegoats, and cannot be made scapegoats. Only those that manage fisheries can be scapegoats for poor management.

As for minke whales, our Parliament instructed the Government to considerably increase the hunt, and increase it as soon as possible. While the formal decision did not mention a specific number, 1800 was mentioned both in the written recommendation as well as the plenary debate in Parliament. This number equals the average hunt from 1963-1983.

At this time, there is an internationally agreed estimate of the population size of the North Atlantic minke whale, to be 107 000 animals. Taking 1800 minkes per year represents less than what Norwegian scientists consider to be the minimum growth rate of 2%. The growth rate of 1% used in the quota calculation model developed by the scientific committee of the International Whaling Commission is considered to be too low by Norwegian scientists.

Our Parliament recognises that there are abundant stocks of other small cetaceans and larger baleen whales, although, admittedly there is not much knowledge of these species and their role in the ecosystem. Parliament has since instructed the Government to consider scientific whaling on these species.

What is ironic, is that Norway appears to know much more about the species we hunt than those we don't. The High North Alliance notes that scientific whaling is more controversial than commercial whaling. Instead of scientific whaling, one alternative is commercial whaling conducted on conditions that make it possible to gather scientific data. We have seen the accusations against Iceland and Japan that their scientific whaling operations are commercial whaling in disguise. To get rid of the hassle, Norway could do scientific whaling in disguise...

Perhaps not very surprising, Parliament is extremely disappointed with the International Whaling Commission. So, it has instructed our Government to consider tasking the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO) with the management of marine mammals, such as establishing Total Allowable Catches (TACs) and the distribution of TACs between Norway and other countries. One reason is that the IWC is not fulfilling its task of

setting whale quotas. Another reason is that the IWC is formally prohibited from distributing the total quota between various whaling nations.

In its last decision, Parliament asks the Government to present a new White Paper in 2008.

Putting aside the conservation and legal issues, let's move to animal rights and animal welfare issues.

I believe there is a sharp distinction between animal rights and animal welfare. I am not sure whether WSPA considers itself as an animal rights or animal welfare organisation. I hope I will find out more by the end of the day.

The animal rights ideology gives animals the same rights as human beings, and consequently opposes all use of animals for human purposes. Although we have a completely different viewpoint, I certainly respect their right to have their opinion. Our ethics is based on the use of living resources, both marine and terrestrial, plants and animals. Our survival in the high north would be impossible without such use. Orange trees don't grow on glaciers ...

On the other hand, the animal welfare ideology accepts the use of animals for human purposes, but that animals should suffer as little as possible. Suffering must be balanced with the benefits derived from this use. This is a view that we share. We consider modern sustainable whaling to be conducted in line with this animal welfare ideology.

Let me go a little bit more into details here. I have taken the trouble to have a look on the report "Troubled Waters" published by WSPA and a bunch of other NGOs. This report discusses how to assess animal welfare with respect to Five Freedoms. These Five Freedoms are developed by the UK's Farm Animal Welfare Council, and they are said to be used in many countries. Can we use these five freedoms as a starting point to assess the animal welfare issues in whaling? Let's try.

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst

Whales migrate northwards to feed. They find food. And as long as there is food available, this freedom is met.

2. Freedom from discomfort.

Whales live a free life. They do not experience any discomfort from whaling operations. However, whales might be entangled in fishing gear, and this could be said to cause discomfort. But, that would be from fishing operations, and not from whaling.

3. Freedom from fear and distress.

Again, whales live a free life. I challenge anyone that they experience fear or distress. In the way Norwegian whaling is conducted, the whales are not aware that they are being hunted. They continue with their activity, whether that is migrating or feeding. The challenge for the whalers is to find out where the whale will surface the next time, and to be within shooting range. That means to be maximum 20-30 metres away when the whale surfaces for two-three seconds.

4. Freedom to express normal behaviour

Unlike livestock in factory farms, whales are not enclosed in small cages. We don't have battery whales, or whales in sow crates. Whales live a truly free life, they go south in the winter, they mate and breed, and then they go north in the summer to feed.

I hope that we can all agree that these four freedoms are fully met with respect to whaling. I accept that there is a difference of view when it comes to the fifth freedom, freedom from pain, injury and disease.

We do contend that this freedom is actually met. Firstly, it is documented that at least 80% of the minke whales harvested in Norway are dead instantaneously. They experience no pain. Secondly, most of the remaining animals lose consciousness and thus do not experience any pain. They are shot with rifles as a secondary killing methods. To be absolutely sure that these animals are actually dead, the whalers often fire several shots. However, we are fully aware that some animals are neither dead instantaneously nor unconscious until death, nor do they actually lose consciousness. In these cases, pain is inflicted upon the animals.

In such cases, it is of great help that the animal is attached to the boat with a rope, the rope that goes out with the harpoon. This attachment makes it easier to follow the animal and to come within shooting range. These whales are either shot with a rifle or a new penthrite grenade.

Based on the majority of the hunt, I think it is fair to say that this freedom is met for most of the animals. I think also that most other people, including the organisers of this seminar, agree that in most cases this freedom is met, in other words that most whales in the Norwegian hunt do not suffer any pain.

I would therefore invite animal welfare organisations to work constructively with the objective of improving the welfare issues associated with whaling. Based on the Troubled Waters report, it is clear that there are differences amongst various whaling operations. It also seems clear, that Norway comes out with a pretty good score also on this issue. It is of no help to only say no to whaling. Whaling will continue anyway, and the best thing to do is to work cooperatively to make improvements where you think it is deemed necessary.

Having said that, I must say that we were very disappointed with the foreword by Sir David Attenborough to the Troubled Waters report. We have admired him so much, and we have truly appreciated his long and distinguished contribution to documenting natural history. In this foreword, he claims whaling to be both uncivilised and inhumane. We felt this to be simply inflammatory. In order for him to get a first-hand experience of whaling and to witness how to kill a whale, we invited Sir David to join a whaling boat. He has not yet responded. Excuse me for asking, but how civilised is that?

To make things worse, Sir David went on Norwegian radio claiming that, and I quote, "it takes at least two and a half minutes to kill a whale and often very, very much longer than that" unquote. This is simply not true. The very report to which he wrote the foreword, does not even claim that. It seems relevant to ask: Is Sir David just ignorant or is he deliberately lying?

Sir David did not join the hunt, but we can see what he would have witnessed. These footages are from Norwegian whaling.

[Whaling video, 3-4 minutes]

The title for today's seminar is, the future of whaling in the 21st century. From my point of view, I think the future for whaling looks bright. I feel confident that more and more people have either reached the conclusion, or are getting there, that whaling should not only be continued, but should even be increased to provide more people with a healthy and nutritious source of protein in a way that is much more environment-friendly and humane than eating beef or pork.

Thank you!