

# To Whale or not to Whale, That is the Question

## Ray Gambell - Conservation biologist

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'You seem a nice enough bloke; what are you doing in this bloody whaling business?' The Australian TV interviewer had hoped to catch me off guard, jet-lagged and tired after flying from London to Sydney. He had reduced his Prime Minister to tears in a recent broadcast, and had a reputation as a tough interviewer to maintain. What was I, what am I, doing in the whaling business?

My involvement had started in a normal enough way. After graduating in zoology, I thought it important as a Christian to do something 'useful' with my biological training. I had made my commitment and become a Christian in my second term as a student, so growth in the Christian life and scientific training had proceeded together. I began in fisheries research, and although counting whiting vertebrae may not be an immediately obvious way to provide food for a hungry world, it was one contribution to the knowledge necessary to identify the stocks of a renewable resource so that they can be properly managed and harvested on a sustainable basis. Together with age determination, maturity rates, recruitment and the rest of their vital parameters, the lives of the fish are reduced to components in an equation leading to catch limits, the mesh sizes of the fishermen's nets and the rest of the regulatory measures needed to prevent over-fishing.

In the early 1960s, the international regulation of whaling was at a crisis point, with obvious depletion of the major stocks of these largest of the mammals, but little quantitative science to provide the factual basis for rational management. I was fortunate then to have the chance to move on from fish to bigger things and so became a whale biologist, and later the scientific advisor on whales to the UK government, and subsequently an international administrator.

### Scientific research

The scientific ethic, indeed the attitude of research scientists in general, is one of intellectual honesty in a genuine seeking after the truth. This is totally compatible with the Christian view of life and work; being both a scientist and a Christian does not introduce any special strains in integrity when dealing with fellow scientists, or anyone else for that matter. But that does not mean that there are not temptations comparable with those we may experience in other walks of life.

By its very nature, a great deal of scientific research consists of repetitive and unexciting work. There is an increasing requirement for results which will stand up to rigorous statistical analysis. This calls for large numbers of observations to be collected, measurements made or samples examined to build up a database which will provide unequivocal answers with computed means and standard errors. But biological systems do not always conform to the expected patterns which the researchers put forward as the hypothesis to be tested in their experimental design. Thus there may be a temptation to leave out the odd aberrant record which falls far off the nicely constructed line on the graph. The picture would look so much prettier if the wayward measurement was not there, the statistical variance would be reduced and the whole thing would be far more conclusive.

This is a temptation which must come to all research scientists at one time or another. There are some classic cases of apparently 'constructed' results in scientific papers which could not have been achieved

by the professed experimental techniques used. But the honest approach, and certainly one which a Christian must adopt, is to record and report things as they are and not as we may like them to be, however inconvenient that might prove. The biblical injunction on this matter is very clear: 'Do not lie to one another' (Col 3:9).

The problem becomes more acute when the results produced by the scientist are applied in some practical way by third parties, such as administrators or legislators, who do not have the background to assess the validity of the recommendations or the guidance offered.

A particular case in the whaling context bears on this kind of situation.

## **The age of whales**

In many management procedures for living resources it is important to know the age structure for the population under consideration. However, measuring the age of whales was a problem for a long time in the history of modern whale research. A number of different techniques were tried, various tissues of the body were investigated, but with rather little success. Then, in 1955, work carried out in the British Museum (Natural History) on the hearing mechanism of whales showed that the earplug of the fin whale is made up of a series of alternating lighter and darker growth layers which might be used as a basis for age determination. It was quickly shown that by counting these growth layers, the age of the whale can be determined in the same way as the rings in a tree trunk indicate its age.

At the time of this breakthrough there appeared to be good reasons, derived from migratory behaviour and other evidence, for believing that the growth layers are formed at the rate of two pairs of alternating light and dark zones per year. On this timescale the scientists had advised their government representatives at the International Whaling Commission to reduce the permitted catches to certain levels in order that the stocks should not be further depleted.

The Antarctic whale fishery was verging on economic extinction in 1964, and the Commission itself was on the point of collapse through the inability of the member governments to reach agreement on how to conserve the whale stocks. Surprisingly in these circumstances, the Commission agreed to reduce the Antarctic catch limits over the next three years to below the sustainable yields of the stocks as estimated by the best scientific advice available. It was therefore a severe blow to realise that we scientists had got the age determination wrong, that only one pair of light and dark growth zones are laid down each year. Thus the whales actually live for twice as long as we first thought, but reproduce at half the rate previously used to determine the catch limits. After having reached such a hard-fought agreement to reduce the catches to certain levels, it was particularly difficult in the face of political pressure and representations from the industry to say that the catches needed to be reduced to something like a half of what was expected on the basis of the earlier scientific advice. But that was what had to be done to be truthful and honest to the facts.

## **Political pressures**

Whaling is a highly emotive subject, and, until recent years at least, has been a main target for the international conservation community. Ever since the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm, 'Save the Whale' has been the rallying cry in these circles. Extreme views have been expressed and violent and sometimes criminal actions have been adopted in attempts to change the inherently conservative positions of the governments and authorities maintaining the industry. My policy has always been to be as evenhanded and objective as possible in the face of whatever provocation might come. Certainly, it has been important to be known as someone whose 'yea is yea' (Jas 5:12), for any appearance of partiality would lose the credibility necessary for the diplomatic and political negotiations involved.

We have had to evacuate a meeting while the bomb squad dealt with a suspicious packet, I and others have been moved from one hotel to another under assumed names by the police to avoid trouble, and in the worst incident the Japanese delegates were attacked and had red ink thrown over them by demonstrators who broke into the annual diplomatic conference of the IWC. From my own experience, it is not at all comfortable to be approached by someone from the crowd at a press conference who throws liquid at your face because you are doing a job with which he disagrees. Fortunately for me it was not acid but tomato ketchup, but the psychological shock and trauma are as great.

In all these situations it is necessary to be sure of your own position, to be certain that what you are doing is right before God, and to be ready to deal with the events of the moment in that light.

### **Other pressures**

The economics of the whaling industry and the passions of those opposed to whaling can result in situations where inducements are offered for certain actions to be taken which might not otherwise occur, just as businessmen offer hospitality to their customers or other influential people.

At one time during the late 1970s, the IWC had a ban which was flouted by a whaling operation sailing under a accession of 'flags of convenience'. The purpose was simply to get round the agreed restrictions designed to conserve the whale stocks, and there seemed to be rather little that could be done under international law to prevent the abuse. However, when the IWC decided that its member governments should not import the products of whaling originating from non-IWC sources, this effectively closed the market for this 'pirate' operation. The owner of the whaling fleet was very concerned, for he had a considerable quantity of whale meat stored in deep freeze which he could no longer sell. He came to me as Secretary of the IWC to try to get some kind of accommodation in the matter. Any action which allowed the meat to enter into international trade was obviously contrary to IWC policy, but he did offer half the value of the meat (£500,000) as an inducement which could have been used for research or any other purpose. This offer was not really tempting, for the Christian knows that 'You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right' (Ex 23:8). It is easy to see, though, how people can so easily get into unfortunate tangles when the end seems to justify the means.

There have also been pressures from the other side of the whale war. At a particularly difficult public meeting I was howled down on the platform as I attempted to explain the work done by the IWC. The audience, or some members of it, were not prepared to listen to any arguments except their own, and were determined to prevent any other view being expressed. The organisers of the meeting managed to restore some kind of order in the end so that I could complete my presentation, and then took me out for a meal afterwards. It was clear that they were embarrassed by what had taken place, and yet at the same time they had a good deal of sympathy with the vocal members of the audience and wished to influence me towards that point of view. By the end of the evening it was made very clear as we walked back to the hotel that I was welcome to return home with one of the young ladies of the group.

The expectation that influence might be applied and used in particular ways can come from any direction. There are a number of people involved in the whaling issue who think that their ends may be attained by applying pressure or providing favours. It is indeed disturbing to find that some of them are not above using knowingly false information to advance the cause which they hold so passionately. The evidence which has been presented by certain anti-whaling advocates to some congressional committees of the United States Government has been flagrantly distorted and untrue. To them, the end of whaling must be such an important goal to achieve that any means, fair or foul, is legitimate. However, the Bible makes it plain in a number of places that we should always 'Speak the truth to one another' (Zech 8:16), and 'Putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbour' (Eph 4:25).

## **Conclusion**

So what am I doing in the whaling business? Whales are fascinating creatures with many features in their biology, physiology and behaviour which make them particularly interesting subjects to study. Their bodies also represent a significant source of food and other raw materials. These sometimes conflicting aspects highlight a number of the problems we have to face in the world with respect to our role as stewards of God's creation.

Our care of the natural world, or lack of care, which has resulted in overexploitation of a number of species, including the whales, is clearly of concern to many people, not just Christians. It is important therefore to see that the world's wealth is not wasted, or used in trivial ways, but made available for all mankind including future generations. That is consistent with God's command to love our neighbours (Mt 22:39). It seems important to me to be involved in the processes which decide on our use and treatment of whales, whether they should be hunted at all, and if they are, with such matters as the humaneness of the killing process, as well as the setting of safe catch limits. So for me this has included basic research into the lives of whales, and more recently, involvement in the politics and decision-making processes of governments.

Because the Christian believes that God created the world in which we live and that he has given us responsibility for its care, we have a special cause for glorifying in his handiwork and marvelling at the complexity and beauty of the creation. But this also means that we do not see the exploitation of the world's resources, whether well regulated or not, as the only point of life. Rather, we see such utilisation in the broader context of the whole of God's dealings with us, our own relationships with one another, and with God. In one way this makes our care of the earth all the more important; in another, it places it at a rather different level, for 'Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who have pleasure in them' (Ps 111:2).

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