

# Whale Watching vs. Whaling in the Caribbean

## I. Summary

- ❖ Whaling is a small, declining industry that may *harm* tourism.
- ❖ Whale watching is a new, fast-growing industry that *enhances* tourism.
- ❖ Whaling and whale watching are incompatible.

*The bottom line: There's little to gain from "scientific" whaling. . . and much to lose.*

## II. Background on whales and dolphins in the Caribbean Sea

Thirty species of whale and dolphins (*cetaceans*) can be found in the Caribbean at least part of the year.<sup>1</sup> Humpback whales and several dolphin species are especially common. Short-finned pilot whales, sperm whales, false killer whales, beaked whales and others are also seen.

Due to the difficulty in studying cetaceans, estimates of their abundance and reproductive rates remain highly uncertain. While some small whales and dolphins appear to be globally numerous, specific local Caribbean stocks may be very sparse. Some stocks of large whales, after being hunted nearly to extinction by the mid-1900s, have gradually recovered since the 1985 whaling moratorium, yet nearly all remain far below historic numbers.

Genetic studies suggest that prior to commercial whaling, some 240,000 humpback whales roamed the Western North Atlantic.<sup>3</sup> Today, all six W. N. Atlantic stocks combined total only about 11,000 animals, less than 5% of their historic abundance. Most breed in the West Indies each winter.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, individual humpback stocks may be relatively small, with recovery hampered by their slow reproductive rate, pollution, noise, prey depletion, habitat degradation, ship strikes, and fishery bycatch. The Gulf of Maine stock of humpback whales – which supports the world's largest whale watching fleet -- is estimated at 902 animals. Since the average number accidentally killed by ships and fishermen already exceeds the number that can safely be removed without depleting the stock (PBR)<sup>6</sup>, taking just 1 or 2 more whales every year from this stock could prevent their recovery.

Caribbean whale watching began in the mid-1980s and has rapidly expanded since. Today, at least 14 West Indies countries and dependencies host whale watching. In the meantime, four islands have conducted at least occasional subsistence whaling, including St. Vincent and the Grenadines which has received an IWC subsistence quota allowing it to take four whales per year. Recently, there has been some discussion of expansion into "scientific" whaling.

### III. Whaling vs. Whale Watching: Specific points

THE ECONOMIC POTENTIAL OF "SCIENTIFIC" WHALING IS MINIMAL.

- ❖ **Demand for whale meat is shrinking and the market is glutted. Even Japanese and Icelandic whalers cannot all sell the meat they harvest; it goes into frozen storage.**

A 2005 study by GJ Financial Consulting (Iceland) concluded that *"the experience from marketing efforts in Iceland, Norway and Japan in recent years seems to indicate that the market for whale meat. . . is small and probably shrinking."*

Japan's *"demand for whale meat has been anemic."* In 2004, *"the industry put 20 percent of its 4,000-ton haul into frozen surplus"*<sup>8</sup> pushing Japan's inventory of frozen whale meat to about 3,000 tons, roughly one-year's consumption. *"Slackening demand has pushed wholesale prices of whale meat down 10% to 30% in 2005 alone."*<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, when Iceland started scientific whaling in 2003, 62-73% of the 37 tons of meat sent to market failed to sell, despite a 50% price drop, and required costly frozen storage.<sup>10</sup>

Young people especially don't want to eat it. A survey of Japanese college students showed a rapid decline in the percentage who ate whale meat (1996-2001).<sup>11</sup> The author predicted that the numbers of *"young people eating whale will continue to decrease in the years ahead."*

- ❖ **Without government subsidies, whaling costs exceed the value of the meat.**

In 2005, an Icelandic consulting firm calculated that each kilo of minke meat cost \$9.74 to harvest. The wholesale price started at \$4.24/kg then dropped to \$1.84/kg. Even if the whalers' costs could be cut 50%, by enlarging their operations, the cost of harvesting the meat would still exceed its market value.<sup>13</sup> They concluded, *"It seems clear that the cost of Iceland's scientific whaling programme in 2003 and 2004 has exceeded any immediate monetary benefits."*<sup>14</sup>

- ❖ **Export potential is very low due to the whale meat glut and legal restrictions on trade in whale products.**

Despite its pro-whaling stance, Japan has refused to permit importation of Icelandic whale meat, presumably because it wanted to sell its own surplus meat first.

- ❖ **Employment opportunities in whaling are minimal, due to the short hunting season, often two months or less.**

THE ECONOMIC RISKS OF LAUNCHING “SCIENTIFIC” WHALING ARE SUBSTANTIAL.

❖ **Expanding whale hunting could quickly degrade a country’s international image, jeopardizing tourism.**

In a highly-competitive market, an island’s image is its most important asset. Tranquility and harmony with nature are key elements of this image.

Millions of dollars are paid to marketing companies to cultivate this peaceful image. And if damaged, a country’s image can prove very difficult and costly to restore.

❖ **Most visitors to the West Indies come from North American and West European countries strongly opposed to whaling.<sup>15</sup> Many say they would not visit a country that hunts whales.**

78% of air travelers to Tonga said they would be less likely to vacation where whales are hunted.<sup>16</sup>

In Iceland, 54% of visitors said that resumption of whaling would negatively impact their decision to visit.

In March 1999, the marketing department of IcelandAir Holidays reported cancellations of vacations after Iceland’s parliament voted to resume whaling.<sup>17</sup>

❖ **If tourism is a major revenue source, loss of even a small fraction of visitors would quickly wipe out any gains from whaling.**

The Icelandic study concluded that even a mere 7% drop in tourist visits would cost the country more than the peak revenue earned in earlier years from unrestricted commercial whaling.<sup>18</sup>

❖ **Launching “scientific” or commercial whaling operations could provoke protests or even a boycott.**

In 2005, Ulsan, Korea’s “City of Whaling,” was forced to cancel plans for a whale meat factory, due to bad publicity and a six-month sit-in at the site.<sup>19</sup> Instead, Ulsan promotes its annual whale festival and in 2005 opened a whale museum that drew 30,000 visitors in the first 10 days.<sup>20</sup>

❖ **Expanded whaling may likely lead to internal and international conflicts, because everybody – whalers and watchers alike – is targeting the same whale populations.**

❖ **The “scientific” label fools no one, because new non-lethal tissue biopsy techniques now make it unnecessary to kill whales in order to study them.<sup>21</sup>**

IN CONTRAST, WHALE WATCHING IS A HIGH-GROWTH INDUSTRY WITH GREAT POTENTIAL.

***“The potential for whale watching in the Greater Caribbean is outstanding and largely untapped in most of the area,” according to a leading whale watch expert, Erich Hoyt.***<sup>22</sup>

Whale watching is fast expanding globally, and the West Indies is experiencing some of the fastest growth in whale watching in the world.

In 1998 39,000 visitors watched whales in 14 Caribbean countries, generating over \$10 million/year in total expenditures. In the 90s, whale watching grew 20.2% per year, much faster than tourism as a whole.

Caribbean whale watching is still growing rapidly.<sup>23</sup> Even a conservative estimate (10-15% growth since 1998) suggests total regional 2005 whale watch expenditures of \$20-27 million per year.

❖ **Whale watching attracts high-end, repeat tourists who tend to frequent local businesses outside of the major resorts.**<sup>25</sup>

Whale watchers tend to be older, more highly-educated, higher-income and more family-oriented than average tourists.<sup>26</sup>

Whale watchers are more likely to travel independently, stay at locally-owned hotels, and venture beyond beach resorts to less frequented areas. A whale watch tourist leaves 2-3 times as much money on the island as an average package tourist.<sup>27</sup>

❖ **For every dollar they spend on whale watching, tourists spend another \$3.50 to \$7.67<sup>28</sup> locally on food, lodging, merchandise, etc.**

In rural West Scotland, marine wildlife tourism receipts reached \$17.7 million by 1996, which brought in over \$108 million total tourist dollars and created 2,670 jobs.<sup>29</sup>

Whale watching spins off other businesses: souvenirs, whale festivals, scientific research, etc.<sup>30</sup>

❖ **Whale watching creates excitement and a positive image attractive to tourists, even those who don't personally participate in whale watches.**

43% of air travelers to Tonga said whales were “important” or “extremely important” in their choice to visit.<sup>31</sup>

50% of Hawaiian tourists reported that whale watching opportunities were at least a small factor in their decision to come.<sup>32</sup>

Many more tourists attend coastal whale festivals than actually board whale watch boats.

By offering something novel and exciting, whale watching islands gain a competitive advantage over islands that offer only traditional sun-sand-surf mass tourism.

❖ **Whale watching creates well-paying jobs for locals.**

Both small and large operators can participate, and local knowledge is a big advantage.

By switching species, the watching season is usually longer than the whaling season. In West Scotland, over 60% of new jobs created by whale tourism were year-round, fulltime jobs.<sup>34</sup>

❖ **Whale watching revenues will likely exceed whaling revenue over time.**

*“Over the short term, whale-watching and whaling appear close in terms of visitor expenditures and revenues, but over the long term, the gap widens with whale watching increasing.”<sup>35</sup>*

Within a few years of starting, Icelandic whale watching was bringing in almost twice as much revenue as scientific whaling (\$10 million vs. \$4.5-6 million).<sup>36</sup>

In one major Norwegian whaling region, whale watchers recently spent \$3.3 million in one year, compared to \$2.1 million brought in by whaling.<sup>37</sup>

❖ **Whale watching also yields cultural, educational and scientific benefits.**

In many coastal towns, whales are a source of local pride and identity. Throughout the world, whales and dolphins stimulate curiosity and get kids excited about science.

WHALING AND WHALE WATCHING ARE INCOMPATIBLE.

❖ **Whale watchers don't like to visit whaling nations.**

In Iceland, 79% of whale watchers said they would completely “boycott a country that conducted hunts for cetaceans.” 91% said they would boycott whale watching there.<sup>38</sup>

❖ **A study in Tonga concluded that it was unlikely that a viable whale watching industry could coexist with whale hunting.**<sup>39</sup>

❖ **Willingness to pay high fees for whale watching depends on being able to see diverse cetaceans up close.**

The top three factors in whale watching are the 1) number, 2) diversity and 3) proximity of whales seen. Whaling threatens to diminish all three, because it may leave behind fewer whales, fewer species, and frightened animals that avoid surfacing near boats.<sup>40</sup>

❖ **Further depleting whales deprives future generations of both whaling and whale watching opportunities.**

If we let whales recover to robust levels, all options are open for the future. Once extinct, they will never come back. Both whaling and watching will be gone forever.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Hoyt, E. 1999. The Potential of Whale Watching in the Caribbean: 1999+. Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, Bath, UK, pp. 4. Note: Common names vary locally. No true porpoises live in the Caribbean, but the term "porpoise" is often used to refer to dolphins, while "dolphin" often refers to the game fish *Coryphaena hipparus* (aka "dorado" or "mahi-mahi." "Blackfish" are usually short-finned pilot whales.
- <sup>3</sup> Roman, J. and S. R. Palumbi. 2003 "Whales Before Whaling in the North Atlantic." Science. July 25, 2003. Vol. 301. no. 5632, pp. 508-510.
- <sup>4</sup> Stevick, P.T. et al. (2003) North Atlantic humpback whale abundance and rate of increase four decades after protection from whaling. Marine Ecol. Prog. Ser. 258, 263–273
- <sup>5</sup> N=11,570 (CV=0.068) "is regarded as the best available estimate for the North Atlantic" NOAA, Humpback Whale, Stock Assessment, December 2005, Gulf of Maine Stock. P. 15. "A new large-scale. . . two-year study will attempt to estimate abundance. . . with extensive sampling. . . in Silver Bank" (West Indies). p. 21
- <sup>6</sup> NOAA 2005, p. 21. PBR = "potential biological removal" = the number of animals that can safely be removed by human action without impeding the recovery of a stock (local population) to its "optimal sustainable population" (OSP) level. See NOAA, <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/glossary.htm#p>,
- <sup>8</sup> Faiola, A. Reviving a Taste for Whale: Japan Introduces Meat to Children as It Fights Moratorium. By Anthony Washington Post Foreign Service, Sunday, June 19, 2005; A19
- <sup>9</sup> Kher, U. and T Sekiguchi. Whale On the Plate. Why Japan fights for commercial whaling in a market that doesn't exist. Time. Monday, Apr. 17, 2006
- <sup>10</sup> Siglaugsson Þorsteinn, GJ Financial Consulting, June 2005. "The Whale Meat Market: Study on Current and Possible Markets and Cost of Operations in Minke Whaling"
- <sup>11</sup> Hamaguchi, Hisashi: "Eating Is Believing - Whale Diet Culture Experience Seminar", ISANA, Dec. 2002, No. 26
- <sup>13</sup> Siglaugsson 2005
- <sup>14</sup> Siglaugsson 2005.
- <sup>15</sup> Freeman, M.M.R. and S.R. Kellert. 1992 *Public Attitudes to whales: Results of a six-country survey*. Edmonton, AB: Canadian Circumpolar Institute, University of Alberta. Cited in Hoyt, Hvenegaard 2002., p 387.
- <sup>16</sup> Orams, M. B. 2001. From whale hunting to whale watching in Tonga: A sustainable Future? *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 9:128-146.
- <sup>17</sup> Payne, Roger. 2002. "Voyage of the Odyssey," PBS broadcast March 27, 2002, Transcript: [http://www.pbs.org/odyssey/voice/20020327\\_vfts\\_transcript.html](http://www.pbs.org/odyssey/voice/20020327_vfts_transcript.html).
- <sup>18</sup> Hoyt and Hvenegaard, p. 387.
- <sup>19</sup> <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/jun2005/2005-06-15-04.asp>  
[http://www.pbs.org/odyssey/voice/20020327\\_vfts\\_transcript.html](http://www.pbs.org/odyssey/voice/20020327_vfts_transcript.html)
- <sup>20</sup> Tae-Shik, Kim. "'City of Whales' seeks to regain former glory with museum, festival.", *Yon Hap News*, 6/16/2005. . <http://english.yna.co.kr/Engservices/7103000000.html>
- <sup>21</sup> Philip J Clapham; Per Berggren; Simon Childerhouse; Nancy A Friday; et al *Bioscience*; Mar 2003; 53, 3; Research Library Core. pg. 210
- <sup>22</sup> Hoyt, E. 1999.
- <sup>23</sup> Personal communication, Joth Singh, 5-10-2006, on reports from whale watch operators at a recent conference in Trinidad
- <sup>25</sup> Parsons, E.C.M., Warburton, C.A., Woods-Ballard, A., Hughes, A. Johnston, P., Bates, H. and Lück, M. (2003) Whale-watching tourists in West Scotland. *Journal of Ecotourism* 2, (2), 93–113.
- <sup>26</sup> E.g. see Iñiguez, M.A., Tomsin, A., Torlaschi, C. and Prieto, L. (1998). Aspectos socio-económicos del avistaje de cetáceos en Península Valdés, Puerto San Julián y Puerto Deseado, Patagonia, Argentina. Fundación Cethus, Buenos Aires.
- <sup>27</sup> Personal communication, Chris Parsons,
- <sup>28</sup> Hoyt, 2001 p. 11. Duffus, D.A. (1988). Non-consumptive use and management of cetaceans in British Columbia coastal waters. PhD Thesis, University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.
- <sup>29</sup> Masters D, Nautilus Consultants, Carter J. (1998) Marine wildlife tourism: developing a quality approach in the Highlands and Islands. Tourism and Environment Initiative and Scottish Natural Heritage
- <sup>30</sup> Warburton, C.A., Parsons, E.C.M. and Goodwin, H. (2000) Whale-watching and marine wildlife tourism on the Isle of Mull, Scotland. Paper presented to the Scientific Committee at the 52nd Meeting of the International Whaling Commission, 11–28 June 2000, Australia. SC/52/WW17.
- <sup>31</sup> Orams, 2001.
- <sup>32</sup> Hoyt and Hvenegaard, 2002, p. 388.
- <sup>34</sup> Parsons, E.C.M., Warburton, C.A., Woods-Ballard, A., Hughes, A. and Johnston, P. (2003). The value of conserving whales: The impacts of whale-watching on the economy

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of rural west Scotland. *Aquatic Conservation* 13, 397–415.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, Hoyt and Hvenegaard 2002. p.385

<sup>36</sup> Hoyt and Hvenegaard, 2002. p. 385.

<sup>37</sup> Hoyt and Hvenegaard 2002, p. 385.

<sup>38</sup> Parsons, E.C.M. and C. Rawles. 2003. The possible negative impacts of whaling on the whale-watching industry in Iceland. *Current Issues in Tourism* 6: 444-448

<sup>39</sup> Orams, 2001.

<sup>40</sup> Hoyt and Hvenegaard, 2002. p. 384.