

Save Whales Not Whaling

The Fallacy of Humane Killing

Whales have been killed by every grisly method imaginable—from explosive harpoons and cold harpoons to electric lances and bullets. No matter what method is used, death is almost never instantaneous. Instead the whale may suffer anywhere from a few minutes to several hours.

By 1982 most whale species were so devastated that the International Whaling Commission (IWC) declared a moratorium or ban on all commercial hunting. In defiance of the moratorium, Norway returned to commercial whaling in 1993. Japan has continued whaling under the guise of “scientific research.” In both countries whales are killed for human consumption and for consumer products. In neither country are these products a necessity. In fact, whale meat and blubber are expensive luxury items, particularly in Japan.

All methods of killing whales are inhumane because, among other problems, they do not render the whales instantaneously insensible. The large size of even the smallest whales, their remarkable adaptations for diving, and the uncontrollable weather and conditions at sea make it impossible to kill them humanely or instantaneously. And, according to published studies, whalers identify death as cessation of movement in external body parts such as the pectoral flipper—not cessation of cerebral function. Therefore, whales, who are sentient, intelligent mammals, may suffer horrible and often prolonged deaths due to the unreliable and brutal killing methods used.

KILLING METHODS

Explosive harpoons—This method uses a large spear tipped with a penthrite grenade that explodes on impact. Accurate execution of this method is nearly impossible given conditions at sea. Even so, this device is supposed to cause “instantaneous” death (defined as death within ten seconds or fewer). Although this method could immediately kill the whale if the projectile pierced directly through the heart or brain, the average time to death is about four minutes, and some whales live for well over an hour after the grenade has exploded in their bodies.

Cold harpoons—This method uses a propulsive device (similar to a bazooka) to launch a large spear into the whale. The spear, which does not have an exploding tip, penetrates deeply into the whale’s body. If the spear does not hit a vital organ—the most likely result—the whale will not die from the impact of the harpoon, but instead will bleed to death, possibly in agony for hours. The IWC currently outlaws cold harpoons; however, some explosive harpoons do not detonate upon impact, thus resulting in a “cold harpoon” death.

Electric lances—The Japanese have used this “secondary” method of killing after using an explosive harpoon on a whale. Because explosive harpoons damage much of the muscle (meat) in the area of impact, whalers are reluctant to use two grenades on one whale when death is not instantaneous. A whale who survives an explosive harpoon strike is dragged back to the ship and secured alongside it. An electric charge is then shot through the whale, which is supposed to induce instant death. However, the voltage of the electric charge is insufficient to cause immediate death (even when applied directly through the brain or heart) and merely adds to the whale’s torture and agony. The Japanese claim to have ceased use of the electric lance in response to concerns about humaneness, but without international observers, if and under what circumstances it continues to be used are impossible to verify.

Bullets—This “secondary” method of killing involves shooting the whale if instantaneous death does not result from an explosive harpoon. Some whalers have been known to use machine guns or anti-tank rifles, because of a whale’s great size. Killing one with only a single bullet is virtually impossible; even an anti-tank rifle, firing large caliber bullets, requires multiple shots. Therefore, most whalers, particularly the Norwegians, “finish off” the whale by riddling the animal with standard caliber bullets. The whale feels pain from each wound and may not die for some time, suffering in agony until death occurs. ➡

Promoting the protection of all animals

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INSTANTANEOUS DEATH

Both Norway and Japan have conducted studies to calculate how long it takes for a whale to die using an explosive harpoon. A 1993 Norwegian study of 226 minke whales killed in Norway's hunt that year determined that 50.4 percent died instantaneously. The average time to death, however, was approximately three minutes. The official report of the 1999 Norwegian hunt stated that 63 percent of the 591 minke whales killed died instantaneously. The average time to death was more than four minutes. The government of Japan conducted a study in 1994, which concluded that 29.4 percent of the 330 minke whales killed in Japan's hunt that year died instantaneously.

In the 1999 Makah Tribe whale hunt in Washington state, the whaling crew struck a young female gray whale with a cold harpoon and then fired four .50 caliber bullets from an anti-tank rifle into her body. Approximately eight minutes elapsed from the first harpoon strike until she ceased moving after the firing of the fourth bullet.

In all of these instances, observers established the moment of death using external indicators, such as cessation of movement of the whale's pectoral flipper and/or relaxation of the whale's jaw. In a document submitted to the IWC in June 1995, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) argued that the results from the Norwegian and the Japanese studies were not sufficient to conclude that the whales were killed humanely because whalers did not take into account cerebral function.

The HSUS maintains that the cessation of cerebral function should determine the moment of death. We believe that given the complex adaptations whales have evolved in order to dive and function at great depths, it is possible that, even though whales are motionless, they store enough oxygen to remain alert and sensible for extended periods of time—far beyond the time estimated in the Norwegian and Japanese studies—and a 1995 IWC-sponsored workshop concurred.

Even if cessation of movement were an acceptable criterion to establish the moment of death, under no circumstances can allowing an animal to suffer for three to eight minutes (and in some terrible cases, well over an hour) be considered humane! The inhumane suffering and torture of these great mammals is unconscionable. The ethical argument to create a worldwide sanctuary for whales and to stop their inhumane torture and killing has never been more compelling.