

Preface

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Whales have become increasingly powerful symbols in environmental and conservation movements. Public whale displays and whale-watching in particular have been important in fostering whales as ‘eco-symbols’. However, these non-consumptive uses are only one aspect of a long history of human-whale interaction. Humans have used whales for many purposes, most notably as food and industrial resources. Human-whale relationships are regionally and historically highly varied. In Japan, for example, dolphins have been harvested for at least the last 5,000 years, and in Alaska and Siberia whale harvesting by Iñupiat/Yupit may have begun as early as 3,000 years ago. From medieval times until the 20th century, whales were used for food, as lamp fuel, and for other purposes in Europe, North America and elsewhere.

However, at the 1972 UN human-environment conference, held in Stockholm, the representative of the USA argued that the environment could not be protected without protecting whales. This argument was further supported by environmental NGOs, such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Greenpeace, and many European countries adopted anti-whaling positions, no longer regarding whales as industrial resources. In 1982 the International Whaling Commission (IWC) amended the Schedule to the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), an international agreement concerning the use and protection of large whales, by establishing a moratorium on the harvesting of 13 species of large whales, beginning in 1986. As a consequence of this amendment the Government of Japan suspended commercial whaling in Antarctic waters in March, 1987, and off the coast of Japan in March of the following year. However, since that time neither pro- nor anti-whaling countries have obtained the three-fourths majority required to amend the Schedule, and commercial whaling remains highly contentious at IWC annual meetings.

An Inter-University Research Project, “An Action Anthropology of Whaling Cultures”, was carried out from October, 2009 to March, 2011 at the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan, to compare whaling cultures around the world and consider various approaches to contemporary problems facing whalers, whaling societies, and whaling nations. Nineteen researchers representing cultural anthropology, archaeology, marine economics, sociology, history, folklore studies, and the biological sciences in Japan examined relationships between humans and whales regionally and historically. Their assertions confirm that whaling and whale products remain important in various parts of the world. By examining diverse examples of whaling in anthropological and human-environmental historical context, the research group concluded that whaling has been and remains a legitimate pursuit, if conducted sustainably, and therefore does not deserve to be denigrated by anti-whaling forces.

Resulting from that project, the National Institute for the Humanities and the National Museum of Ethnology hosted an International Symposium, “Whaling Cultures of the World: Past, Present, and Future,” at the National Museum of Ethnology from March 11 to 13, 2011, during which the history and current status of various whaling

cultures was discussed and their future considered.¹⁾

This collection of papers presents some of the results of the research project and symposium. We hope it will contribute to an improved understanding and appreciation of whaling cultures and contemporary whaling issues.

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Note

- 1) On March 11, the first day of the symposium, a massive earthquake and tsunami caused unprecedented damage along the Pacific coast of northeastern Japan. Whaling-related facilities were severely damaged at Ayukawa, a port for small-scale coastal whaling located in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture. A concerted effort to revive whaling activities there is now being made.

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