What's the story?
Encyclopedia of New Zealand

(Phillips, 2009a)

Whaling

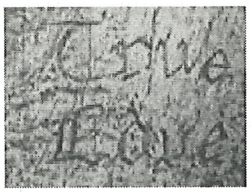
Ship-based whaling

For the first 40 years of the 19th century whaling was the most significant economic activity for Europeans in New Zealand – with the hunt first for sperm whales from visiting ships and then for right whales by shore-based whalers. The pursuit had major consequences for Māori society. Some of New Zealand's most important early European settlers were whalers.

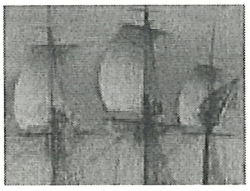
Sperm-oil candles

Whale products

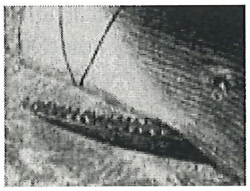
During these years whaling was an important industry worldwide. Whales were caught primarily for their oil, which was used to light city streets and lubricate machines. It was also used by cooks for frying food.


Scrimshaw

The oil of sperm whales, the major prey for ships in the seas around New Zealand, was valued because it was odourless and could therefore be used indoors. It was also a high-quality lubricant, and an agent in tanning leather. Spermaceti, a light, liquid wax found inside the sperm whale's head, was especially valued as a lubricant for precision instruments, and it produced the best smokeless candles.


The whaler *Britannia*

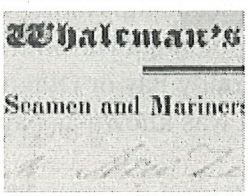
The black or right whale, which became an important prey for shore and bay whalers from 1830, also offered whalebone or baleen, a form of keratin (the same material as human fingernails) which hangs in fringes inside its mouth. It was used in the fashion industry in the making of corsets, and for whips.


Hunting sperm whales

Whale teeth and bone were carved by whalers with time on their hands. This carving was called scrimshaw.

Grey gold

An unusual by-product of the sperm whale is ambergris (meaning grey amber), a waxy substance which forms in the whale's large bowel, perhaps as a reaction to the beaks of the squid they eat. Ambergris was highly valued as an aphrodisiac and a base for perfume. The largest piece ever found, at 1,400 pounds (636 kilograms), came from a sperm whale caught by the Dunedin whaling vessel *Splendid*, south of New Zealand in 1882.



Whaleman's shipping paper

Origins of ship whaling

Whalers' interest in the South Pacific as a hunting ground was first roused when British convicts were brought to New South Wales in

Australia and ships needed cargo to bring back. The British government offered money for whaling, in order to contribute to the training of seamen for the Royal Navy, and enticed Americans to join their fleet. It was an American captain, Eber Bunker of the British boat *William and Ann*, who first hunted in New Zealand waters in December 1791. Over the next decade the area became more attractive as the East India Company's monopoly on fishing in South Pacific waters was progressively lifted, and Governor Philip King in New South Wales worked to attract whaling. By 1801 King reported six ships whaling off the north-east coast of New Zealand, and the following year he claimed that whaling was established.

Increased interest

From 1804 the number of whaling ships in the South Pacific grew, as the Napoleonic wars led to attacks on British whaleboats off South America. In addition to peaceful waters, New Zealand had plentiful sperm whales to the north-east. The land offered wood for fuel, timber for naval spars, flax for rope, and fresh water and vegetables to ward off scurvy. In 1810, 12 whaling ships were in New Zealand waters – mainly British vessels sent out by London venture capitalists, but also a few American whalers from New England, where Nantucket Island was a traditional whaling centre.

The 1810s saw a downturn as the fleets of Britain and America were caught up in the war between them. There was a revival by British whalers in the 1820s, and some Sydneysiders entered the trade with the abolition of the high duty on oil in 1823.

American and French whalers

The 1830s saw a big increase in American whalers in New Zealand. On whaling expeditions lasting about three years, in boats of up to 500 tons (called 'plum pudners' on account of their squat shape, like a plum pudding), the Americans often stopped in the Bay of Islands for supplies and rest and recreation.

Pacific purgatory

In the 1830s Kororāreka won a dubious reputation as the 'hell-hole of the Pacific', where prostitution, grog shops and drunken brawls were common. Most respectable observers were appalled. John Dunmore Lang described its inhabitants as 'the veriest scum of civilised society'; James Busby noted that the whalers were open to 'every temptation and opportunity for licentiousness'; and William Colenso claimed that the place was 'notorious for containing a greater number of rogues than any other spot of equal size in the universe.' [1]

The crews were usually young, tough and truly international, with Pacific Islanders and Portuguese alongside the Nantucket men. Kept under tight discipline on board, they looked for fun on shore, and in Kororāreka (present-day Russell) they found it. In 1838 the Bay of Islands hosted 54 American ships along with 14 British, 18 French and 10 from Sydney. Whangaparāoa Peninsula and the Hokianga Harbour also attracted some. Further south, some American whaling ships anchored at Cloudy Bay or Otago and Akaroa harbours, where they would hunt right whales close to shore in what was known as bay whaling.

The French appeared from 1836, and a whaling captain, Jean François Langlois, organised the Nanto-Bordelaise Company to settle Akaroa, with whaling as one of the purposes of the proposed French colony.

Decline

From the early 1840s fewer foreign whalers visited as whales became increasingly scarce and the new government in New Zealand imposed duties and port charges. Occasional American whaling ships still visited in the mid-1800s, with the last one probably the *Charles W. Morgan*, which visited in 1894.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in Don Grady, *Sealers and whalers in New Zealand waters*. Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986, pp. 130–31. › Back

Biographies

Lewis Acker, 1813-1817?–1885

William Darby Brind, 1794?–1850

Jean François Langlois, 1808–?

Phillip Tapsell, 1777?–1873

How to cite this page: Jock Phillips. 'Whaling - Ship-based whaling', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 23-Nov-09
URL: http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/whaling/1