

3. Whaling and sealing in the 17th and 18th centuries

In the 16th century the population of Europe was growing, particularly in urban areas. This expanded the markets for commercial crops and foodstuffs, including oils and fats. During the search for a northern sea route around 1500 rich fisheries on the banks off Newfoundland were discovered and exploited by French and British fishermen. In the 1520s Basques developed a whaling industry in the strait between Labrador and Newfoundland, shipping a substantial amount of oil back to Europe every year. By the 1580s resources were becoming depleted and alternative hunting grounds had to be found. Whaling at Iceland and in North Norway was attempted, but the discovery of Svalbard created new opportunities: in summer the North Atlantic population of Greenland whales concentrated in this area.

From 1611 the British started regular whaling at Svalbard, employing Basque experts. The Dutch soon followed, and later other nations took part as well. After some initial rivalry over hunting grounds, whaling continued quite peacefully. Land stations with try-works (oil factories) were built in many places along the coast. From the 1640s the activity rose sharply, particularly when the Netherlands abolished their privileged “Noordsche Compagnie”. Catch pressure increased and the hunting grounds became crowded. This stimulated a transition to pelagic whaling, which developed in the latter half of the 17th century. By 1700 most of the land stations at Svalbard were abandoned and the whalers operated in the whole area between Cape Farewell (Greenland) and Svalbard. Whaling in the Davis Strait was commenced, and by the mid-century 250-350 whaling ships were fitted out every year. The IWC has estimated the initial North Atlantic stock of Greenland whales at around 24,000 animals. A more recent estimate by Allen & Keay (2006) is twice as high: 52,500. We cannot say for sure, but we know that during the 17th and 18th centuries more than 100,000 were killed. Whaling was probably sustainable only during the first few decades in the 17th century. The stock collapsed well before 1850 and was in practice hunted to extinction.

The main products of whaling were oil extracted from blubber and baleen. The huge whales were harpooned from small boats. Dragging the line and the boats fastened to it, maybe for hours, exhausted the animal. Stabs and cuts with spears and lances killed it. While land stations were used, the whales were towed to shore and flensed while floating near a beach. The blubber was cut into small pieces and melted in large coppers on a fireplace onshore. The train oil was then cooled and rinsed in water vessels and filled on casks. In the pelagic whaling flensing took place along the shipside; the blubber was normally put directly into casks and produced when the whalers returned home.

The first British hunting expeditions to Svalbard went for walrus, at Bjørnøya as early as 1604. Whales were always the favoured prey, but seals and walrus were caught if whales could not be had. Specialized sealing, however, developed when the whalers in the 18th century expanded into the drift ice and discovered the huge amounts of Harp seals and Hooded seals that reproduce and moult in the so-called West Ice, near Jan Mayen. As whales became scarcer sealing became more important, and in the second half of the 19th century it developed into a large industry, particularly in Britain and Norway. Svalbard played no role in this business.

Food for thought

- Why was the Greenland (Bowhead) whale (*B. mysticetus*) such an attractive prey for the whaling industry?
- In what sense was whaling a sort of ‘capitalist industry’ in the pre-industrial age?