

# The Social, Cultural and Economic Importance of "Subsistence" Whaling

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**Abstract.** Structured systems of indigenous governments include systems of commerce and exchange, different concepts of wealth and very different nutritional habits which have been developed on the strength and in accord with generations of observing the natural systems which we live in and ultimately sustain us. Indigenous social structures occur within ecological structures. It can be described as a "science of relations". This indigenous science has developed over millennia and is an acute awareness of the necessity to include social, cultural, spiritual and economic growth within the natural limits of nature.

When we talk about indigenous social, cultural and economic practices we are in fact talking about responsibilities that have evolved into unwritten tribal laws over millennia. These responsibilities and laws are directly tied to nature and is a product of the slow integration of cultures within their environment and the ecosystems. Thus, the environment is not a place of divisions but rather a place of relations, a place where cultural diversity and bio-diversity are not separate but in fact need each other. This is **cultural bio-diversity**; a practice which has been developed and nurtured over millennia; in the Nuu-chah-nulth language "Hishuk Tsawalk", everything is one, everything is connected.

When the term subsistence is used it is always viewed in its minimal form; **survival**. This invokes deeply rooted colonial stereotypes of indigenous peoples as a people perpetually on the edge of starvation, living hand to mouth without responsibilities. But as our ancestors tell us, ours was and is a world of abundance with many responsibilities.

In the context of the colonial world these responsibilities have become rights insofar as we are expected to defend them, but at their root, for indigenous whaling peoples, they are responsibilities first and foremost. When we speak of "subsistence whaling", we are not referring to whaling done out of desperation, or a practice which demands the parties involved be dressed in the fashion of their ancestors 500 years ago. Indeed, subsistence hardly seems the word. It is a category imposed on traditional whaling peoples by a section of society whose view of nature has been clouded.

The ecological relationships which unite whales and whalers continue: orcas hunt whales, some whales eat fish; fish eat krill, some whales eat krill; so what is missing? What has been consciously suppressed out of concern for the whale stocks? It is the ability of the people to once again be a part of the web of life. The stocks are healthy once again, and it is time to reinstate the human relationships and become part of the ecosystems which sustain us. This is the root of subsistence

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Structured systems of indigenous governments include systems of commerce and exchange, different concepts of wealth and very different nutritional habits which have been developed on the strength and in accord with generations of observing the natural systems which we live in and which ultimately sustain us. Indigenous social structures occur within ecological structures. It can be described as a "science of relations". This indigenous science has developed over millennia and is an acute awareness of the necessity of including social, cultural, spiritual and economic evolution within the natural limits of nature.

When the term subsistence is used it is always viewed in its minimal form; **survival**. This invokes deeply rooted colonial stereotypes of indigenous peoples as a people perpetually on the

edge of starvation, living hand to mouth. But as our ancestors tell us, ours was and is a world of abundance and responsibilities. Our principle of respect was not born from a longing for sustenance, but instead in gratitude for the cornucopia found within our territories. Indigenous peoples subsist enmeshed in the pattern of relationships with nature, the environment and the ecosystems. This pattern of relationships is not merely to survive, but to thrive; it includes everything....the plants, the fish, the sea-mammals, the land mammals, the mountains, trees, water, and even the winds which change with the seasons. Everything is deemed worthy of our respect, and consideration. In fact indigenous social, cultural and economic practices have a role to play in the delicate balance of nature. In the Nuu-chah-nulth language "Hishuk

Tsawalk”, everything is one, everything is connected.

When we talk about indigenous social, cultural and economic practices we are in fact talking about responsibilities that have evolved into unwritten tribal laws over millennia. These responsibilities and laws are directly tied to nature and is a product of the slow integration of cultures within their environment and the ecosystems. Thus, the environment is not a place of divisions but rather a place of relations, a place where cultural diversity and bio-diversity are not separate but in fact need each other. The most important aspects of cultural bio-diversity are those that integrate people, (the human relationship), with the ecosystems found within their environment. Some indigenous practices had cultural importance at the time they were being practiced, (arranged marriages, etc), but most indigenous practices, such as whaling, sealing and fishing have a much deeper ecological management role. These indigenous practices maintained the balance within nature. I am not talking about the morality of the practices, but rather the social, cultural and economic practice of responsibility to bio-diversity. It is from this perspective that we begin to realize that the realm of cultural diversity and bio-diversity are not separate but rather are connected through our relationships with nature. This is **cultural bio-diversity**; a practice which has been developed and nurtured over millennia. In the context of the colonial world these indigenous responsibilities have become indigenous rights insofar as we are expected to defend them, and defend them in an adversarial system of justice. But for indigenous whaling peoples, at their root, they are responsibilities first and foremost.

One of the protest industry's most successful strategies to date has been the crusade towards bio-diversity. Regrettably, the progress towards understanding bio-diversity is being undermined by this same industry. In their effort to raise billions of dollars they have chosen to overvalue certain photogenic aspects of the natural world (whales, seals, etc) and have removed the human relationships and principle of sustainable use and stewardship from the realm of bio-diversity. The result is an unbalanced view of nature, the environment, and the ecosystems. This in turn has led to real imbalances in animal populations, habitat, and food sources. According to the traditions of indigenous whalers, the whales (and all other elements of nature) are our equals: is this

not the ultimate expression of what has been called "animal rights"? To address them as equals and respect them for their contribution to our health, cultures and economies?

So, when we speak of "subsistence whaling", we are not referring to whaling done out of desperation, or a practice which demands the parties involved be dressed in the fashion of their ancestors 500 years ago. Indeed, "subsistence" hardly seems an appropriate word. It is a category imposed on traditional whaling peoples by a section of society whose view of nature has been clouded. With a proper understanding of what we mean when we are discussing subsistence, the values of whaling will be properly understood because they extend into the realm of culture, spirituality and economics. Topics not easily explained to those who insist that we must endure starvation before we may properly subsist; that we "do not need to whale anymore", as though our fundamental physical, psychological and spiritual needs differ from our ancestors; that we do not need to fulfill our responsibilities within the ecology's of our ancestral territories. Our social, cultural and economic practices are diverse because the environments we live in are diverse. We have evolved in harmony with the natural systems around us, and whaling is no exception; indeed, it is a prime example. For indigenous whaling peoples it is, at its most fundamental level, a very visible relationship between humans and the natural world. The ecological relationships that unite hunters and the hunted continue: Orcas hunt whales, some whales eat fish; some fish eat krill, some whales eat krill. So what is missing? What has been consciously suppressed out of concern for the whale stocks? It is the ability of people to once again be a part of the web of life. It is time to once again become a part of the ecosystems which sustain us. This is the root of subsistence.

Whaling, as with all other "subsistence" activities, has always had a commercial aspect. In the Pacific Northwest whale products were traded great distances inland for items not readily available on the coast. This was accomplished through a complex and established network of traditional trading routes. However, it represented more than a trade of goods, it was also a way in which political, social, and familial ties with distant and neighboring peoples was established, maintained, and strengthened. Commerce has a central role in social and cultural subsistence; something often forgotten in the western world's

insistence that economic activities must exist as a separate category. Indigenous whalers no longer trade blubber for stone tools. Whaling communities, like communities everywhere, require cash to function in the twenty-first century. Who can say what commerce will look like in another thousand years. The medium of exchange may change, but the principles of respectful, sustainable and ecologically sensitive utilization will not. These fundamental understandings will continue to be passed down as cultural bio-diversity.

When the term "commercial" is used there are voices that cry out from distant urban centers that whaling must stop; that the "slaughter" must end. Meanwhile the protest industry conjures up images of the unforgivable over exploitation of whales to generate a whirlwind of concern. At the heart of these cries and fabrications exists the misguided impression that there is a global re-emergence of industrial whaling. To a generation schooled in the Western world on the excess of industry, whose daily bread may itself be toxic, and whose fears are exploited by a protest industry bent on using them, commercial whaling is presented as a symptom of "our" presumed slide into ecological devastation. In spite of all the emotions, what needs to be emphasized and understood is the difference between the "industrial self-regulated whaling" of the past and the sustainable, science based "commercial whaling" of today. The truth is very different. Whaling has never stopped in fact only five percent of the world's whaling falls under the jurisdiction of the International Whaling Commission. Furthermore, whale populations have increased in conjunction with sustainable whaling and indeed is continuing to flourish. The period of the industrial whaling superpowers is well past; whaling today is small-scale, sustainable, vital and in most cases commercial. As the unsustainable harvest of the industrial whaling superpowers plowed through entire stocks, and then promptly collapsed; the small-scale, traditional, sustainable whaling peoples of the world (whose activities preceded the industrial harvest by, in many cases, centuries) were left visible in its wake practicing time honored, proven methods of traditional ecological knowledge. Decades before the inception of environmental organizations such as Sea Shepherd, coastal communities and indigenous whalers were left to deal with the damage done to whale stocks. In some cases, they consciously ceased hunting completely, to allow the stocks to

recover. This was done in full awareness of the suffering this would visit upon their communities but knew it would be in the long term interests of both whale and whaler alike.

The world will not witness a return to the self-regulated industrial whaling of the past. The global market for whale products is limited, outside of dietary requirements for meat and blubber, and the need for bone and baleen for traditional works of art. It is practically non-existent. Synthetic oils have replaced the need for whale oil to lubricate the machinery of industry, perfumes are no longer made from ambergris and corsets no longer need baleen. In economic terms, it can be said that the contemporary world is one in which whale stocks far exceed current and projected market demand for whale products. A return to the industrial scale whaling of the past would certainly be cause for alarm for everyone, in particular the small-scale whalers of today. The lessons of the industrial whaling period will not be forgotten; the world will make sure of that, as will the whalers.

The return to tradition leads to a return to whaling for whaling peoples. The return to whaling leads to a return to tradition. Either way, a return to whaling is inevitable. In a time when the call to live a more ecological lifestyle is all around, the re-emergence of locally specific, respectful, sustainable harvesting should be applauded, rather than protested. Is it better to continue living in a state of dependency on external support, and detachment from our immediate ecology's, or is it better to become more integrated? At one time the environmental movement was searching for a "better" state of living, a new model for living which awakens environmental consciousness in the people, and integrates the social world with the natural world. Yet here we have people, indigenous peoples, who have lived this way for millennia. Unfortunately, we are opposed in this, ironically by those who do so in the name of this search for a "better" way of living within our environment. Such people actually believe that they have a deeper, more "evolved" and more "holistic" understanding of whales than those who have lived in relationship with them for millennia. They often state "no one who knew whales as I do could conceive of hunting them" as if the dislike of killing, and a sense that whales are worthy of respect were a consequence of this supposed deeper knowledge of whales. However, understanding and respecting the whale

magnificence does not make it "wrong" to subsist on them.

At the very least, we must move the debate from the realm of emotion and protest profiteering, to the realm of logic and ecology. Emotion is powerful, immediate, and a good source of financial support for one's cause. One is able to take immediate advantage of the public and gain financial support in the process. But this is very dangerous. Emotion changes much faster than ecology.... people become desensitized to emotional pleas over a relatively short period of time. You can see it happening already. People are getting extremely tired of the protest industry. Where will this overemphasis on emotion, to the detriment of ecology, leave the public's understanding of nature 20 years from now? When emotional appeals no longer work, and ecology has become a casualty of the overemphasis on emotion. Even as whaling peoples seek to embody the traditional principles that the resources and ecosystems remain healthy for seven generations after we are gone, it is conceivable that the protest industry could exhaust the public's interest in, and understanding of ecology within mere decades. From this perspective whaling represents a key example of the very notion of stewardship, and ecological awareness that many claim is lacking in the industrialized world.