

Is whaling sustainable in Norway?

Introduction

Whale hunting or "whaling" has been a common practice in several countries across the globe and has been practiced for centuries. Whaling was at its height in the beginning of the 20th century, when whaling was a highly lucrative business. However, whaling in this time was not well regulated, and resulted in a typical "tragedy of the commons" scenario, where a wild hunt for whales and an overexploiting, resulted in several stocks being depleted. One example is the blue whale in the Antarctic Ocean, where the population of whales reduced from 150-200,000 to about 5-10,000 whales by 1965. (Lamberson & Clark , 1982). This drastic change in several whale stocks, ultimately led to the International Whaling Commission (IWC), an intergovernmental organization created in 1946 for regulating whaling, adopted a global "moratorium on whale hunting" in 1982 (Sigvaldsson, 1996). This moratorium called for a pause for all commercial whaling worldwide from 1986 and onward, however both Norway and Iceland filed an official objection to this decision (International Whaling Commission, u.d.).

In 1993, Norway, under Prime minister Brundtland, once again started commercial whaling, arguing it was sustainable (The Norwegian Government, 2018). It was in fact Brundtland who introduced the term "sustainable development" in the report "Our Common Future" from 1987. In this report, the definition of Sustainable development "is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.41). Thus if applied to whaling, we can understand sustainable whaling as the process of hunting whales while preserving the stock that does not endanger its existence.

In this paper, we will focus on the case of Norway. The problem we will be answering is the following: Is whaling sustainable in Norway?

To answer this question, we will be looking into 1) Strict state regulations and a comprehensive monitoring system. 2) Whales as an important part of the food chain, lastly we will argue that 3) Whaling only constitutes a small business in Norway.

A well-regulated and monitored business

There has been a long tradition for whaling in Norway. One can find 17 different species of whales in Norwegian waters, but only one of them, minke whale, is being caught for commercial fishing. The whaling in Norway is both sustainable and legal. The fishers must follow strict quota systems provided by scientists. The annual quotas are provided by IWC. The hunting takes place in the zone around Svalbard, Jan Mayen, and international waters. All the vessels hunting whales in Norwegian waters are imposed to use a tachograph. The tachograph is a surveillance system that

registers all the hunting. In this way, the fishermen cannot hide how much they catch. There are also inspectors joining the fishermen when they go whaling, and the fishermen need to attend a course every year focusing on killing and security (Regjeringen, 2018).

In 1996 the Norwegian minke whale DNA register was also established. (Glover et al., 2012) The DNA register functions as a control system, to detect attempts of illegal trade and harvesting of the minke whale population in Norway. To control that none of the whales are caught illegally, there are taken two tissue samples from every whale caught. The DNA-profile of all the whales in the Norwegian whaling are registered. As a result, one can make sure that the traded whale products match with the DNA register. The DNA register has also provided important data for several scientific studies (Glover et al., 2011).

In 2019, 14 vessels were registered to catch whales in Norway, but only 12 of them went whaling (Bjørge et al.,2020).. The catch season was from 01.02.2019 to 18.09.2019 and the quota for 2019 allowed the whale fishers to catch 1278 whales, but there were only 429 catches (Bjørge et al.,2020). The numbers from 2019 show that it was caught way less whale than the quota allowed (Bjørge et al.,2020). This is a trend every year, and it's not because there is not more whales to catch. Both the whale fishers and the scientist going on research cruise to count the whale stocks can confirm that there is high abundance of whale, especially in the Southeast parts of the counting area. Whale counting done from 2014 -2018 by the Institute of Marine Research showed that in the Northeast Atlantic Ocean there are approximately 600 000 whales, and 100 000 of them are minke whale (Leonard & Øien, 2020). The whale stocks in Norway are abundant and there are good systems developed to prevent overfishing of the stocks. One can therefore argue that the Norwegian whaling is sustainable and should be allowed to continue this way.

The arguments against whaling

In 2018 the IUCN Red List labelled the Antarctic minke whale as Near Threatened (Cooke, Zerbini & Taylor, 2018). So, even if the whaling is regulated in Norway, is it worth it to hunt whales? Whale meat is not a significant part of the Norwegian diet, but these last few years, the demand has risen, as an article of *The Guardian* explains. In this paragraph, we will thus focus on the arguments used by activists to fight whaling.

Whales are keystone species. They are critical to the food chain and play an integral role in the biological pump and energy flow of all marine life. Because they are on the top of the food chain, they make the whole chain vulnerable to the extent of falling apart if they were to become endangered or go extinct (Chami et al., 2019). Commercial whaling has grievously depleted their numbers, beginning a chain reaction of destruction among the lower marine animals and the food chain (Pershing et al., 2010). This has resulted in previously common whales becoming far more rarely sighted (Lunawat, 2020).

Moreover, they play an important role related to carbon dioxide. When they swim from the depths, towards the surface, they unintentionally push planktons up to the surface waters, which are abundant in sunshine and oxygen, allowing these critters more time to reproduce. Planktons, apart from serving as grub to smaller fishes, also absorb the carbon dioxide from our atmosphere, sinking it deeper into the ocean floor, for thousands of years when they die. However, whales directly contribute to cleaning up the atmosphere by storing large amounts of carbon emissions in the air, carrying it down to the sea bed when they die (Chami, et al., 2019). Thus, one can argue that whaling might interfere with SDG13, that is climate action. Because they are on the top of the food chain, they also accumulate a lot of toxins (Gouteux & all, 2007), thus, by eating whale meat, these toxins find their way in the human body. By eating a lot of whale meat containing toxins, it might harm the health of the human being, thus this can be linked with SDG 3 and “risk for the well-being”.

Finally, whaling is a highly controversial practice and Norway’s practice of whaling has been met with heavy criticism from both foreign governments, but also animal welfare and environmental organizations. Animal welfare advocates like to argue that whaling is “unethical”. Often images of newly killed whales are presented. These images can be quite grotesque (BBC, 2019).

The group “Sea Shepherd” is maybe the most extreme opponent of whaling. In 1994, Sea Shepherd under the command of Paul Watson, entered into Norwegian waters and collided with a coast guard ship, as a part of the campaign “Whales forever’ (T. Emberland, 2015).

Current situation

Nowadays, whale hunting is ecologically responsible in Norway as no whale stock is under the hunting pressure from competing whaling efforts. Whalers have a great interest in keeping the whale population and stocks sustainable. Centuries ago, the situation was different as there was competitive whaling. Whaling is no longer a capitalized business as there is no more competitive whaling world market. Whaling is mostly based in the community, and they are family-owned businesses. This small-capital business is well seen and recommended by green economists as they are against the exploitation of the natural resources (Barthelmess *et al.*, 1994).

In the case of Norway, the harvesting of whales is based on scientific evidence. The Norwegian government states that some whales need protection while others are abundant in their seas. The minky whale is an example of an abundant one and the hunt is traditional and legal, always done in small scale activity. The Scientific Committee of Norway has developed a Revised Management Procedure (RMP) that is used to set catch limits on those stocks that can be harvested in a sustainable way (International Whaling Commission [IWC], 2020).

Conclusion

As a conclusion, it can be said that Norway has been taken enough measurements to allow catching whales in the most sustainable way. Maybe the way of killing them makes it a dilemma of what is ethically correct, but it is necessary to take into account that it is also the livelihood of some populations. However, these measures should continue and be improved in the future if necessary, as we cannot allow the disappearance of such an important piece for the marine ecosystem as whales are. The current situation in Norway is promising, but for the future one might need to consider to implement an even better monitoring mechanism, making sure that the whale stocks stay at a sustainable level.

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