

Whale Resources

Why are there so many species of whale on the endangered species list? In a better attempt to understand how humans have nearly decimated some whale populations, we must find how whales have been as resources in the past and how these resources are being managed today.

Historically, small tribes who lived in the coastal regions would use the whale for food. When a whale was caught, it was the highlight for a village. Many times the entire village would help in beaching the whale. Then they would eat the whale meat communally and divvy up the remaining resources among the community so that nothing went to waste. People would construct their houses out of whale bone and use baleen for many decorative purposes (such as Japanese sword handles and Alaskan baleen baskets). Baleen was also used in making fishing lines because it had the advantage of not collecting frost. Additionally, baleen's flexibility led to its use in the fashion industry in a variety of commercial products, including bustles, bodices, collars, and hoop skirts. Around the 12th century, baleen whales were also hunted for whale oil, which was used for lighting, and in the manufacturing of wool, leather, and soap. The oil was obtained by cooking the whale blubber, which is the fatty layer directly below the skin.

In the 17th century, the whaling industry began hunting sperm whales. Until this time, nearly all of the whales that had been hunted were baleen whales. The advent of hunting sperm whales introduced new types of whale products. Most notably among them was the demand of the spermaceti, the liquid that is found in their head, which makes high quality smokeless and odorless candles. Overall sperm whale oil was of better quality than oil from baleen whales, and it was desirable for making lubricants and for lighting purposes. A product called ambergris (only found in the intestines of sperm whales) was used in perfumes. Shortly after the 18th century, many whale products had been replaced by more reliable and efficient materials or synthetic products. For example, the use of whale oil declined with the discovery of kerosene. Likewise, whale bone structures were replaced with materials like wood and steel because they were more widely available and sturdier. Modern innovations in plastics have similarly replaced most of the uses for baleen, such as fishing string.

In recent history, the whaling industry has made a small comeback. This is mostly because the process of hydrogenation has made it possible to incorporate whale oil in margarine and soaps. Whale products are also used in products like cosmetics, animal foods and lubricants. In fact, even whales that are protected by the International Whaling Commission's guidelines are being found in the whale meat market (see archived webcast, *The History and Future of Whales*: www.esi.utexas.edu/outreach/prevlectures.html). So even though whale products are not a necessity nowadays, there are enough uses to still make it profitable to hunt the huge mammals of the sea.

Sources:

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