Falsification of Soviet whaling data after introduction of the International Observer Scheme

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ABSTRACT

Illegal whaling by the USSR from 1947 to 1973 has been well documented, but it has been generally assumed that passage of the International Observer Scheme (IOS) ended this practice. In fact, this was not the case. The USSR continued to kill whales illegally, and to falsify data on catches (notably of Antarctic minke whales) and on the biological characteristics of whales, well after 1972. Here, we discuss the nature of these catches and data manipulations.

Beginning with the 1972/1973 Antarctic whaling season, the International Observer Scheme (IOS) was introduced by the IWC. Under this system, Soviet whaling fleets carried inspectors from Japan, and Japanese fleets had Soviet inspectors.[1] At that time, one of us (YAM) was in charge of the Marine Mammal Laboratory in Odessa, a department of AzCherNIRO. In 1973, YAM was sent to work on a scientific research vessel named *Bodry-25* to conduct whale studies in the Pacific sector of Antarctic. After two seasons (1973-1975), YAM returned to the Marine Mammal Laboratory.

At a regular lab meeting, the report of the scientific group from the *Sovetskaya Ukraina* factory fleet for the 1974/75 season was presented. Subsequent analysis by YAM of the reported biological data for Antarctic minke whales (*Balaenoptera bonaerensis*) revealed that the characteristics of the killed whales differed markedly from those observed for previous years. Specifically, the average length at maturity and of primiparous whales appeared too high. The same phenomenon was apparent for data from the 1973/74 season. This raised suspicions regarding the reliability of the data. When queried, the chief of the scientific group, V.L. Yukhov, could give no adequate explanation for the discrepancies.

Following a conversation with the captain of the vessel *Bodry-25*, a man named A.V. Grebenshchikov, it became clear that, despite the presence of international inspectors, the fleet's catches of whales exceeded the allotted IWC quota. In other words, many animals were not reported.

In the data (for example), instead of 3-4 minke whales only 2-3 were recorded, and their lengths were overstated. The reason behind this relates to the way the system worked, which can be explained as follows. There was a catch quota, but the Soviet Ministry of Fisheries gave a production plan target for *products* that was completely different; the latter was calculated based upon tables of weights by length of the killed whales, but this table was unrealistically optimistic and did not account for thin or rotten animals. The difficult way to meet production quotas was to try to find whales of sufficient size to make enough products. The easier way was to kill 3 minke whales and report them as 2 larger ones; the additional whales killed but not recorded were referred to aboard the factory fleets as "green whales". There were also "air whales", which were whales that were not caught but were recorded to meet catch-by-area targets, or to

[1] This arrangement reflects a characteristic of the IOS, in which exchange of observers was restricted to bilateral agreements arranged between member nations.

reconcile the total products with a number of whales that could conceivably make up such product. This procedure involved a fine line, because they did not want to create a situation in which the Ministry would set a higher target the following year based upon what was reported in the current season (this was common practice throughout the USSR).

One of us (YAM) was able to interview many fleet personnel about this situation; this was easy because YAM lived in a 100-apartment complex which was inhabited primarily by whalers. The whalers all confirmed the poaching practice. However, the members of the scientific group for the seasons concerned (those working under Yukhov) all denied the illegal whaling and the data falsification, as did the fleet's governing body and the production association (called "Antarktika"). YAM was forced to report the situation to the VNIRO leadership and then to the Deputy Fisheries Minister of the USSR, B.M. Kamentsev. By Kamentsev's order, the VNIRO leadership created an investigation commission consisting of experienced scientists from AtlantaNIRO and TINRO, under the chairmanship of A.A. Berzin. The commission analyzed the reports of the *Sovetskaya Ukraina* fleet's scientific group for recent seasons and admitted that the reported data were invalid. The commission's conclusions were classified, and their report was sent to VNIRO and to the Ministry.

In response to the commission's conclusions, VNIRO and the Ministry instituted a set of new measures. For the 1979/1980 season all members of the scientific group were replaced. Instead of Yukhov, the chief of the group was V.P. Savusin. This scientific group confirmed that, in the presence of inspectors from Japan, Soviet whaling fleets continued illegal whaling and data falsification. Usually the whaling officials did not record catches of small whales, but to compensate they increased the reported lengths of other whales caught. This practice distorted data on the biological characteristics of whales; unlike in the years before the IOS (when two sets of books were maintained, true and false), only falsified data were kept in the official records. This deprived scientists of correct data on which to conduct valuable studies of whale biology. In order to preserve the true biological data, the members of the scientific group were forced to record the violations unofficially in their field notes only. An example of this is given in Figure 1, which shows a page from a field notebook giving two sets of lengths: the true length and the falsified, officially recorded length.

An example of the distortions is as follows: according to the biologists' data from one season the average length of "green" minke males was 8.03m, but according to the official inspection data it was 8.33m. "Green" females had an average length of 8.30m, but according to the inspection data it was 8.88m.

Because the Fisheries Ministry did not the penalize the whaling fleet management over these major violations, the fleet continued the illegal whaling and falsification of data in subsequent seasons. The more time that passes following the whaling period, the more complicated it will become to recover the true data and correct the record.

The overall percentage of catches that were illegal, and/or which involve falsified data, is unclear from existing records, but could likely be clarified with further work. Although we have discussed here the situation with just one whaling fleet (*Sovetskaya Ukraina*), it is not unlikely that the practice of illegal whaling and data falsification were common in other other Soviet fleets as well.

The international inspectors were fully aware of these violations, but ignored them. Japanese whalers had a vested interest in Soviet whaling, because minke whale meat was transferred to Japanese boats directly in the areas where whaling was conducted. In reality, the whaling fleets had no real independent international inspection, but rather exchanged observers between two countries with a major interest and stake in the whaling.

The Marine Mammal Laboratory demonstrated, that the analysis of the biological data presented by the fleet's scientific group under the direction of V. L. Yukhov was incorrect, and revealed the cause of the observed distortion of biological characteristics of the caught whales. The management of AzCherNIRO did not forget the problems that this created fro them, and in 1982 the laboratory was closed. Its employees were offered positions in the Ichthyologic Laboratory, but YAM refused the offer, and all other employees of the lab resigned at the same time. All had many difficulties in their careers after this episode.

Currently YAM is a professor at the Pedagogical State University of Odessa. V. P. Savusin, is Deputy Director of the Ecology Department of the Odessa City Council. S. G. Bushuev is head of the Odessa center of YugNIRO. We confirm and attest to the occurrence of illegal whaling during the presence of international inspectors on Soviet whaling fleets. Whether a similar situation occurred on Japanese vessels with Soviet inspectors is unknown, but not unlikely.
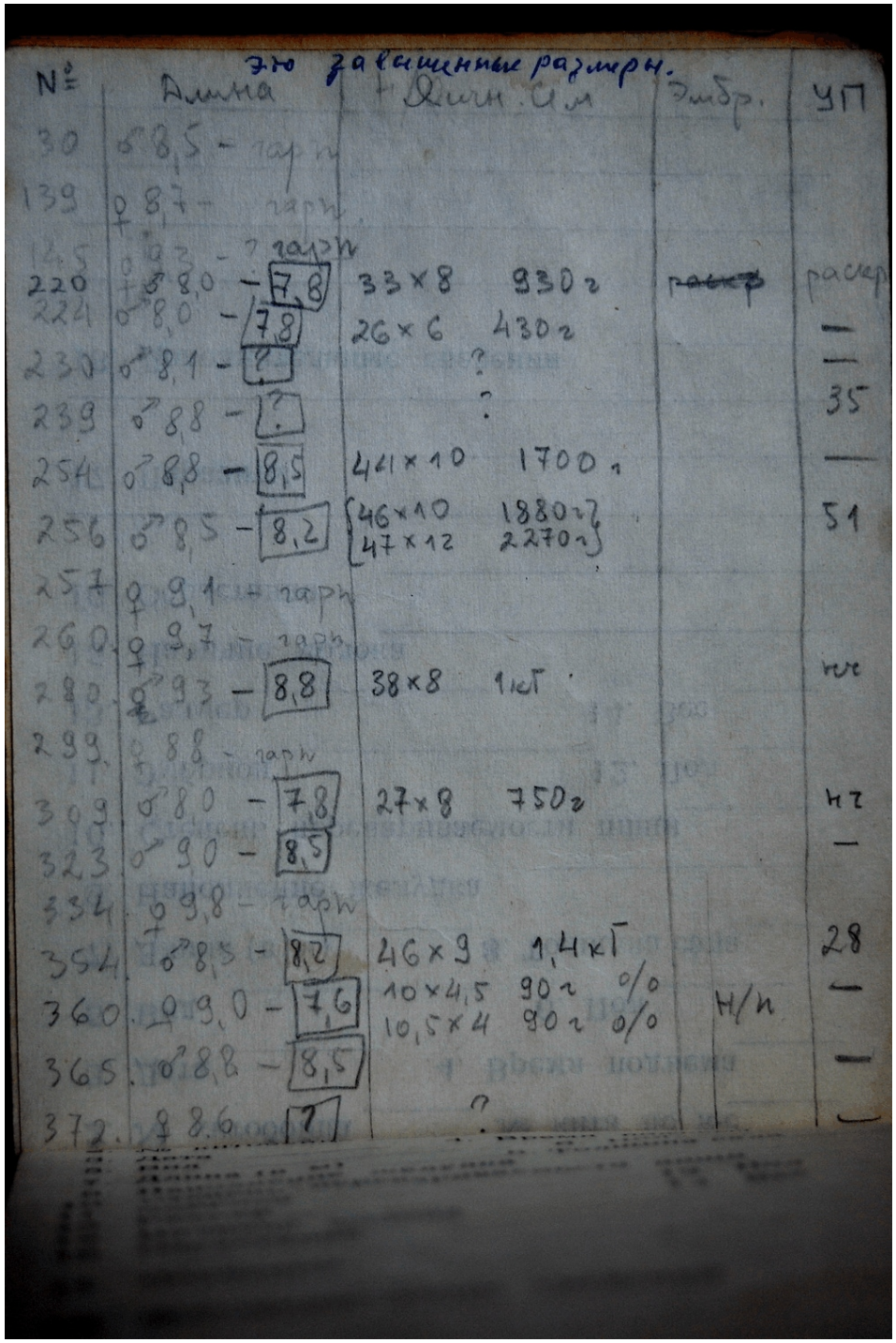
Figure 1. Example page from a biologist's field notebook from the factory ship *Sovetskaya Ukraina* showing actual and falsified lengths of Antarctic minke whales. The first four columns are: the number of the whale, the sex, the true length and the falsified length (outlined in a square).