

## **Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling in Bequia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines**

### **2. Whaling in Bequia: A Brief History**

In the early 19th century, whaling ships from New England made regular cruises to the Caribbean Sea in search of sperm whales and humpback whales, and visited the Lesser Antilles frequently (Adams 1971: 55, 59). American whaling activities in the Grenadines reached a peak during the 1860s and 1870s, when a number of Bequians were employed on American ships and where they learned whaling skills (Adams 1971: 60). They began whaling independently in 1875 or 1876, targeting mainly the humpback whale, which came close enough to shore to be intercepted by whaling boats launched from the beaches (Adams 1971: 60, 65).

The indigenous whaling enterprise in the Grenadines, including Bequia, reached its peak around 1910, when 100 men were engaged in harvesting and processing humpback whales (Adams 1971: 56). In the early 1920s, the Grenadines maintained six shore whaling stations, each equipped with three to five whaling boats (Adams 1971: 62). However, since 1925, whaling in the Grenadines had declined, with only a few humpbacks having been harvested annually, and only by whalers from Bequia (Adams 1971: 71).

No humpback whales were harvested between 1949 and 1957, but a catch of three in 1958 encouraged the whalers. As a result, they constructed two new whaling boats (Adams 1971: 71). In 1961, they constructed a modern, well-equipped shore station in Petit Nevis (Adams 1971: 71). Nevertheless, the catch decreased again during the 1970s, when whaling activities were on the verge of collapse (Price 1985: 415).

However, four humpback whales were harvested in 1982 and three in 1983 (Price 1985: 418–419). The success of these two years again reactivated the industry, and a new whaling boat was constructed in 1983 (Price 1985: 418–419). For 27 years, from 1958 through 1984, a total of 54 humpback whales were struck and 44 of these were landed (Price 1985: 419 Table 4).

Since 1925, whaling activities in Bequia had depended on successfully harvesting a few humpback whales a year. Although this had led to a certain fragility in the whaling economy, such catches could sustain the livelihood of Bequians. Bequians had been engaged in whaling not only for monetary considerations but also to acquire prestige, as only the strongest and most reliable men were recruited for whaling (Adams 1971: 61).

### **3. Whaling in Bequia: Current Conditions**

A new whaling boat was launched in 1996 and its crew including the harpooner, was much younger than the average. During the 1998 season, two boats succeeded in harvesting two whales. Without a doubt, this first success in five years renewed the motivation of the

whalers and once again increased enthusiasm for whaling. Two whales were harvested in each season from 1999 through 2002.

In July 2000, a renowned harpooner who had led the whaling in Bequia for over 40 years, passed away at the age of 79. He was a fourth-generation whaler, with roots dating back to the beginning of whaling in Bequia. Today, the fifth and sixth generations continue whaling operations in Bequia.

### **3.1 Whaling Implements**

Since 2002, two whaling boats have been used in Bequia (Table 1), but from 2000 to 2001, three were in operation. The prototype of the Bequia whaling boats was the Nantucket-type whaling boat, which was 28–30 feet (8.5–9.1 m) long. When the first whaling boat was constructed in Bequia, it was only 25–26 feet (7.6–7.9 m) long (Adams 1971: 63). The current boats are slightly larger. The oldest of the three whaling boats was constructed in 1983, renovated in 1999 and sold off as a fishing boat at the end of the 2001 whaling season. The second was constructed in 1996. These two boats were said to be 27 feet (8.2 m) long and 7 feet (2.1 m) wide. The third and newest boat, which had originally been constructed as a wooden fishing boat, was refitted and fibreglassed as a whaling boat in 2000.

The oldest (1983) whaling boat was equipped with four 3m harpoons, three 3.8m lances and two 94 cm shoulder guns. The second oldest (1996) whaling boat is also equipped with four 3 m harpoons and three 3.8 m lances, as well as one darting gun 2.47m long.

The basic technique of harvesting a whale is to weaken it by thrusting the hand harpoons into its body, and then to give a final stab with the hand lances. Sometimes, a shoulder gun or darting gun is used to shoot a bomb lance. Since a bomb lance costs 400 East Caribbean (EC) dollars (US\$150)<sup>2</sup>, a significant expense for the whalers, they are used prudently, as a miss is costly. Although for the most part these implements now may seem outdated, they are still used with considerable pride by the Bequian whalers.

### **3.2 Whaling Operations**

On a Sunday in early February, an Anglican priest blesses the whaling boats, and prays for the safety of the crews and for a successful harvest. The whaling season then begins. During the season, the whalers congregate on the beach at Friendship Bay, on the windward side of Bequia, at around 6 a.m. every day except Sundays, public holidays and on days when the weather is obviously unsuitable. At that point the decision to go whaling is made based on weather and sea conditions.

When the whalers embark on a whaling expedition they set course for the Island of Mustique, located 13 km southeast from the bay, at approximately 6.30 a.m. After mooring the boats beside the beach, the crewmen ascend to a lookout point on the Island, where they take turns in searching for whales using binoculars.

Simultaneously, another team in Bequia search for whales in a similar fashion from a lookout point located on a hill on the southeast coast of Bequia. When a whale is spotted, they inform the crewmen on Mustique using marine radios and the whale hunt commences. When a whale is struck and secured it is towed to the whale station in Petit Nevis (or in Semple Cay since 2005) assisted by a fishing boat with an outboard engine, where it is processed. This routine continues throughout the three-month whaling season, or until the quota has been harvested.

Six crewmen serve on board each whaling boat. From the bow to the stern, they are: 1) harpooner, 2) bow oarsman, 3) midshipman, 4) tub oarsman, 5) leading oarsman, and 6) captain.

When rowing, the harpooner, midshipman and leading oarsman sit to port and the bow oarsman and tub oarsman sit to starboard. The captain handles the steering oar in the stern. When sailing, all members except the captain sit or stand on one side according to the wind direction and the captain steers at the stern.

The harpooner has absolute authority over whaling decisions. When the boat is about 10 feet (3 m) behind the whale, the harpooner thrusts the first harpoon into the whale and then the second, third and subsequent harpoons. After a “Nantucket sleigh ride” on the sea, if necessary, the harpooner shoots a bomb lance into the whale.

The captain steers the boat from the stern, adjusts the mainsail and takes all responsibility for sailing the boat. Immediately after the harpooner has thrust the first harpoon into the whale, the captain quickly winds the rope around the loggerhead. He also keeps the boat at a certain distance from the whale, making it easier for the harpooner to thrust the second and subsequent harpoons into it. In the past, the captain changed places with the harpooner after the harpoons had been inserted, after which the captain killed the whale with a hand lance or a bomb lance. Nowadays, however, the harpooner kills the whale.

The harpooner and captain require a high level of skill in harpooning and steering the boat. However, it appears that the other crewmen can manage their roles with training onboard if they are capable fishermen. Generally, an apprentice crewman joins a whaling crew as a leading oarsman and is promoted, step by step, from tub oarsman to midshipman and then to bow oarsman. A bow oarsman is equivalent to an apprentice harpooner, and sits behind the harpooner, where he learns harpooning skills.

### **3.3 The Distribution of Whale Products**

In the Bequia whale fishery, a “share system” is used in lieu of wages. Harvested whales were processed at the shore station in Petit Nevis until 2002, and at the shore station in Semple Cay since 2005). The whale meat and blubber are placed in separate tubs (one tub equals one share) and distributed to all persons involved in the whaling operation.

After the renowned harpooner-boat owner who had led Bequian whaling for over 40 years died in 2000, the share system was simplified, and since then blubber has been

distributed in the same manner as the whale meat. In other words, the two boat owners each receive two shares of both meat and blubber, whereas the others receive one share, respectively. Reflecting the fact that the sales of blubber are almost the same as the sales of whale meat in recent years, the share system itself has changed to reflect the current reality. The share to the owner of the shore station has also been eliminated since the shore station was moved to Semple Cay, because the small cay is government-owned land, and the shore station was constructed with financial aid from the Japanese government under the “grant assistance for the grass-roots human security projects program” (see Hamaguchi 2011: 230–232).

Each man’s share, except for the portion given to his own family and gifts to relatives and friends, was sold to other Bequians at the shore station. The price of both whale meat and blubber was EC\$4 (US\$1.5) per pound in 19984). These prices have increased to EC\$5 (US\$1.9) since 2003.

The distribution of the whale products through a share system and their redistribution as gifts and through cash sales play a significant role in maintaining the whaling culture in Bequia, allowing it to be passed from generation to generation. What should not be missed here is the local consumption of the whale products. The Bequian whalers are allowed to harvest only four whales a year because of the Schedule to the ICRW, which sets the catch quota of 24 humpback whales for six years. Furthermore, a whale is not necessarily harvested every year. Whenever a humpback is harvested, Bequians rush to buy the meat. The consumption of whale meat at least once a year reinforces the concept that the people of Bequia are residents of a whaling island.

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