

## Epilogue: Whales and Elephants as Cultural Symbols

*This epilogue by the late Dr. John H. Peterson, Jr., of the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work at Mississippi State University, was submitted in November 1991. In his commentary, Dr. Peterson focuses on two of the papers presented in this volume, those by Ris and Kalland, who analyze the evolving symbolic significance of whales and how this has affected coastal whaling communities in northern Norway. As a discussant of the whaling papers at the Common Property Conference, Dr. Peterson was impressed by the commonality of the problems facing sustainable management of whales and elephants and of the need for environmental scientists to be aware of the symbolic, ethical and philosophical issues involved in managing natural resources such as marine mammals and African large mammal species, which have so excited the imagination of publics and politicians in distant places.*

Kalland (this issue) and Ris (this issue) add an important dimension to the study of management of whales and potentially other species by examining the context in which the worldwide perception of whales is formed. The authors demonstrate the dynamics of forming public opinion about whales at the symbolic and the community level, but their analysis has a wider applicability. Most of the cultural analysis in these papers could apply to elephants as well as to whales. In Zimbabwe a new strategy for elephant management has evolved through cooperative efforts by ecologists, professional hunters and, most important, local African communities (Zimbabwe Trust, 1990). These people were shocked when the ban by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) on trade in elephant products suddenly threatened a successful program to preserve elephant populations through regulated harvesting. The conclusions of these papers must be seriously considered and the implications applied to the management of all symbolically important species, such as whales and elephants.

The major point of both papers is that natural resources are culturally constructed. The whale controversy is less a rational discourse and more a clash between widely differing socio-economic and symbol systems. The shift from ecological issues to moral and ethical issues is recognized now that a large number of stocks of different whale species can potentially sustain regulated harvest.

Kalland's paper, "Management by Totemization: Whale Symbolism and the Anti-Whaling Campaign," demonstrates in great detail how whales have come to occupy a unique symbolic place in the animal kingdom through the merging of characteristics to create the "super whale." This is the same logical process that takes place in the creation of any positive or negative stereotype. All contrary evidence is ignored. Facts assumed to be consistent with some observed facts are invented where evidence is lacking. This creates a uniform image that ignores diversity and contrary evidence. The constructed image is then accepted as real, and any contrary evidence is rejected as meaningless or false.

With a few word changes, the description of the super whale fits the elephant: 1) Whales are the largest animal on earth; elephants are the largest land animal. 2) Whales have the largest brain on earth; elephants have the largest brain on land. 3) Elephants don't sing, but they communicate sub-vocally over great distances by a process only recently understood and often

described in supernatural terms. 4) Both whales and elephants could be called friendly to humans by ignoring contrary evidence. 5) Both whales and elephants care for their young and injured members of the group.

The stereotypic image of the "super" or fictitious whale is built up of partial descriptions of different whales and then applied to all whales. Although elephants do not show the diversity of species characteristic of whales, a similar falsification process takes place by using descriptions of elephants in certain localities or in terms of some assumed aggregate applied to all elephant populations no matter where located or under what management regime. Thus countries with large and expanding elephant populations, such as Zimbabwe, are lumped with countries with almost no elephants under the image of the vanishing African elephant.

As Kalland notes, whales are an animal to which it is easy to ascribe symbolic significance because they do not fit into "normal" categories. The anomalous nature of whales as a fish without scales was first noted in the abominations of Leviticus. Worldwide, such anomalous animals are regarded as having special characteristics and significance. Elephants are anomalous because they are non-hoofed grazing animals.

Similarly, the popular and erroneous image of Africa as a wilderness (Jones, 1990) is a land counterpart to Kalland's most convincing analysis of the symbolic value of the ocean as a lost paradise. Elephants and whales are the only rightful inhabitants of these paradises. The loss of elephants is often described as a loss of the Eden-like African wilderness (which never existed except in the modern mind).

The Levi-Straussian structural dualism Kalland applies so effectively to whales fits elephants exactly as does the fundamental dualism between the good guys being anyone working to preserve whales and the bad guys being anyone still wanting to kill whales.

Kalland also points to social and economic realities underlying the symbol systems he describes. Social theorists from Pareto to Marvin Harris suggest looking for the blood and guts issues often underlying elaborate symbol systems. The use of whales as a symbol for preservation and non-utilization is useful to increase the income of environmental organizations. Environmentalism is a million-dollar business. Since its product is a manipulated symbol system, perhaps we should call the environmental movement a million-dollar belief system. Many people outside the United States find it difficult to understand how U.S. citizens can respond with so much money in support of simplified solutions to complex issues. The U.S. is the home of TV evangelism in which people known to have questionable morality are still able to get others to mail in millions of dollars to support morality. Many urbanites seem to desire simple moral solutions to complex environmental problems, lack interest in true understanding, and have ready money to support those who offer them a simple solution.

Essential to this simple solution is the cultural transformation of largely non-white subsistence communities and people into unnatural bad guys as compared with the nature-loving urban whites. The green position absolves Western urban consumers of any guilt for the worldwide environmental impact of materialistic lifestyles by allowing urbanites to contribute money to protect a few symbolic species usually from non-white

communities that did not bring these species to the brink of extinction in the first place.

Again elephants add to the universalism of the analysis. Whalers are members of marginal communities at the fringes of urbanized Western civilization in Norway and Iceland, or they are the non-white Japanese and native communities of Canada and Alaska. People benefiting from sustained elephant harvests in southern African countries such as Zimbabwe are rural black African villagers who are portrayed by environmental true believers as the bad guys in their current efforts to preserve elephant breeding populations through regulated utilization. Conveniently ignored is the fact that the massive reduction of the elephant populations occurred under white colonial regimes.

The oversimplified symbols promoted by commercial environmentalists give their leaders a great deal of money and power. Unfortunately, this money and power are rarely used to promote ecological understanding among their followers. Additionally, the media humanizes selected "mediagenic" animals at the expense of providing an understanding of ecosystems or of protecting less photogenic animals.

In contrast to the media images and manipulated symbols of the commercial environmentalists, the small-scale whalers do not in fact threaten the existence of any whale species, nor is their lifestyle threatening the world ecosystems. Yet these subsistence communities are the targets of self-righteous urban consumers looking for someone to blame for the world's environmental problems.

Ris provides a community-specific example of the manipulation of the cultural values of marine mammals from his study of a whale tourism project in northern Norway. Rather than emphasizing the cultural shift of whale issues from ecology to an ethical ideology, Ris emphasizes the replacement of direct colonial exploitation of non-Western peoples by a neo-colonial exploitation in which tourism plays a major part. He describes a Whale Centre created by a combination of local interests and a Swedish environmental organization. The Whale Centre has an overt goal of substituting whale watching by tourists for whaling. Ris indicates that there is ample room in Norwegian coastal societies for both sustainable utilization and non-consumptive whale watching. But whale tourism is a foreign business and missionary efforts have been aimed at shaping the perceptions of both tourists and local people to an ideology in which sustainable utilization is acceptable only in the past and not in the future.

Ris's study suggests a fundamental linkage between certain types of tourism and a manipulation of rural community values towards the non-ecological, symbolic systems of the urban Western tourists. His study suggests why Kenya is a major supporter of non-consumptive utilization of whales and elephants. This African nation has such a poor record of protecting wildlife that there are no significant elephants outside national parks. Further, Kenya has no historical interest in whaling. Yet Kenya is a prime promoter of protectionism of elephants and whales. One would suspect that Western-oriented tourist income helps explain Kenya's public policy. The whale-watching organization in Norway described by Ris is titled "Whale Safari," demonstrating the similarity in the minds of European urban tourists between the "wilderness paradises" of the ocean and Africa. In both, the wildlife should be protected from local people, not for ecological reasons, but for the pleasure of urban tourists.

The dualistic logic of a belief system demands a uniform association of ideas, even if this results in what non-believers perceive as inconsistencies. Today those who propose sustainable limited harvest of elephants and whales are relatively powerless compared with the vast media campaigns and fund drives of the environmental true believers. But this is a very recent shift in power. Ten and twenty years ago, the forces benefiting from killing whales were predominantly large commercial concerns. These organizations seemed all powerful and unstoppable.

Shaping public policy through symbol management is a slow process. There is a great lag time before the new symbols are widely accepted and a shift in policy begins. The idea of sustained utilization is a new idea for urban publics that have only recently rallied to the environmental cause under the idea that killing leads to extinction. The sustained utilization that has promoted preservation of much wildlife in the U.S. is not only ignored, but is equally threatened by the uniformly simplistic solutions of the environmental true believers.

The environmental propagandists avoid mention of the destructive consumptive lifestyle held by the urban residents who support environmental causes. Beef consumption in Europe and the U.S. destroys more wildlife through habitat destruction than all the subsistence people ever killed. But it is less profitable for the environmental movement to attack urban consumptive lifestyles than small communities in less developed regions.

In pointing out the inconsistencies of the doctrinaire green position, we should acknowledge the contribution of the environmental movement in the past decades. There has been an increasing public consciousness that something is fundamentally wrong with worldwide trends of population and consumption. These papers demonstrate the symbolic logic that offers the preservation of a few symbolic animal species at the expense of basically poor non-white peoples, without addressing the major issues. But the widespread acceptance of these symbols may herald the beginnings of a paradigm shift that Catton (1980:238) argues is required for a recognition that humans are part of the world ecosystem. But Catton (1980:69, 222) also acknowledges that the struggle over alternative paradigms is characterized by scapegoating and an inability to communicate "as between people who share no common language."

For a shift to what Catton called the "ecological paradigm" to take place, ecological awareness must go beyond concern for symbolic species to an understanding of the ecological realities of population and consumption trends. The challenge to those researching sustainable utilization of wildlife is to document and communicate sound concepts of local common property management regimes. These principles must be communicated not just to scientists but to policy makers and urban populations in general. We must demonstrate the linkages between Western lifestyles and habitat deterioration worldwide and at the same time show the realistic potential of sustained utilization.

The communities we study with intact common property regimes often have rich symbol systems supporting cooperation and sharing of limited goods (Child and Peterson, 1991:55-56, 61, 73-74). Can we communicate these symbol systems to the general urban public without creating super whalers, super small communities, or unrealistic images of sustainable development, which are as false as is the image of the super whale? This is the task confronting us.

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*John H. Peterson, Jr.*