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The Power of Whaling: Why Historical Data is Direct Evidence of Past Population Sizes

McKie, Annabelle; Romero, Aldemaro; Kannada, Shelly D.

Department of Biological Sciences, Arkansas State University, P.O. Box 599, Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701

Several recent papers using molecular data have assumed rather small pre-whaling populations of both right whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*) and bowhead whales (*Balaena mysticetus*) for the North Atlantic. Some have even suggested that the decline of those populations took place before the onset of commercial whaling. To ascertain whether these assumptions were consistent with the historical record, we analyzed documents related to the whaling by Basques (both Spanish and French), Dutch, English, Germans, Danes, Scots, and New Englanders for those species in the North Atlantic. The examination of these historical records indicate that: (a) many nations other than the Basques were involved in whaling in that part of the world to the point that their combined takes were higher than that of the Basques; (b) a conservative estimates is that European nations were responsible for the killing of about 200,000 right and bowhead whales; and, (c) the majority of the whales killed (even by the Basques) were not right but were bowhead whales. Although natural phenomena such as the "Little Ice Age" (ca. 1350-1800 CE) may have had some impact on these populations, they mostly likely affected the North Atlantic population of the gray whale *Eschrichtius robustus* for which we found very few records despite the past widespread distribution of this species in that part of the world. We hypothesize that this may be the result of the close dependence of this species to coastal ecology that was probably greatly affected by the expansion of the ice sheets over the coastal areas of the upper North Atlantic. Also, the history of whaling in the North Atlantic is a well-researched topic but because most of the literature has been published in non-biology journals, most biologists working on past population estimates of whales for the North Atlantic are unfamiliar with such wealth of information.