



Critical Business and Uncritical Conservation: The Invisibility of Dissent in the World of Marine Ecotourism

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While mass media viewing audiences around the world have become accustomed to seeing globally circulating images of people protesting human relations with whales, they normally associate such imagery with a transnational urban activist youth, associated with environmental NGOs (ENGOs) like Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd, protesting against the commercial hunting of whales.

The protestors I am about to familiarise you with, by contrast, are middle aged men living in the Azorean village of Lajes do Pico. They hold

serious suspicion of anti-whaling NGOs, and claim that anti-whalers have become blind to many of the serious problems facing whales and dolphins in the present day. These men are passionately committed to questioning the taken-for-granted assumption that all forms of whale watching are ecologically beneficial, while relying on whale hunter knowledge for the development and articulation of a deep ecological understanding of what constitute sound and environmentally friendly relations between humans and cetaceans in the context of marine mammal ecotourism (Neves-Graca 2004).

In July 1999, Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio visited Lajes de Pico in direct connection with promoting whale watching in the Azores. On the morning of his visit, locals woke up to the calmest and most perfect weather they had ever seen in the summer months. There was hardly a cloud in the sky, and the breeze that would soon blow in from the windward side of the island had not yet awoken. No one could have guessed the big storm that was brewing around the president's visit. No one that is, except for a group of local citizens who were intent on protesting a planned whale watching trip for the President's enjoyment.

As the President's entourage approached Lajes, the bay was filled with old whale hunting canoes on sail, a former whale hunting engine boat, and a few small motor vessels. These vessels were initially mistaken as a welcoming gesture. Soon however, word reached the entourage program manager that the boats were intentionally blocking ocean sea access to Espaço Thalassa, the whale watching company chosen to take the President out on a whale watching trip.

Why would this group of Pacific men have gotten organised for such a public disruption of the Presidential visit? After centuries of neglect, Azoreans are normally extremely welcoming of dignitaries from the Portuguese mainland (Neves 1995). Could it be that they were making a statement against Espaço Thalassa for being partly owned and run by a French citizen who had clashed with the locals due to his candidness about their former whale hunting and dolphin killing practices? The truth is the protest was neither against Espaço Thalassa per se, nor the President: it was instead the voicing of extreme discontent over the model of whale watching promoted by Espaço Thalassa, and against rendering invisible the alternative understandings of whale watching based on whalers' knowledge of cetaceans and their judgment on which types of whale watching encounters are the least pernicious for whales and dolphins.

The Azorean whalers of Lajes do Pico hunted sperm whales locally from about 1882 to 1983. Although they did so mostly in the context of 20th century industrial whaling, Azorean whaling remained highly artisanal throughout this period. Whales were hunted with small open whale boats (known locally as whaling canoes) fitted by 7 men crews, including a harpooner. They used motor launches only as supplementary support to tow whale boats, and to tug the whales

back to port once they were killed. Given the precariousness of hunting whales under such delicate conditions, whaling success depended greatly on these men's ability to fully understand the behavior of whales: this was especially important if they were to preempt and/or quickly respond to whale reactions during the hunting encounter. It can truthfully be said that the lives of these men depended on such highly developed acuity (Neves-Graca 2002, 2005).

As the century during which Azorean men hunted whales unfolded, a very keen sense of whaler identity developed in the archipelago, although nowhere as intense as in Lajes do Pico (Neves-Graca 2002, 2006, 2007). At the core of this sense of identity was the recognition of deep similarities between whaler selves and the whales they hunted (Neves 2005). Whalers often stated that because successful hunting requires the ability to be and to behave in whale-like fashion (i.e., to see and to know the world from a whale's perspective), whalers and whales met in a space of shared 'ontology' which the whalers described as a deeply relational mode of existence. It is thus perhaps not all that surprising that many of the former whale hunters I interviewed in Pico for over a decade now, have told me repeatedly and with great conviction that "no one loves a whale as much as a whaler does".

Shortly after whale watching was introduced in Lajes as a commercial activity in 1989, the wisdom the whalers had accumulated through generations of hunting became increasingly marginal and silenced. This unfolded along the lines of a dichotomous evaluation of the whale hunting legacy vis-a-vis contemporary whale watching. Whalers were squarely situated as belonging to a foregone and mythical past in opposition to current normative and scientific understandings of whales and cetaceans

in general. Their views and ideas were presented as quintessentially non-ecological, and they were even called 'whale murderers' by activists in European mass media outlets (Neves-Graca 2004).

And yet, not only did the former whale hunters hold strong opinions about whale ecology, which were often critical of whale watching practices, they were resolute in having their voices heard. Quite a few were hired by 'alternative local' whale watching companies, including those whose logic of existence was less oriented towards capital extraction and accumulation, and more concerned with the re-embedding of the whaling legacy within the context of contemporary environmental concerns and sensitivities. To be sure, partly out of having been exposed to the green discourses of radical ecologists and partly through the support of networks that included activists and scholars who disagreed with the dominant capitalist vision for whale watching in the Azores, the former whalers became steadily more apt at articulating well informed and sound environmental critiques of this activity. They also became part of a movement for the implementation of alternative forms of whale watching practice that was less commercially oriented and also potentially less damaging to whales and dolphins.

At the core of this critique and alternative positioning was the recognition of the serious disturbances caused to whales and dolphins by boats producing high pitch under-water noise. The whalers often postulated that such a form of pollution must introduce serious stress on cetaceans who rely on echo-location to find food, to communicate with one another, to navigate, and to raise and nurture their off-springs. Interestingly, only now have scientists begun to publish a cohesive body of scientific research that proves

the validity of the whalers' position. As an alternative, they proposed that boats with onboard engines should be used in whale watching and that strict measures should be introduced in relation to how whales should be approached and how human-whale encounters should be conducted. Far from wanting to romanticise whaler knowledge, it is relevant to point out that the whalers of Lajes do Pico did not have 'perfect or total knowledge of whales' or their ecosystem. In fact, some of their premises and practices have been the target of valid critiques by scientists and mainstream whale watching operators.

Nevertheless, the whalers' views still entailed a much more holistic understanding of cetaceans and of the potential impacts of whale watching on cetaceans than those espoused by dominant whale watching companies, the local government, and national and international NGOs. Of these groups, the former whalers were the most committed to figuring out how this activity ought to be regulated so as to be environmentally sustainable for future generations. How is it possible then that constituencies ranging from local levels of governance, the University of the Azores, representatives of Greenpeace and WWF, and even the well intended founders of the first Azorean whale watching companies were so intent on not just dismissing whaler opinions, but to go as far as outright silencing them?

While the full disclosure of all the details implicit in this question would be extremely lengthy and complex (Neves-Graca 2004 and 2007), it can be explained in relation to the logic that pervades current views on whale watching all the way from the International Whaling Commission (IWC), through NGOs, to local and regional levels of governance in the Azores. This logic is based on two core premises that are more greatly

supported by ideological belief than by fact and/or scientific evidence: 1) that the best way to preserve cetaceans and their marine environments is to envision and implement profitable commercial uses of these species, i.e., that people are not motivated to protect the environments unless they can do so at a profit; 2) that whale watching is quintessentially an ecologically benign capitalist enterprise and hence, that whale watching and conservation are two sides of the same coin. The problem, as I have argued elsewhere (Neves forthcoming-a; Neves forthcoming-b) is that conservation is increasingly being subsumed by capitalist logic, resulting in a deadly fallacy that conflates ecological processes with economic goals and strategies. In the context of whale watching this has resulted in worrisome negative environmental impacts on cetaceans, as is the case of the Canary Islands, where sperm whales were harassed to the point of exhibiting signs of the effects of long term extreme distress (Neves-Graca 2004, 2007; forthcoming-b).

In effect, a serious consequence of confusing conservation with capitalist interests is that it creates major blind spots which have impeded the IWC and organisations like Greenpeace and the WWF from effectively evaluating the true environmental impacts of commercialised nature protection. The year before the Portuguese president's visit to Lajes do Pico, there had been a three day conference meant to establish the basic principles for whale watching in the Azores. It was clear that the views of whale watching promoted by the IWC, Greenpeace, XXX, the Azorean University, the Azorean Government, and the most capitalist Azorean whale watchers had not only aligned, but had also become a dominant paradigm that left very little space of alternative views. It was even clearer that this group of constituencies was not interested in the opinions of dissident whale watching

companies and former whale hunters, regarding a more cautious and critical approach to the potentially negative impacts of an excessively commercial form of whale watching. While the whalers were then successfully silenced, this was not something they were willing to let happen during the presidential visit of 1999.

The protest (mentioned above) was a means to voice an alternative understanding of what constitutes a healthy and sustainable relation between the economic goals associated with marine ecotourism, and marine conservation objectives. The whalers wanted the world to know about the importance of embedding economic goals within ecological concerns, which in turn was seen as critically important for securing the economic and social sustainability of the Lajence population. The demonstration created a space for the voicing of such concerns and alternative views, some of which were eventually incorporated into the law that currently legislates whale watching in the Azores. In the final instance, this case shows not only that there exist well conceptualised and coordinated alternative understandings to mainstream conservation, but also that the latter can be effectively resisted when alternative visions are soundly conceptualised, constituencies manage to organise themselves effectively, and when there is sufficient commitment to the sustainability of local socio-economic processes.

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Strategies for Effective and Just Conservation: The Austral Foundation's Review of Conservation in Fiji

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In the tropical, developing world conservation sector, big NGOs (BINGOs) dominate the prioritisation and implementation of conservation programmes (Rodriguez *et al.* 2007). Questions are asked about the impact and effectiveness of this dominance (Chapin 2004). Our research studied the impact and effectiveness of BINGO-dominance on the conservation sector in a small island developing nation in the Pacific – Fiji. In small island nations, trends and impacts can have a clarity and visibility that may not always be transparent in large countries, hence providing us the opportunity to investigate assumptions that underpin BINGO programme design in developing nations throughout the world.

The review took place during 2007. We interviewed 67 informants, who

were selected to be representative of stakeholders, collaborators, and other participants and funders of the conservation sector. Over 70 reports, articles and other literature from published and unpublished sources were reviewed, as were numerous conventions, strategies, policies and documents. The draft findings of the review were put to a meeting of 29 stakeholders and informants, and the ensuing discussion and conclusions were taken into account in the final analysis.

Fiji as an International Conservation Priority

The combination of Fiji's perceived international biodiversity values and the degree of threat facing its species and ecosystems has made the country a priority for a number of international conservation organisations.

For a total Fiji population of 900,000, we found 23 non-government agencies (including 18 BINGOs) and at least a half-dozen community-based groups working on conservation outcomes. A total of 148 individuals are employed full time in government and non-government conservation programmes and projects. Several Pacific regional secretariats with conservation mandates include Fiji in their oversight. By analysing the budgets of both government and non-government funding sources, we estimate that collectively over USD 8 million is spent on its biodiversity conservation annually.

A Biodiversity Crisis in Fiji

Most of the 18 BINGOs that have started conservation programmes in Fiji arrived a decade ago. While these arrivals resulted in a significant increase in the number of conservation projects