The occupation of catching and extracting commercial products from whales.

Early Whaling

Whaling for subsistence dates to prehistoric times. The early people of Korea were hunting whales as far back as 5000 B.C., and those of Norway began whaling at least 4,000 years ago. Various peoples of the NW North American coast and the Arctic have a long tradition of whaling. Whaling, done from canoes or skin boats, often when migrating pods of whales passed nearby, was a very dangerous undertaking. Over time, many, such as the Qwidicca-atx (Makah) people of the Olympic peninsula, developed set spiritual and hunting practices that became the core of their culture.

Early Commercial Whaling

The hunting of whales is thought to have been pursued by the Basques from land as early as the 10th cent. and in Newfoundland waters by the 14th cent. It is not until the middle of the 16th cent., however, that the appearance of Basques in those waters is established by record. Whaling on a large scale was first organized at Spitsbergen at the beginning of the 17th cent., largely by the Dutch who, with the Basques, apparently developed methods of flensing and boiling. The Dutch were at first in competition with the English Muscovy Company of London, but before its collapse in 1625 they had gained ascendancy; in 1623 they established the port of Smeerenberg. Large profits continued only until c.1640, when the scarcity of whales forced the Dutch farther out into the northern waters in search of them.

By the middle of the 17th cent. whaling from the land was established in America. The earliest type, called drift whaling, consisted of harvesting whales that had washed up on the shore, mainly after storms. Drift whaling became economically important in Colonial America, and the first laws regarding it were written at Southampton, Long Island, in the 1640s. This practice was followed by shore whaling, in which whales swimming close to shore were hunted. Whaling centers, at first on Long Island and Cape Cod, shifted to Nantucket and then New Bedford, Mass., the greatest whaling port in the world until the decline (c.1860) of the industry. With the capture (1712) of a sperm whale by a Nantucket whaler, the superior qualities of sperm oil were discovered, and American whalers began fishing farther south in search of the sperm whale, which superseded the right whale in value.

American fisheries were set back by the American Revolution, but in 1791 the first Americans rounded Cape Horn to hunt in the S Pacific. Another, but temporary, setback occurred in the War of 1812, but the outcome spelled the complete defeat of British whaling. From c.1815 until shortly before the Civil War, the period widely known as the golden age of U.S. whaling, Americans sailed the Pacific from south to north, on voyages often lasting as long as three or four years, in search of whales. Melville's *Moby-Dick* gives an account of a voyage in this period. The advent of the Civil War, a decrease in the
demand for sperm oil and in the number of whales, and the discovery (1859) of oil in Pennsylvania brought on the decline of the industry.

**Modern Whaling**

The invention (c.1856), by the Norwegian Sven Foyn, of a harpoon containing an explosive head may be said to have inaugurated modern whaling. Besides insuring the whale’s immediate death this type of harpoon was subsequently modified to shoot compressed air into the whale so that it will not sink before it can be secured. The development of the factory ship, equipped to take on board and completely process whales caught by smaller chaser boats, increased safety and enhanced the ability to catch the larger blue whale. It also allowed for the use of all parts of the whale; formerly only the blubber and head could be procured, and the job of flensing from the side of the ship was a hazardous one.

In 1904 operations commenced from a whaling station on South Georgia, an island in the S Atlantic, and the modern industry found in Antarctic waters the last rich whaling fields on the globe. The number of expeditions from the Antarctic islands, however, was restricted by Great Britain, which had secured sovereignty over these areas. In 1925 the first floating factory was sent to the Antarctic regions; that innovation led to the greatest expansion in the history of whaling. In 1930 the modern whaling industry reached its zenith, with 6 shore stations, 41 floating factories, and 232 whale catchers in the Antarctic regions, of which 3 stations, 27 factory ships, and 147 catchers were Norwegian and 2 stations, 27 floating factories, and 68 catchers were British. During World War II most of the world’s whaling fleet was lost, but afterward Norway, Britain, and Japan (which had started Antarctic expeditions in 1935) soon reestablished their prewar positions, and in addition the Soviet Union, the Netherlands, and South Africa appeared in the Antarctic regions for the first time.

**Attempts at Regulation and Protection**

In 1932–33, partly in response to the collapse of the whale-oil market, the first attempts were made to regulate and restrict the catch by international agreement. After World War II the International Whaling Commission (IWC) was formed in Washington, D.C., by 17 nations, including all those operating in the Antarctic regions. The commission, which regulates most of the world’s whaling activity, began in the 1960s to limit the number and species of whales that could be hunted.

In the subsequent years, environmental activist groups such as Greenpeace, became extremely involved in the attempt to stop whaling, shadowing whaling vessels and attempting to interfere with whalers. In 1982 the IWC voted a moratorium on commercial whaling, to take effect after the 1984–85 season. Exceptions to the moratorium generally have been made for native peoples, such as the Makah, who traditionally had hunted whales and used their meat as a major part of their diet. These regulations are not adhered to by all nations, including some members of the commission (which now has 76 member nations), and whales continued to be hunted by Norway and Iceland and, for research purposes, by Japan. The majority of whales taken in recent years have been by the Norwegian and Japanese fleets; most of the catch consists of minke whales, except in Iceland, where endangered fin whales are also killed. The killing of whales for research, while permitted under IWC regulations, is opposed by many as unnecessary. Opponents of whaling believe it has been abused and should be abolished, and activist antiwhaling organizations also have attempted to interfere with such whaling. In 2010 Australia brought a case to the International Court of Justice in which it asserted that Japan’s Antarctic whaling program was not for scientific research, and in 2014 the ICJ ruled against Japan and ordered the program ended. The ruling did not affect Japanese whaling off the country’s coast, and

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Japan resumed Antarctic whaling under a new research plan in 2015.

In 2003 the IWC voted to expand its main functions to include whale conservation. The Indian Ocean and the ocean waters off Mexico, a number of South Pacific island nations and territories, and Antarctica have been designated whale sanctuaries. The protective efforts have allowed some species to return to numbers that will probably assure their survival, but others, especially the right whales, remain severely depleted in numbers and endangered. In 2006, however, after more nations favoring commercial whaling joined the IWC, it narrowly voted to support the eventual return of commercial whaling.

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