

BOOK REVIEW

Kalland, Arne. 2009. *Unveiling the whale: Discourses on whales and whaling*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

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<http://www.dur.ac.uk/anthropology.journal/vol18/iss1/pountney.pdf>

Arne Kalland has conducted extensive research on marine resource management since the mid-1970s, with a particular focus on Japan. This led him to pay attention to the international whaling debate, a research interest which has resulted in the publication of this monograph. Since the early 1990s he has explored people's attitudes towards nature and has more recently focussed on the relationship between religion and ecology.

Kalland promotes sustainable whaling (i.e. a suspension of the current moratorium on hunting whales for commercial purposes) on the premise that hunting techniques have become increasingly humane. Social taboos promote eating domesticated over wild meat, but whaling has according to Kalland a lower carbon footprint compared to farming cattle for beef and it is an integral part of coastal whaling communities' way of life. These views could have been a highly interesting entry point into questioning why we ascribe to whales certain values which conflict with whaling communities' belief systems. However, the author devotes a great part of the book to promote his perception of anti-whaling environmental organisations as 'culturally imperialistic', 'intolerant', and at times 'militant'. This was disappointing, especially since the author raises relevant critical points that need to be addressed not only by anthropologists but by worldwide organisations, with regards to how people perceive humans' relationship and effect on nature, the inconsistencies within the International Whaling Commission (IWC) moratorium, and how certain animals are

inscribed with particular values, in this case uniqueness, intelligence, beauty (what Kalland terms “the Superwhale”). Arne Kalland’s critique of the discrete categorisation of people into those who whale culturally (Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling) and those who whale commercially without cultural values indicates that the two cannot be meaningfully separated. ‘Indigenous people’ are rarely isolated from global market forces and for coastal whalers whaling is more than a mode of subsistence. However, the author undermined his argument in two ways. First, by polarising the debate and vilifying the opposition (an accuse he himself moves to the anti-whaling environmentalists). Second, by using selective pieces of information, emotive language and at times crude generalisations, it becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to appreciate how the author differs from the people he is decrying. By chapter 3 the book reads more like a smear campaign than an exploration of social engagement with whaling. This can be seen in the polarisation between traditionally whaling nations as entirely conforming to regulations (Japan) and non whaling countries (UK and US) as uncompromising. Recent events, whereby a Japanese ‘research ship’ (allegedly a cover for whaling activities) attacked the *Ady Gil* (a speedboat containing 6 anti-whaling campaigners) on 6 January 2010 could not be fitted into Kalland’s framework.

The potential to explore why non-whaling Western societies have turned whales into environmental icons is sacrificed in favour of condemnation of environmentalists. Analysis of this theme does not advance beyond a summarising statement to the effect that rapid urbanisation can be held responsible for the loss of every value Westerners would like to reincorporated into society (purpose in life, reduced crime, divorce and drugs). It would have been highly interesting to understand why governments in Norway and Japan support an economically insignificant industry, beyond a brief chapter (pp. 172–208) on whaling as part of identity (p. 40). Similarly, the sustainability model that the author proposes is assumed, whereas it needed to be expanded and perhaps also critiqued; we have the impression that Kalland values one system of knowledge over another, prioritising the “science” model of sustainability over the ethical discourse utilised to retain the moratorium.

The author proposes that the sole reason why the moratorium was not lifted once stocks of certain species of whale were no longer endangered was because social engagement towards whales had changed from one based on science to one based on emotion — and values ascribed to whales were more a reflection of our society than innate features of whales. While this may have a part to play in the reluctance to lift the moratorium, the author does not consider the possibility that the reason why sustainable whaling was not reintroduced was because quotas were de facto ignored prior to the moratorium. The fear to return to a system that evidently failed may be driving the moratorium more than sentimental attachments. In addition, while the author focuses on coastal whaling communities, stating that the industrial pelagic whaling of the past no longer exists, is not there the risk of a situation similar to what occurs in Somalia arising? The impact of nuclear waste and overfishing by European ships in the Gulf of Aden has translated into an increase in local fishermen turning to piracy. While this represents an extreme example, it is also difficult to conceive how small local whaling communities could survive in a competitive global market. Nation specific quotas could potentially be dominated by larger corporations. Although the Kalland states that whalers would not want to see their stocks run dry (p. 178) it is plausible that if one whaling community reduced whaling to allow the replenishment of stocks, another will exploit this for their own benefit.

It is paramount to discuss social engagement with environmental issues, particularly in the absence of scientific consensus regarding the extent of environmental destruction and the role of humans in this (as seen at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference of December 2009). In addition, Kalland's choice to challenge an often unquestioned discourse, that the Earth is unable to sustain the destructive behaviour of humans, is vital in questioning how we quantify and understand our impact on world's ecosystems. However the polarisation of the debate makes parts of the book read less like ethnography and more like propaganda, particularly where Kalland claims that whale protectionists invent news to generate 'crisis maximising strategies' (p. 89). Kalland's direct approach is to be commended as well as the accessibility of the book (blessedly free of jargonised language), and for creating new avenues for further research into the attribution of values and anti-values to highly contentious environmental discourses.