

"The chimney is on fire"

On 21 December 1964 the last whale harpooning by a New Zealand boat in New Zealand waters occurred off Kaikoura. In *The Perano Whalers of Cook Strait 1911-1964*, author Don Grady graphically describes a typical sperm whale hunt of the mid-1960s by the killer vessel *Orca*, which operated out of Tory Channel. Such a romanticised account is unthinkable in today's more enlightened times.

A pod of sperm whales has been sighted by the whale-spotter aircraft or by the lookout man in *Orca's* barrel high up on the foremast. The hunt is now in earnest.

The steel-hulled *Orca* is steaming off Kaikoura in a circle on a smooth sea with a SSE swell. The weather is fine and clear. The men on the bridge are purposeful and alert.

Master-gunner Trevor Norton lopes down the catwalk in a gunner's gait to the deadly swivel gun pointing ominously out from the bow. Several times Trevor holds off firing the gun at the last minute. He's like a ballet dancer doing shadow exercises before the real thing.

For reasons known to himself, Trevor holds his fire again. It might have been that the big bull sperm in his gunsights was too far away; perhaps it turned out to be a dam with a calf,



"We're going to lose our sea life if we don't do something," she says.

Rod Rae sums up the attitude of someone who once used to take as much from the sea as he wanted, but now would like to put something back.

"Twenty years ago I could dive and spear 30 butterfish in 30 minutes. You can't do that anymore. The peninsula is an area worth preserving because there's such diversity. These days more and more divers are beginning to see the merits of reserves."



Kaikoura, a town of surprises. The leopard seal in the background would be classed as a "vagrant individual" by marine mammal scientists, since the seal is usually confined to the southern oceans.

Photo: Gerard Hutching



If whale numbers continue to plummet as they have in the last 100 years, these whalebone relics may be all that future generations have to remind them of one of the greatest natural wonders the world has seen. Photo: Craig Potton