

The whales' wake



ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY

Whalers with a right whale at Kaikoura early this century. By this time right whales were so rare that they were only occasionally caught, and whalers concentrated on the more numerous sperm and humpback whale stocks.

THE FIRST WHALING ship listed as calling into a New Zealand port was the *William and Ann* in 1791. Lured by the reports of whales by early explorers, British and American vessels continued to ply the country's off-shore waters until the 1830s. Their main target was the sperm whale; the quarry was rendered down at sea, and Maori settlements used as a source of provisions and extra hands.

In 1829 the first shore-based stations were established in Cook Strait and in Fiordland's Preservation Inlet to target the winter and spring migration of right whales close to shore.

By 1844 over 80 such stations had been established, dotted along the eastern coastline from East Cape to Foveaux Strait. Some operated only for a short period. In addition, foreign ships, known as bay whalers, anchored in coastal waters and com-

peted with the shore bases for whales.

Even incomplete whaling records show 26,000 right whales were killed in south-east Australian and New Zealand waters, three quarters of them in the decade 1835-44. During this period the region supplied a major proportion – probably about one third – of the world's total right whale catches.

Look-outs were established on high ground near the bases and the tell-tale, V-shaped blow of right whales could be observed up to eight kilometres off-shore. Clinker-built row boats were dispatched carrying about eight men, an oarsman in the stern and a harpooner at the bow. Cows entering bays to calve were quickly exterminated. Those in groups migrating northwards ran the gauntlet of rival stations along each section of coast.

Once secured by harpoon the

whales were towed to shore, their blubber cut away and rendered down in try-pots, and the oil separated and stored in wooden barrels.

A stench of rotting offal and blubber scraps, and greasy smoke from the try-pot fires which coated buildings and trees, characterised each whaling base.

But the smell of whale was the smell of money. Like today's petroleum industry, the end products provided lighting, heating and lubrication. A secondary product – the horny, keratin plates of the whales' baleen – was used to make chair seats, corsets and buggy whips.

In 1840 over twice as much right whale oil as sperm whale oil was shipped from Sydney, the destination of the product from New Zealand bases. By 1845 there was practically none. The right whales had gone, and with them the associated industry.