

TWENTIETH CENTURY WHALING OPERATIONS AT WHANGAMUMU AND CAMPBELL ISLAND

The Nineteenth Century Background

The extensive nature and the eventual decline of the whaling industry in New Zealand waters has been well enough recorded, principally by McNab,¹ Dawbin² and Rickard.³

Although the statistics are only imprecisely recorded, Dawbin estimates that at its peak in the early years of the nineteenth century, pelagic whaling off the New Zealand coast probably employed up to 200 whaling vessels, chiefly American, in the season and that in their peak seasons their catch probably exceeded 1000 sperm and right whales.⁴

A concurrent and also extensive feature of nineteenth century whaling was the development, from 1827 onwards, of shore whaling. At one time or another approximately 100 of these shore stations appeared on the coast and to these could be added the occasional appearance of bay whaling—whaling operations based upon pelagic whaling vessels anchored in convenient bays and inlets, using their boats for off-shore whaling, sometimes in competition with the shore based whalers.

Dawbin estimates that at its peak shore whaling in the early nineteenth century probably accounted for about 400 right whales in a season,⁵ but, like sealing before it, indiscriminate slaughter by both pelagic and shore whalers led to a decline in the industry. Pelagic whaling continued, but in declining numbers, until the late nineteenth century, the American sperm whalers continuing to visit the Bay of Islands and Mangonui until the 1870s, but by 1880 they had all but disappeared from the coast.⁶ From 1850 until the turn of the century shore whaling was confined to a few shore stations in the vicinities of Kaikoura, Tory Channel, Mahia Peninsula and the Bay of Plenty where the later catches were small.⁷

The Twentieth Century Revival

An essential feature of nineteenth century whaling was its technical simplicity. The whales were caught from the traditional open oared whaleboat and their killing was by the hand operated harpoon or lance. Although there was some trade in whalebone and baleen, a product of the right whale, was in demand for corsetry, the whale was principally killed for its oil.

Although the catches were never to rival those of the past, modern techniques gave rise to a moderate revival in the trade. By the early years of the twentieth century, new developments included the invention of the explosive harpoon, the advent of the steam whale-chaser and in