

Commentary

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Ethics of Whaling: Is whaling truly immoral?

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the impact of human activities on the environment, in particular habitat degradation and destruction, and resource over-exploitation, have been of increasing concern which led to a rise of environmentalism. As a result, the relationship between humans, the natural environment, and other living organisms is being reconsidered. This has led to examining alternatives to traditional consumptive use-oriented relationships between humans and nature, as well as moral and ethical responsibilities toward future generations.

A part of this debate relates to whaling, where the international community is split primarily along two opposing sides. One view denies the conventional consumptive use-oriented relationship between humans and whales, and claims that the only acceptable whale use in the 21st century is non-consumptive use, such as whale watching. According to this view, whales are an international common heritage which must be ‘preserved,’ as opposed to ‘conserved,’ for future generations. Moreover, whaling should not be permitted because it is against ethics that ‘there are certain cultural norms, like cannibalism, that are in violation of our basic approach to maintaining our civilization’ (Wetson cited in Eilperin, 2006).

In contrast, the other view supports the maintenance of a traditional relationship between humans and whales, where hunting and dietary use should be allowed as long as such use is sustainable. Since whales are used for food, the claim that whaling and eating whale products are immoral/unethical is not acceptable. Solely non-consumptive use of whales is simply not justifiable as long as resources are abundant. This view acknowledges traditional users’ right to the resource, and opposes anti-utilization when it is based strictly on sentiment.

This brief paper attempts to clarify moral/ethical arguments against whaling, their meanings, and if such claim is indeed justifiable.

PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE

To understand the claim that whaling is unethical and

immoral, two philosophical concepts, namely ethics and morality should be defined and discussed. Singer (2018) defines that ‘ethics, also called moral philosophy, the discipline concerned with what is morally good or bad, right or wrong.’ Furthermore, he states that ethics’ major concerns include the nature of ultimate value and the standards by which human actions can be judged right or wrong.’ In other words, ethics or morality implies something of objective and normative value to be accepted by all people.

However, there is an opposing view, moral relativism, which argues that such objective or universal morality does not exist, but is only relative to a group, person, or society/culture. This school of thought was largely influenced by anthropology (Gowans, 2018), such as ‘...moral values are relative to culture and that there is no way of showing that the values of one culture are better than those of another’ (American Anthropological Association Executive Board, 1947). Reflecting these varied views on ethics, morality defined by Gert and Gert (2017) is more comprehensive: ‘1. descriptively to refer to a code of conduct put forward by a society or a) some other group, such as religion, or b) accepted by an individual for his/her own behavior or 2. normatively refer to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons.’ As there are two opposing views of moral/ethics, the possibility of an objective morality has become one of the constant themes of ethics (Singer, 2018).

DISCUSSION

When someone claims that whaling is immoral/unethical, which morals does he/she refer to, universal or specific to a society/culture? Universal moral or ethical argument against whaling is persuasive only if the population or resource cannot be sustainably used, and such use would lead the species to go extinct, with nothing left for the future generations. However, many whale populations have recovered and a risk averse resource management tool to ensure calculation of safe quotas, Revised Management Procedure (RMP), has been developed. There

is therefore no sound scientific basis to oppose whaling because whales can be sustainably harvested and utilized for human consumption.

Conservation of biological diversity is a globally shared concern and a part of newly emerging normative values, however, the concern here is the conservation of the stock or species but not the protection of an individual animal. As long as survival of species is not at risk, the moral argument against whaling is difficult to justify as it is a matter of animal rights or animal welfare but not conservation.

There are a wide variety of edible plant and animals around the world, but somehow lines are drawn concerning what to eat or good to eat and ignore the rest as inedible, disgusting or sacred. Some people eat whales while others do not. The claim that whaling is immoral based on the lack of shared food habits is merely a reflection of a specific value. Nevertheless, provocative words, such as bloodbath, barbaric and cruel practice, are often used to criticize whaling and to justify their position against whaling.

An attempt to convince the other side by claiming that its own morality is superior to the others' can be regarded as 'ethical egoism' (Gert and Gert, 2017). Arguments of immorality against whaling may be a good example of this phenomenon. To be convincing, the claim is often enforced with an evolutionary twist. Attitudes towards whales are frequently used as a measurement stick for the progress of animal rights discourse: liberation from racism, sexism, and finally to speciesism (Kalland, 1993). Compassion for whales is considered by some as an indicator of personal as well as social maturity (Scheffer, 1991) and being considerate to whales has become a prerequisite for membership in the 'world community' (Fuller, 1991). In other words, for those arguing against whaling, advanced civilized society and its citizenry should exempt whales from the universally accepted principle of sustainable use because whales are special magnificent creatures, 'the humans of the ocean' (Gylling-Nielsen, 1987). Thus, personified whales deserve certain rights and exemption from dinner tables.

CONCLUSION

Do you perceive whaling as immoral and is this position

justifiable? The word moral/ethic has strong connotations that such values have to be absolute and universal. However, there is a philosophical debate between normative vs. specific which is manifested in the whaling debate. On one hand, those who claim whaling immoral assert their morality has evolved to be normative and superior to the others so that the rest should embrace this norm. On the other hand, others consider such claim to be invalid because such position is a mere reflection of a specific value only acceptable to certain groups and people, and consider their argument to be ethical egoism. An answer to the question whether whaling is immoral or not lies in one's personal belief. Whaling is immoral for some, but it is not for others.

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