

Whalers and Conservation

In the past, the main contact that humans had with whales was in hunting them. In some cultures, whale meat was a major [food](#) source dating back to prehistoric times. Whales were highly prized game because, like the woolly mammoth or bison, a single kill yielded an incredible amount of meat. But by the 1700s, when worldwide whaling really took off, the focus had shifted from the meat to a rich oil derived from whale blubber. Since it was the primary lamp fuel in many parts of the world, whale oil was big business throughout the 1700s and into the 1800s.



Photo courtesy [NOAA](#)

The deck of an early 20th-century whaling vessel. Whaling was once big business in the United States, Russia and many other countries throughout the world.

In this era, whale **baleen** was also highly prized. The keratin material, commonly referred to as **whalebone**, combines great strength and flexibility. These qualities made it an ideal choice for a variety of products, including ladies' corsets, riding crops and umbrellas. Whale teeth, engraved with inscriptions and decorations, were also very popular, particularly among the upper class.

Who are the Sea Shepherds?

The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is a nonprofit environmental conservation group that vigilantly defends and protects marine life from the glacier-studded Southern Ocean to the tropical Galapagos Islands. Founded by Paul Watson in 1977, Sea Shepherd is best known for its anti-whaling campaigns, as documented in the Animal Planet series "Whale Wars."

Although commercial whaling was banned by the International Whaling Commission more than 20 years ago, a handful of countries, including Japan, continue to allow whale hunting under the auspices of scientific research. Since the commission's ruling, Sea Shepherd has reportedly rescued at least 1,400 whales from slaughter. Rather than protesting, Sea Shepherd engages in direct-action tactics, including spraying high-pressure water cannons at whaling ships and hurling rancid butter and slippery powder onto the decks. The tactics have attracted controversy, but the organization maintains a strict policy of nonviolence and stands by its effectiveness.

Under these regulations, many whale species have bounced back from the brink of extinction, but others, such as the **right whale**, are still in serious danger. According to whale-conservation organizations, the survival of these species depends on even stricter whaling regulations and more vigilant campaigns against illegal whaling operations. If these conservation efforts succeed, endangered whale species have a good shot at replenishing their numbers and continuing their mastery of the oceans for another 50 million years.

<http://animals.howstuffworks.com/mammals/whale.htm/printable>