

Humpback hunting his concern

by Mike Walker

Hunting of humpback whales continues in the Caribbean despite the fact that they are listed by the International Whaling Commission as an endangered species.

Further, current official estimates to the humpback population are probably at least double the true figure.

This was the report of Stephen Price, marine biologist and director of ORCA expeditions, to the Whale Society of Edmonton last week.

Price recently returned from an expedition to the Lesser Antilles Islands in the Caribbean, where ORCA performed a count of the humpback population and investigated hunting of humpbacks in the area.

ORCA's humpback survey was taken on a coral shelf east of Grand Turk Island, where 85 per cent of humpbacks reported in a previous survey had been sighted.

The organization used a sixty-foot catamaran and a light plane for the count. In the sea survey, whales were counted either visually — counting "blows" as the whales surfaced for air, or aurally — using a "hydrophone" and tape recorder to listen for whales. In the aerial survey, "blows" were counted as an aircraft overflew the area.

In either case, Price said there is a serious risk of double- and triple-counting. Thus, great care is required to keep track of whales as they are being counted.

Price estimated there are 625 humpbacks in the area of ORCA's survey. If this number is indeed 85 per cent of the total population, he said, there are a total of 735 humpbacks. Price

said humpbacks probably number less than a thousand.

In contrast, the International Whaling Commission's (IWC) latest estimate, based on the previous survey, is 2000. Price said this figure must be the result of multiple counts. He said he is planning to publish his findings and present them to the IWC soon. He said he hoped the Commission would subsequently revise its population estimate.

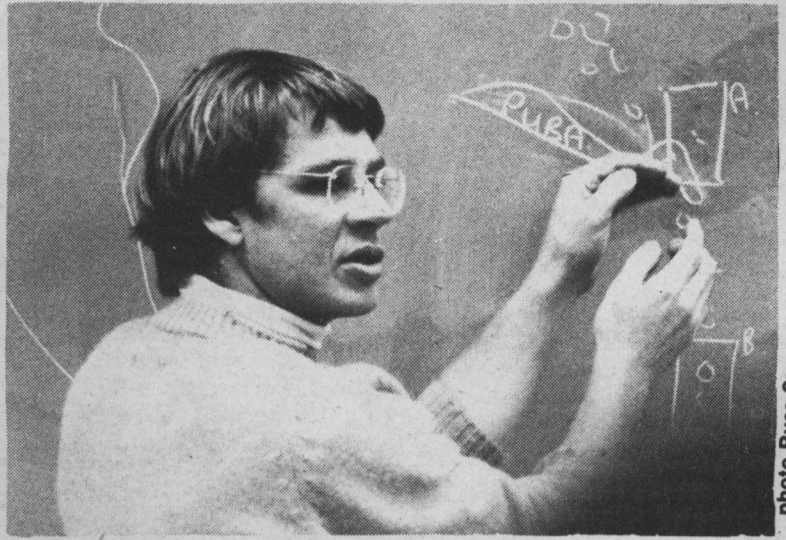
Since the humpback is on the IWC's "endangered and protected" list, IWC members are under a moral obligation not to hunt humpbacks, he said. The only exceptions within the IWC are the Eskimos of Greenland, who, according to Price, are allowed to hunt humpbacks using only aboriginal methods. This results in about 10 kills per year, he said.

However, many small countries that are not IWC members are under no obligation to respect the Commission's wishes,

he said. For instance, the residents of St. Lucia and St. Vincent probably kill eight to ten humpbacks per year, according to Price, using boats ranging from dugout canoes and 28-foot traditional whaling boats to power-craft.


Price said he fears these whalers are also responsible for a large number of woundings. He says many of their boats are equipped with small harpoon guns capable of killing dolphins and smaller whales but not the bus-sized humpbacks. The humpbacks are wounded by these harpoons, he says, and some likely die later, but there is no way to gather data on woundings.

ORCA Expeditions can be contacted through Box 6789 Station 'D', Calgary and The Whale Society of Edmonton can be contacted through President Dennis Whighton at 432-3606, or through Box 476, Substation 11, Edmonton.



Stephen Price

Photo Russ Sampson



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