

Fantasies at the International Whaling Commission: Management, Sustainability, Conservation

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In the 1970s, the whale emerged as a global icon in environmental struggle. In my research at the International Whaling Commission (IWC) I was interested in two questions. First, I wanted to learn more about what kinds of values, histories, and political imaginations helped shape discussions at the IWC. With an all-pervasive reputation for being a "whalers' club," the IWC not only has had to fend off a reputation of cronyism and extreme malfunction, but has also been called by 1989-1993 IWC Commissioner for the United States, John Knauss, "a disaster." Second, I was interested in the kinds of frictions that turned discussions at IWC meetings into disaster, and what kinds of suppositional incommensurabilities and historical and cultural unspecificities informed, and continue to inform, the debate. Instead of probing the pros and cons of reasoned argument that, in the case of the IWC, have led to both political and intellectual dead ends, I traced the formulations as well as effects of arguments that transpire in the context of the IWC. My subject was not the investigation of institutional governmentality or whaling regimes, but the images, narratives, assumptions, and frameworks that give form to frictions.

During the period of my research (2003-2005) it became clear that ideas about management, sustainability, and conservation help to generate the conflicts that so frequently transpire, and I began to explore these ideas as one particular site of political and cultural contestation. Immersing myself in the institutional history of the IWC, I examined the values, attitudes, and imaginations that lie at the heart of IWC debates. As it turned out, while ideas about management, sustainability, and conservation inform all aspects of IWC discussions, they come perhaps most powerfully together in relation to Indigenous peoples. My explorations of issues of sustainability looked especially at discussions around aboriginal whaling, since it is here that frictions often assume their most charged tone. Like sustainability, which often doubles as its cousin, conservation is seen as a global problem. But unlike sustainability, the term is more closely associated with the counterculture movement that began to flourish in the mid-1960s, drawing attention to the environmentally fragile state of the globe. This was a time when radical politics translated into environmental critiques; its goal was to raise awareness. In my examination of issues of conservation, I followed specifically some of the ideas and actions of Greenpeace, with particular attention to how they helped to raise awareness in conservation biology and science. Needless to say, ideas about management, sustainability, and conservation shape, and are shaped by each other, and cannot be neatly separated.

As it became increasingly clear, IWC politics is a bundle of incongruities and contradictions. Groups from different cultural, historical, and political backgrounds are pitted against each other; so are humans and animals. The principles of the Commission's management are ambiguous. Who is at their centre? Environmentalism, it appears, has come to prevail within the Committee, but not without a challenge. Non-governmental organizations, environmental advocacy, and civil society spread as a transnational governmentality — a new imperial power that reaches deep into cultures and seemingly negates their autonomy and specificity. Yet whales are autonomous too in the sense that they are capable of life without humans. Are there ways to envision the autonomy of humans and animals as

interrelated instead as antagonistic? The challenge for the IWC is to think about such interconnections. Autonomy within the global decision-making forum of the IWC, then, moves many ways. To recognize both the autonomy of animals and humans in a struggle about life and death requires work and an attitude capable of moving beyond the presumed dualisms of so many debates that happen at the IWC. Moreover, imagining interrelations instead of frictions has never been easy. It is perhaps the recognition that animals are not inferior to humans but that all life is deeply connected that offers the most promising opening to move beyond the presumed dualisms that continue to shape IWC debates.

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