




FUTURE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

This is how humans have affected whale populations over the years

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WWF founder Sir Peter Scott said: “If we cannot save the whales from extinction, we have little hope of saving mankind and the life-supplying biosphere.” Image: Todd Cravens/Unsplash

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“The living whale, in his full majesty and significance, is only to be seen at sea in unfathomable waters; and afloat the vast bulk of him is out of sight...”

So wrote the American author Herman Melville in his hefty 1851 novel about the hunt for the white sperm whale Moby Dick, inspired by his own adventures aboard whaling ships.

The planet’s biggest mammals have been hunted for thousands of years.

Have you read?

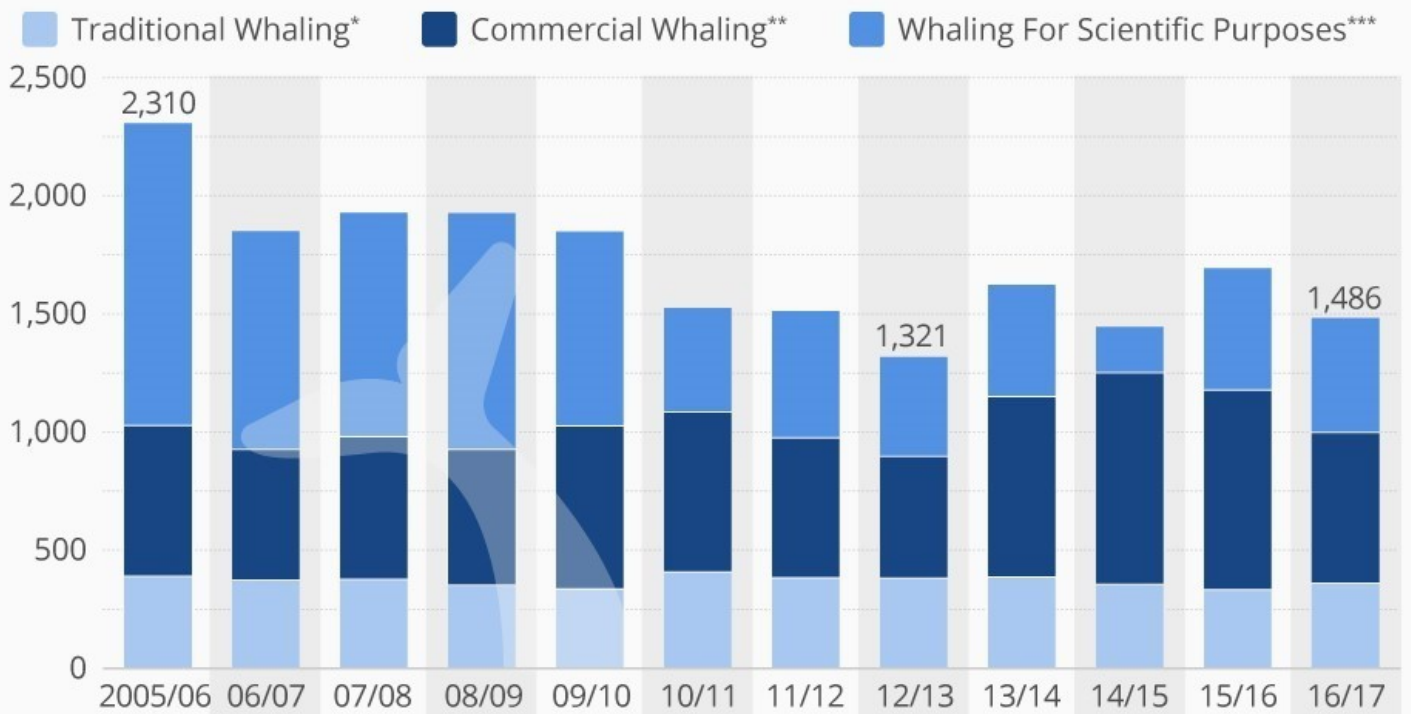
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For many indigenous communities, including the Inuit hunting in the Arctic Ocean, whaling was a means of survival, providing food and even shelter, as whalebone could be used for [roofing](#).

Livelihoods and local economies in seafaring nations such as Japan and Norway were built on the meat, oil from the blubber and whalebone, or baleen - used in hoop skirts and corsets.

Whaling: Still No End In Sight

Number of whales intentionally killed by humans by year



* Denmark, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Russia, U.S.

** Norway and Iceland

*** Japan



Source: IWC



Almost 1,500 whales were hunted in the last year on record Image: Statista

Some species, including the western South Atlantic (WSA) humpback, may have recovered from the brink of extinction to [their pre-whaling population](#), but several others are still endangered.

With whaling ongoing, and plastic pollution and global warming changing their ocean



A gray whale is beached on the Californian coastline Image: REUTERS/Stephen Lam

No doubt Melville would have been intrigued by the changing tides of fortune that have washed over cetaceans since his death in 1891.

Here's a salty, potted history of human and whale relations over the last century:

1900s: The hunt intensifies

lighting lamps became a multi-million dollar industry until fossil fuels took over in popularity.

Commercial whaling hit its peak in the early 1900s. Between 1904 and 1916 it's

estimated nearly 25,000 WSA humpbacks were caught around South Georgia. A total of 2 million whales were killed in the Southern Ocean during the 20th century.

WHALES KILLED THROUGHOUT THE SOUTHERN OCEAN TO NEAR-EXTINCTION DURING THE 20TH CENTURY	725,000	FIN WHALES
	400,000	SPERM WHALES
	360,000	BLUE WHALES
	200,000	SEI WHALES
	200,000	HUMPBACK WHALES
	+ 2 MILLION	TOTAL

2 million whales were killed during the last century Image: WWF

1946: International action

In response to depleting numbers of cetaceans, including the near-extinction of the blue whale, several countries came together to sign the [International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling](#) and establish a [global body to manage whaling](#).

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) currently has 88 members and its role

whale watching.

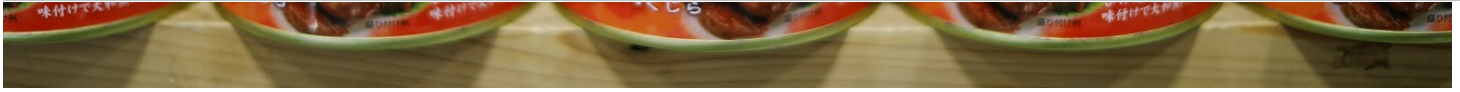
1960s: Save the whale

In 1961, another global conservation organization was born - the World Wildlife Fund or WWF. That year alone, **66,000 whales were killed in the Antarctic**, and hunting was still happening in many other parts of the world.

WWF founder Sir Peter Scott said: "If we cannot save the whales from extinction, we have little hope of saving mankind and the life-supplying biosphere."

"Save the whale" became one of the charity's first rallying cries and it pioneered ground-breaking research techniques, including the recording of underwater vocalizations - or whale song - and photographing examples of the bond between mothers and their calves.





Whale meat is sold in cans in Japan. Image: REUTERS/Issei Kato

1980s: The moratorium

Members of the IWC agreed to ‘pause’ commercial whaling to allow whale numbers to recover, and the moratorium began in 1986. The global trade of whale products was banned and quotas were set for [subsistence whaling](#) to support indigenous communities. Special permits were given to allow ‘scientific’ whaling, which countries including Japan continued to do.



A Minke whale on board a whaling vessel. Image: Kyodo/via REUTERS

The moratorium was largely successful, with the population of [Western gray whales](#) increasing from 115 individuals in 2004 to 174 in 2015. The [WSA humpback whale](#), which numbered fewer than 1,000 for nearly 40 years, has recovered to close to 25,000, according to the latest study.

“I think there is pretty good evidence that a moratorium on hunting has allowed certain populations to recover from depleted status when they were being whaled,” Dave Weller, a research biologist in California, told National Geographic.

But the WWF says six out of the 13 baleen whale species are still endangered. The [North Atlantic right whale is critically endangered](#), with numbers dropping from 524 in 2015 to 412 in 2018. As climate change causes its migration patterns to shift, the species is more at risk from collisions with ships as well as lethal entanglement in fishing gear.

Earlier this year, Japan left the IWC and has [resumed commercial whaling](#) in its waters, saying hunting and eating whale meat is part of the nation’s culture.

Only more time will tell what impact the move may have on the future of whales and the whaling industry.

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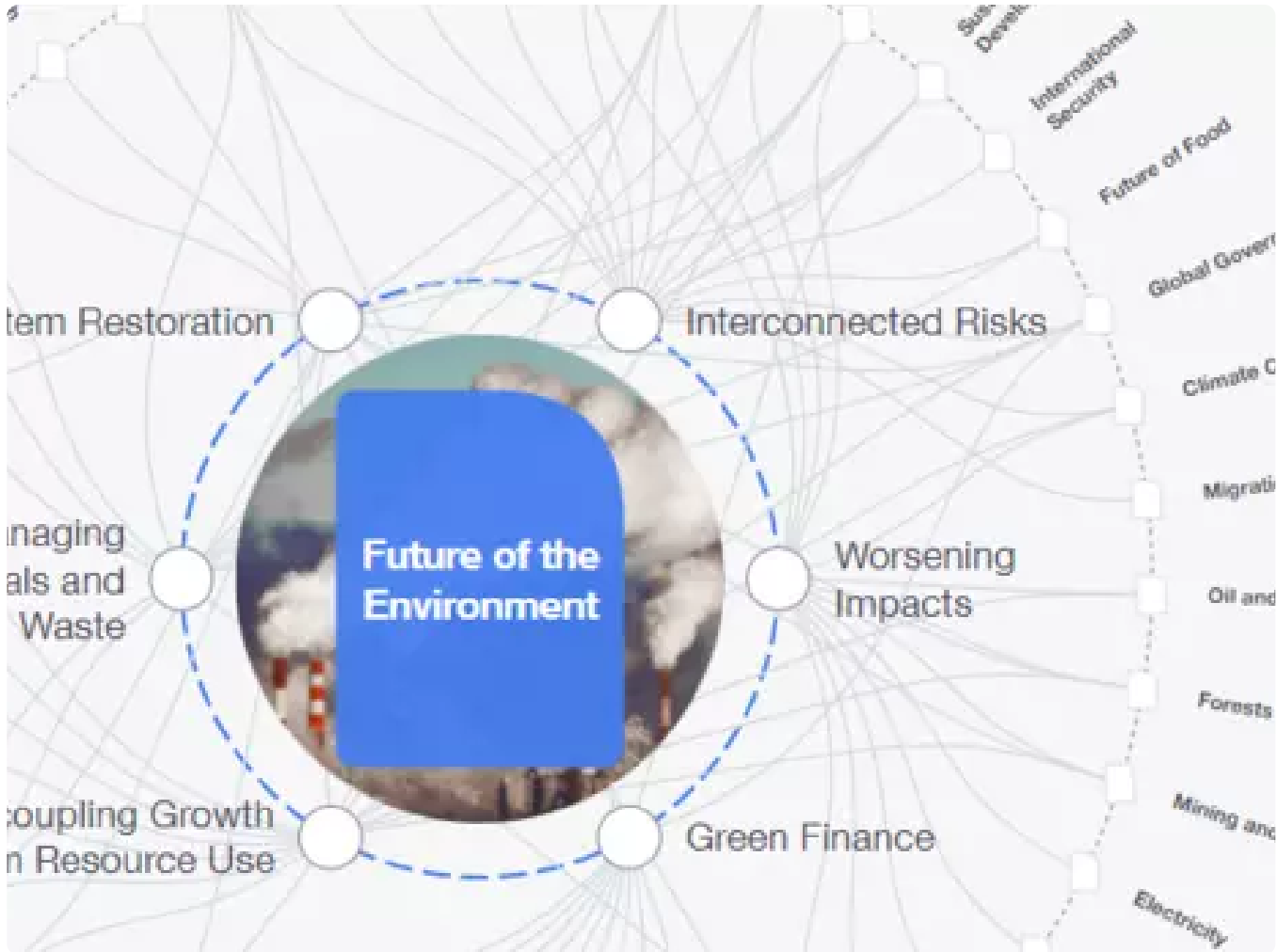
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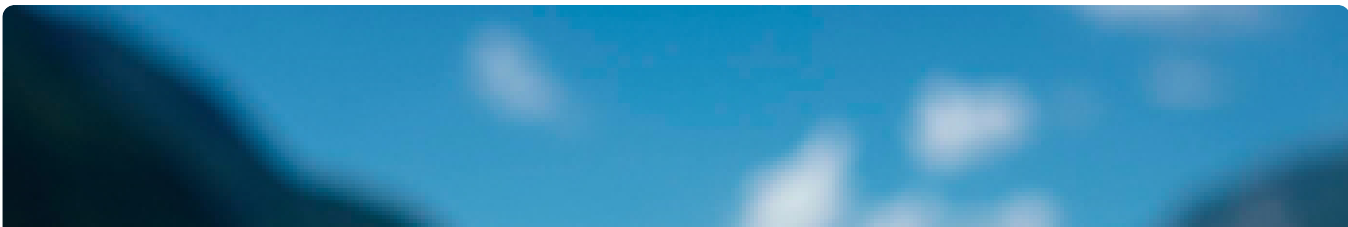
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Sarah Parsons

February 10, 2023

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