

## Research Note

# Whale Watching: Trouble on the Small Whaling Island of Bequia

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**Abstract:** Since 1987, the harvesting of humpback whales by the Bequians of St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been approved by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) as a form of "aboriginal subsistence whaling." However, in 2012, a non-profit organization launched an anti-whaling, pro-whale watching campaign, because the chairperson of the organization thought that whaling in Bequia was not aboriginal subsistence whaling. In this paper, I address issues that have resulted from the campaign, and explore the future of whaling in Bequia.

**Keywords:** aboriginal subsistence whaling, whale watching, anti-whaling campaign, Bequia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines

## Introduction

In February 2014, A, a whaler who had led a whaling team on the island of Bequia in St. Vincent and the Grenadines<sup>1</sup> since 1996, suddenly sold his whaling boat to a non-profit organization, known as the St. Vincent and the Grenadines National Trust<sup>2</sup> (hereafter, SVGNT), without forewarning his crew members. SVGNT had launched an anti-whaling campaign in 2012 with the ultimate goal of converting the practice of whaling into whale watching. Over the course of eighteen years, before selling his boat, A had harvested eleven humpback whales. This sudden decision by the most skillful harpooner on the island, therefore, caused a stir within the local community, which had a well-established whaling

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<sup>1</sup> Bequia, a small island in the Caribbean Sea, is situated at 13°00'N and 61°15'W. It has a total area of 18.1 square kilometers, had a population of 4,946 in 2012 (SVG Statistical Office 2014:53), and is part of the independent nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

<sup>2</sup> The St. Vincent and the Grenadines National Trust (SVGNT) was established under the provisions of *the Saint Vincent and the Grenadines National Trust Act* (hereafter, *the SVG National Trust Act*), which came into force on October 25, 1969. The mission of SVGNT is "to force a strong national appreciation for the preservation and understanding of cultural traditions and heritage" (SVGNT 2009:1).

tradition. Having previously gone whaling with A on several occasions<sup>3</sup>, I too was shocked by his unanticipated action. In this paper, I would like to inquire into the circumstances surrounding the retirement of this leading figure, and to explore the future of whaling in Bequia.

## The Road to Whale Watching in Bequia

The Bequians, having acquired whaling skills from American whalers, began whaling in 1875 or 1876, and mainly targeted humpback whales (Adams 1971:56, 60). The islanders ate whale meat and blubber and exported whale oil to the U.K. and the U.S. (Adams 1971:69). The harvesting of humpback whales in Bequia was approved as a form of “aboriginal subsistence whaling”<sup>4</sup> at the 39<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the IWC held in 1987, and a three-year catch quota of three humpback whales per year was agreed upon (IWC 1988:21, 31). The latest catch quota, approved at the 64<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the IWC held in 2012, was as follows: “For the seasons 2013–2018 the number of humpback whales to be taken by the Bequians of St. Vincent and the Grenadines shall not exceed 24” (IWC 2013:21, 152).

However, at the same meeting, the chairperson of SVGNT, on behalf of the Eastern Caribbean Coalition for Environmental Awareness (ECCEA), requested the withdrawal of the aboriginal subsistence whaling status granted to Bequia on the grounds that this tradition had been learned from American whalers and was carried out by persons of mixed European and African descent (IWC 2013:20-21)<sup>5</sup>. The chairperson, who was born in Bequia, is a lawyer and the daughter of the former prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. She has successfully used her connections and eloquence to attract public attention to her campaign.

In 1987, during the prime ministership of the chairperson’s father, the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines made an official request to the IWC to grant aboriginal subsistence whaling status to Bequia, which was accepted. The chairperson’s father is the great-great-grandson of the founder of Bequia’s whaling business (see Mitchell 2006: photos 2, 3, 6; Ward 1995: back cover). Therefore, the chairperson belongs to the fifth successive generation following that of the founder of Bequia’s whaling business.

According to the chairperson, during her childhood, the elementary school was temporarily closed whenever a humpback whale was harvested. She had a pleasant time when she visited the island of Petit Nevis, where a whaling station was located, to observe

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<sup>3</sup> I conducted twelve field research trips to the islands of Bequia and St. Vincent between 1991 and 2014, for an aggregate time of three and a half months.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I do not take up issues concerning the definition of “aboriginal subsistence whaling” for reasons of space. I have elsewhere discussed these issues at great length (see Hamaguchi 2013).

<sup>5</sup> The Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), a U.S. anti-whaling organization, published a report in June 2012, which opposed the aboriginal subsistence whaling status granted to Bequia (see AWI 2012). The presentation of the SVGNT chairperson was based on that report (“Whaling in Bequia: Not ‘Aboriginal’...Learned from Yankees.” <http://iwc blogger.wordpress.com/2012/07/04/whaling-in-bequia-not-aboriginal-learned-from-yankees>, accessed September 2, 2012).

the processing of a whale. At that time, whaling was constitutive of the island culture of Bequia. However, after the whaling station was relocated from Petit Nevis to Semple Cay in 2003<sup>6</sup>, it became difficult for many islanders to enjoy such excursions because of the narrowness of the cay where the new station was sited. Consequently, from the chairperson's viewpoint, whaling is no longer a representative culture of the island, but work for the concerned whalers. This is one of several reasons why the chairperson does not support whaling in Bequia.

SVGNT began to actively promote its campaign aimed at converting whaling into whale watching after the IWC's 64<sup>th</sup> annual meeting. In November 2012, the organization held a meeting to promote whale watching at a community center in P, one of Bequia's two communities with a whaling tradition<sup>7</sup>. According to the information that I obtained from community P, almost none of the participants at the meeting supported the ideas of SVGNT.

In March 2013, SVGNT sent a delegation composed of B, a former whaler and crew member of X's whaling team, three Bequia residents, and an official of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries<sup>8</sup> on an exposure trip to the Dominican Republic to introduce them to its whale watching activities. All travel expenses for this delegation were financed by SVGNT<sup>9</sup>. According to B, they took part in whale watching three times and spoke with persons involved in the whale watching business.

In May 2013, SVGNT arranged for A, B, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries official to participate in a "Whale Watch Operators Workshop," sponsored by the IWC and held in Brisbane, Australia. According to A and B, their travel costs were financed in full by the IWC and by the Australian or the U.S. government, respectively. The chairperson of SVGNT, however, told me that these expenses had been covered by the IWC. This discrepancy raises some questions about the financing of these two whalers' travel costs. The report of the Scientific Committee of the IWC describes, "A Whalewatch Operator's Workshop, funded by the governments of Australia and the USA, was held in Brisbane,

<sup>6</sup> Harvested whales were processed at the whaling station in Petit Nevis until 2002. The station and land were owned by Athneal Ollivierre and his brothers (and their heirs). However, Athneal's death caused many rifts among his heirs, and it consequently became impossible for whalers to use the station. Therefore, the whalers constructed a new whaling station at a small cay called "Semple Cay" in 2003 with financial aid from the Japanese government (Hamaguchi 2013:263-271).

<sup>7</sup> Whalers lived in neighboring communities, P and Q. P had a population of 1,529, while Q had 396 in 2012 (SVG Statistical Office 2014:53).

<sup>8</sup> The designated role of this official was to "head the special new unit set up in the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, [...] designed to promote the linkages between Agriculture, Fisheries and Tourism" ("Bequia delegation on whale watching mission to Dominican Republic." *Searchlight*, March 15, 2013. <http://searchlight.vc/Bequia-delegation-on-whale-watching-mission-to-dominican-republic-p43564-82.htm>, accessed April 19, 2013). Given this role, the official was considered to be in charge of whale watching activities within the government.

<sup>9</sup> A part of SVGNT's funding sources is described on its website as follows: "The National Trust has developed a project to promote the non lethal use of this marine resource [the North Atlantic humpback whale]. The project valued at approximately US\$28,500 is funded entirely by members and friends of the National Trust [emphasis added] and aims to work with the whaling community of Bequia to demonstrate that whale watching is an economically viable alternative" (<http://svgnationaltrust.moonfruit.com/#/humpback-whales/4568202208>, accessed November 13, 2013). Further research is needed to identify who the "friends of the National Trust" are.

Australia on 24–25 May 2013” (IWC 2014:54). This shows that B’s understanding of his travel costs was basically factual.

A told me that at the workshop he had introduced himself as both a fisherman and a carpenter rather than as a harpooner. It seemed that A had felt out of place at a workshop intended for those who did not pursue whales lethally. He also remarked that he had enjoyed spending his time shopping and sightseeing in Australia. This workshop was a good holiday for him. It is not certain whether or not the workshop influenced him, but he may have been somewhat inspired by the whale watching business discussed at the workshop. If this were true, it would be a tactical victory for the chairperson of SVGNT.

### **The Current Whaling Situation in Bequia and the Trajectory of the Most Skillful Whaler**

A built the whaling boat *Rescue* that he later sold to SVGNT with the help of his father in 1995. From 1996, he used this boat to participate in the whaling business. There were no catches between 1994 and 1997 in Bequia, and whaling in the region was endangered due to the lack of whale products during these four years. However, in 1998, A harvested two humpback whales. This success literally rescued Bequia’s declining whaling culture (Hamaguchi 1998). When I met A in August 2012, he criticized SVGNT’s anti-whaling campaign. This led me to wonder what he had experienced over the past year and a half.

When I visited Bequia in March 2014, I asked A why he had sold his whaling boat to SVGNT and retired from whaling. One of the reasons he gave for his retirement was the loss of unity among whalers. When A attempted to harvest a humpback whale on April 13, 2013, a trouble ensued. As A prepared to throw a harpoon at the humpback whale, X’s boat, on which Y was an alternate harpooner, approached A’s boat very closely. According to the whaling regulations of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, A’s boat had preference to strike the whale<sup>10</sup>. A was angered by Y’s disregard for the regulations. A man on shore happened to take pictures of this near miss<sup>11</sup>. A then strongly protested to X regarding Y’s negligence, showing these pictures as evidence. As a result of the incident, Y was compelled to operate independently from X’s whaling team during the following whaling season commencing in 2014.

During the 2013 whaling season, the whaling teams of A and X each harvested two humpback whales. However, Y, the alternate harpooner in X’s whaling team, killed two whales while the chief harpooner, X, was not on board. According to A, having two harpooners in X’s whaling team caused confusion among the crew members. It was unclear as to who the actual leader of X’s whaling team was. To understand the complicated

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<sup>10</sup> Article 7, paragraph (1) of the *Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Regulations, 2003* states: “If a whale is seen by two or more whaling teams, whether those teams are on shore or at sea and those teams commence a whale hunt, the first boat that gets nearest to the whale shall have the preference to strike the whale.”

<sup>11</sup> I obtained a photocopy of one of these pictures from A.

relationships that existed between these three harpooners **A**, **X**, and **Y**, we have to delve into the history of whaling in Bequia.

The late Mr. Athneal Ollivierre (1921–2000) led whaling activities in Bequia from the late 1950s until his death<sup>12</sup>. He taught the fundamentals of whaling to each of these three whalers — **A** (born in 1955), **X** (born in 1950), and **Y** (born in 1958). **A** went on board Athneal's whaling boat, the *Why Ask*, as a tub oarsman in 1991 and 1992, and as a bow oarsman in 1993<sup>13</sup>. He then achieved independence as a harpooner and became owner of his own whaling boat, the *Rescue*, in 1996. **X** went on board the *Why Ask* as captain in 1996 and 1997, and as a bow oarsman in 1998. He subsequently became an independent harpooner and owner of his own whaling boat, the *Perseverance*, in 2000. **Y**, on the other hand, went on board the *Rescue* as a bow oarsman in 1996 and 1997, and subsequently went on board the *Why Ask* as an alternate harpooner in 1998. In recent years, he was an alternate harpooner on the *Perseverance*. However, in 2014, he became an independent harpooner and owner of his own whaling boat, the *Persecution*. Thus, **A**, **X**, and **Y** followed different routes to acquire training as harpooners and develop their whaling techniques.

When Athneal was active in whaling, he was respected as a great harpooner, and regarded as a hero throughout Bequia. In those days, whalers were united as one body under the command of Athneal. The whaling teams of **A** and **X** ran a joint operation during the 2003–2010 whaling seasons. During these seasons, they divided whale products equally, regardless of which boat had harvested the whale. However, they began to diverge, running separate operations in the 2011 whaling season. As a result, their relationship changed from one of cooperation to one of competition.

Why then did **A** and **X** come to compete rather than cooperate over whales? **A** harvested a total of six humpback whales during the 2000–2010 whaling seasons, while **X** harvested seven whales during the same seasons (Table 1). Their skills and success were therefore similar. **A** resides in community **Q**, while **X** lives in community **P**. Accordingly, when **A** harvests a whale, he becomes a hero within community **Q**. Likewise, when **X** harvests a whale, he becomes a hero within community **P**. It is difficult for two heroes to coexist within neighboring communities because a great man cannot brook a rival.

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	total
<b>A</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	1	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	2	11
<b>X</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	1	-	-	1	1	1	-	1	-	1	-	8
<b>Y</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	2	4
Athneal Ollivierre	-	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Athneal's adopted son	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1

[source: the author]

Table 1: The Catch Statistics of Humpback Whales by the Harpooners: 1991-2013

<sup>12</sup> See Hamaguchi (2001) for a memorial article dedicated to the great harpooner, Athneal Ollivierre.

<sup>13</sup> Six crew members serve on board a whaling boat. Their positions from the bow to the stern are: (1) harpooner, (2) bow oarsman, (3) midshipman, (4) tub oarsman, (5) leading oarsman, and (6) captain. The harpooner has absolute authority over whaling decisions. The captain steers the boat from the stern and takes all responsibility for sailing the boat. The bow oarsman is equivalent to an apprentice harpooner and sits behind the harpooner, where he learns harpooning skills (Hamaguchi 2013:143).

During the 2013 whaling season, A's and X's whaling teams competed over a whale. Y's newly formed whaling team subsequently entered the scene at the beginning of the 2014 whaling season. It seemed that the competition over whales would become increasingly difficult. At a time when A grew weary of the competition, SVGNT offered to purchase his whaling boat for a considerable amount of money<sup>14</sup>. This proposal triggered his decision to retire from whaling.

### Conclusion: The Future of Whaling in Bequia

SVGNT's campaign to convert the practice of whaling into whale watching is presently making progress. SVGNT's purchase of A's whaling boat, the *Rescue*, was a great success. Its chairperson offered to contribute the whaling boat as a historic relic to the Bequia Boat Museum<sup>15</sup>, which was built in 2013. As a result, the whaling boat has disappeared from community Q, which, as previously mentioned, was one of the two communities on the island with a whaling tradition. Although two whaling boats still exist on the island of Bequia, whaling has now become restricted to community P.

Furthermore, the *Rescue* was the last whaling boat in Bequia that was modeled on the Nantucket-type whaling boat<sup>16</sup>. The two remaining operational whaling boats were refitted from wooden fishing boats. The *Perseverance* was refitted with fiberglass, and the *Persecution* was covered with waterproofing vinyl cloth. According to both X and Y, the durability of their whaling boats has increased through the use of modern materials. However, these minor adoptions using modern materials may provide anti-whaling organizations with some justification for criticizing whaling in Bequia, because they regard these modern materials as incompatible with the concept of aboriginal subsistence whaling<sup>17</sup>.

X's whaling team (*Perseverance*) harvested a total of twelve humpback whales during the 2000–2013 whaling seasons (Table 2). Of these twelve whales, X harpooned eight and Y

<sup>14</sup> I obtained A's confirmation that he had sold his whaling boat to SVGNT as well as confirmation from the SVGNT chairperson that the organization had purchased the boat from him. However, I was not able to acquire any information on its price at the time. When I am able to obtain SVGNT's accounts in the future, the price of the whaling boat may become clear. Article 11 of the *SVG National Trust Act* states: "It shall be the duty of the Board to keep full and proper accounts of all moneys received and expended on behalf of the trust and submit such accounts annually to the Director of Audit on such dates as he may direct."

<sup>15</sup> According to the chairperson of the Bequia Heritage Foundation (BHF), which owns and manages the Bequia Boat Museum, the chairperson of SVGNT called him suddenly and offered to contribute the whaling boat to the museum. Although she is a member of BHF's board of trustees, the board has never discussed SVGNT's contribution. Her offer, in all likelihood, will be accepted at the board meeting, because she has influence over the other board members, apart from the BHF chairperson. In addition, the SVGNT chairperson's mother is the BHF secretary.

<sup>16</sup> Nantucket is an island off the coast of the U.S. state of Massachusetts. The island was a center for American whaling vessels (Morita 1994:57). The Bequians, having learned whaling skills from the American whalers, began the practice of humpback whaling, using the Nantucket-type whaling boat as a prototype (Adams 1971:60, 63).

<sup>17</sup> For example, AWI criticized the use of the speedboat in Bequian whaling as being incompatible with the concept of aboriginal subsistence whaling (AWI 2012:6).

harpooned four (Table 1). However, in the past five years, while **Y** has harpooned four whales, **X** has harpooned only two whales (Table 1). This suggests that **Y**, who is eight years younger than **X**, will become the dominant whaler in Bequia. **Y** has recruited a man in his mid-thirties as a crew member and is trying to pass on his whaling skills to the next generation. On the other hand, **X** has found a successor to **Y** who was an alternate harpooner until the 2013 whaling season. As long as these two whaling teams exist in Bequia, whaling will continue for the time being.

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	total	
<i>Why Ask</i>	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	
<i>Rescue</i>	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	2	1	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	11	
<i>Perseverance</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	2	1	1	2	12

[source: the author]

Table 2: The Catch Statistics of Humpback Whales by the Whaling Boats: 1991-2013

These two whalers communicated their views on whale watching. **X** told me that he was not against whale watching in particular, but that humpback whales were migratory. He wondered if whale watching tourists would come to the areas where whales appeared irregularly. **Y** claimed that nobody except **B** supported whale watching in community **P**, and that it did not bring any money to local people. He pointed out that people not only could get whale meat, but that money circulated a little among the owners of the boat, taxi, and supermarket involved when a whale was harvested.

It seemed that these two whalers were confident that whaling would continue, even if whale watching were to be initiated in Bequia. By contrast, the SVGNT chairperson's view was that whaling would disappear in Bequia within ten to fifteen years. She believed that SVGNT's campaign would be successful. She also had her own opinion about the relationship between whaling and whale watching.

The chairperson told me that the catch quota of four whales a year was not a big problem to Bequia, but that it was harmful to tourism. She insisted that more whales would come near Bequia and more tourists would visit that island if whaling were stopped. She also remarked that whaling was compatible with whale watching, but that no whaling was better. From her viewpoint, it was clear that her strategy was to calmly induce people to embrace whale watching rather than aggressively insisting on an anti-whaling agenda.

Although the chairperson had not yet decided what to do, she devised two or three possible plans for introducing whale watching in Bequia. She told me that it was a realistic way for them to establish a partnership with the tour operators which had boats for sight-seeing, rather than constructing a new boat for whale watching, and that the former whalers, **A** and **B**, would become the best guides for whale watching. She also insisted that whale watching tourists would be satisfied even if they did not encounter a whale at sea if **A** or **B** talked about whales and whaling on board.

The chairperson was carefully considering starting a whale watching business without investing much money. She was also investigating coping measures for situations when whale watching tourists did not encounter whales at sea. It appeared, therefore, that she was an effective planner.

**B**, who had participated in an exposure tour to gain whale watching experience in the Dominican Republic, told me that whale watching was very popular in that country and that a new international airport had been constructed near the whale watching site, but that tourism development in Bequia had stagnated. He seemed to expect that whale watching would bring employment and money to Bequia.

As to the tourism development in the Dominican Republic, I asked **B** if the official language of the country was Spanish. He answered that people working in the tourism sector spoke English well, and that there were many whale watching tours operated by Americans. Although I thought of asking him if Americans took the money earned through whale watching back to the U.S., I withheld this pessimistic question. Even if whale watching starts in Bequia, it is necessary to develop bright ideas in order to prevent economic leakage outside the island.

**A** told me half-jokingly that if someone provided him a whale watching boat and asked him to be the captain, he might become both a captain and a guide. This indicated that he might have recognized the economic feasibility of initiating a whale watching business in Bequia.

While it may be difficult for me to observe the outcome of the SVGNT chairperson's prediction that whaling in Bequia will disappear within ten to fifteen years from present, I shall return to Bequia in a few years' time to see whether whale watching has commenced and, if so, whether **A** and **B** are participating in the whale watching business. I will then be able to contribute a follow-up to this paper.

### Acknowledgements

This study was supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (253709657) provided by the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Inter-congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), held at the Makuhari Messe, Chiba City, Japan on May 15–18, 2014. I would like to thank the participants of the congress who gave me useful comments.



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