In the News: Makah Tribe Marks Last Whale Hunt + Discussion

The article “Makah Tribe marked last whale hunt on Saturday,” written on May 18, 2014 for The Spokesman-Review, tells of the Makah Tribe’s organization of a feast and canoe ride to commemorate the 15-year anniversary...
Review, tells of the Makah Tribe’s organization of a feast and canoe ride to commemorate the 15-year anniversary of the tribe’s last legal whale hunt following a self-imposed decades long hiatus from the practice. The momentous event of 1999, where the Makah engaged in their first successful hunt since the 1920s when the gray whale became an endangered species, has since been the topic of countless books, scholarly articles, news stories, and animal rights campaigns and is even the event that inspired the undertaking of this blog!

Despite treaty rights to whaling established in the 1855 Treaty of Neah Bay, whaling being an important point of negotiation between Europeans and the Makah during the colonial era, legal and social roadblocks have provided challenges for the tribe’s whaling initiative. Lawsuits by animal welfare groups following on the heels of the 1999 hunt put legal breaks on the Makah whale hunt, and by 2004 the Marine Mammal Protection Act further hog-tied tribal officials as the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the Makah could not obtain a waiver to hunt whales for subsistence purposes until an environmental assessment, similar to an environmental impact statement in construction work, is conducted. An environmental review is currently underway as the tribe seeks authorization from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries agency to commence another whale hunt.

As we have already seen at the Ozette site, whaling is an ancient Makah tradition that has been practiced for over a millennium. It is a practice that has created a central cultural identity based on the whale’s entrance into the spiritual, political, and social realms of society. One of the most popular arguments against Makah whaling is that they may seek to turn a profit off the whales they catch, opening up a portal for other nations to revive their commercial whaling efforts. Another, being thrown around largely by people who know nothing about law, is that the tribe forfeited their treaty rights to whaling in its 80-odd year hiatus from whaling; why revive a tradition that hasn’t been practiced in decades? I think the choice to abstain from whaling was a difficult but natural one; commercial whaling had over-hunted the gray whale, the tribe’s species of choice, into endangerment. You can’t hunt whale if there are few left to hunt, and the choice to refrain from whaling was in the best interest of the recovery efforts of the gray whale population, whose numbers had revived to nearly 30,000 in 1994 when the removal of the gray whale from the endangered species list marked the Makah’s reentrance into the whaling culture. The prayers, rituals, and preparation practiced by Makah whalers today demonstrates cultural continuity with the past, calling into question claims of “inauthenticity.”

I hope to address some of these arguments further in subsequent posts.
Thus far I have talked about the importance of whaling mainly in terms of its being an incredibly large and irreplaceable form of food and raw material, evidenced through the sophisticated whaling operations of groups such as the ancient Makah of the Ozette site and possibly trickling down to a less intensive form of whale-use as far south as Par-Tee in Seaside, Oregon. However there is a whole other way in which to conceive of the whale as an important social and cultural actor and that is through the evaluation of the ways in which whale permeated the complex social, spiritual, and artistic realm of the many varied groups along the Northwest Coast, including the prehistoric Thule whaling communities of the Canadian arctic and the Nuu-Chah-Nulth of Vancouver Island.

The Social Hierarchy of Whaling

One of the most obvious ways in which the practice of whale hunting permeated the social boundaries of indigenous coastal groups such as the Makah and Nuu-Chah-Nulth is the construction of social hierarchies and ideas of prestige that encompassed the act of preparing for and hunting such a large and graceful creature. Many archaeological and ethnographic accounts describe the chief as being the most important actor in the whale hunt, and logically so for the hunt requires many qualities necessary of an all-around good leader (Cavanagh 1977: 107). Not only must the chief remain in good political standing with neighboring tribes and his fellow tribal members by providing and distributing food when village supplies begin to run low, but he must also exhibit important traits such as demonstrating his good standing with the supernatural spirits aiding him in the hunt, commanding the respect and cooperation of his whaling crew, and of course demonstrating his prowess as a whaler. The chief is the first harpooner to strike the whale, and once caught the chief also reaps the best spoils of the hunt including the prized whale saddle. Amongst the Thule whaling societies of the central Canadian Arctic this paradigm is slightly different, with the most prominent figure in the whaling crew being the captain, not named so for his status of chief but rather for his status as a high ranking and wealthy male in the community (Grier 1999).

Regarding other figures in the whale hunt, research is a little less solid on exactly which individuals were permitted to engage in the hunt. Ethnographic accounts do not entirely eliminate the possibility that people other than high-ranking tribal members may have partook in whale hunts, but the extensive ritual preparation necessary to hunt a whale suggests that the elite class, who likely had the best of not exclusive access to this broad wealth of ritual and cultural material.
ceremonial knowledge, were the dominant practitioners of the hunt (Cavanagh 1977: 106-107). Elsewhere in the Canadian arctic, statistical analysis of the presence of whale hunting tools in the house assemblages of seven prehistoric Thule sites help to support the hypothesis that a division of labor characterized whaling crews. The results reveal the patterned emergence of three hierarchical categories of households associated with their role in whaling, revealing the more wealthy households of whaling captains, of specialized crew members, and of more generalized crew members. This would suggest that while almost everyone in these villages partook in whale hunting, a hierarchy still existed whereby differential ability to contribute to the hunt made for a differential distribution of goods with whaling captains receiving the best and largest portions of the whale products after a successful hunt.

Whales in Indigenous Art and Symbolism

While ancient art in the Pacific Northwest can be hard to recover due to high soil acidity, the image of the whale can still be argued as having an ancient root in Native American culture in light of evidence coming from the well-preserved archaeological wet site of Ozette. Late period house deposits here include incised and painted wooden planks containing the artistic motif of the whale in conjunction with the Thunderbird, a supernatural hunter of whales (Monks et al. 2001: 76). A carved wooden whale saddle inlaid with otter teeth is also one of the most prized and talked about pieces from this assemblage, and was likely displayed at the whaler’s home as a symbol of prestige and wealth. At the village site of T’ukw’aa in British Columbia, archaeologists from the Toquaht Project unearthed a small stone image of a whale, further displaying the animal’s proliferation into the artistic realm.

Monks also mentions the Little Beach site in western Barkley Sound, where whales bones laid atop burial mounds serve to suggest that the whale had a symbolic importance that extended back as early as 3000 to 4000 years ago. Next we will look to the complex physical and spiritual preparation that coastal whaling tribes devised for the hunting and capturing of this great animal.

Ceremonial and Ritual Preparation

The importance of whaling over other forms of hunting can be evaluated in terms of the intensive spiritual and ceremonial trials one had to endure in preparation for the hunt. The killing of the first whale of the season might be marked by a ceremony comprising of the sacrifice of a slave in some places, as well as ritual bathing, fasting, and prayer (Monks et al. 2001). Various ethnohistorical accounts recall rituals such as bathing several times a day in the ocean for a week prior to the hunt, cleansing themselves with shells and bush branches while other accounts talk of ceremonies involving both the whaler and his wife, who holds onto a line attached to her husband while he “dived and spouted water in the imitation of a whale” (Cavanagh 1977: 108). These rituals and ceremonies suggest that whale hunting was no mere hunting activity, but involved participating in a complex preparation that required both physical and spiritual readiness.
hunting was a very serious business, taxing to both the body and the spirit and thus requiring rigorous preparation.

Contemporary whaling preparation, as described by Charlotte Cote (2010) in her book discussing the preparation for the Makah whale hunt of 1999, requires its whaling crew members to adhere to a very strict regiment to prepare the body and soul for the hunt by abstaining from alcohol, smoking, and drugs and undergoing months of spiritual cleansing through purification ceremonies, rituals, and prayer. All of it is in the name of being spiritually pure for the whale, a creature which is believed to willingly give itself up only to those strong and pure of heart to feed the Makah people. The Makah have been condemned as murderers of these majestic and peaceful beasts, and while I can understand their views as an animal lover, I also cannot overlook the fact that the very act of hunting a whale is a highly spiritual endeavor. The very rituals and ceremonies that accompany the whale hunt are to honor the spirit of the whale and prepare the whaling crew for being spiritually and emotionally worthy of hunting such an animal, an animal which will provide them with a surplus of food, oil, and raw material. In later posts, I will address more the social debate surrounding contemporary Native American whaling rights as opposed by animal rights activists and anti-commerical whaling organizations.

Works Cited


*Breaching humpback whale photo via John Hyde

*Orca petroglyph photo via Paul Gordon on Flickr

Archaeological Case Study: Par-Tee
The archaeological site of Par-Tee in Seaside, Oregon has, over the course of excavations here in the 1960s-70s, yielded certain key finds and pieces of evidence leading to an interesting debate surrounding potential whale hunting at this site, a site located well beyond the location of other archaeologically known areas for indigenous whaling. Systematic and intentional whale hunting has not been definitively documented outside of whaling areas around the Northern Peninsula of Washington State, Vancouver Island BC, and Alaska, yet the presence of whale remain embedded with a bone harpoon point raises some interesting questions about the territory of ancient Native American whalers. For this post I draw on the research of Robert J. Losey and Dongya Y. Yang, two of the few archaeologists to have published a detailed analysis of the whale remains at Par-Tee.

The occupation of Par-Tee radiocarbon dates to a period spanning about 2300 cal BP to 800 cal BP, with nearly 6,300 tools and at least 100,000 vertebrate remains recovered from the site, 16% of them identified as cetaceans which include minke whale, harbor porpoise, and various dolphin species (Losey et al. 2007). Over 350 modified whale bones are also present in the assemblage, predominantly in the construction of tools such as both barbed and un-barbed bone points, atlatls, ornaments, and a possible spindle whorl. Amongst the 324 complete and fragmented harpoon points present, made mostly of antler and terrestrial mammal bone with only two being made of whale bone, about 15 may be considered large enough to hunt whale with and while this doesn’t in and of itself confirm that the people of Par-Tee hunted whales it doesn’t eliminate the possibility either.

The most compelling piece of evidence from the site, dubbed “a smoking gun” by those enthusiastic about the idea that whaling was practiced in Oregon, is a humpback whale phalange deeply embedded with an elk bone point. Charcoal samples located in the same level as the phalange suggest that it was likely deposited between AD 650 and 950. Could this be proof that Native groups as far south as Oregon hunted whale, or is it a possible that the animal was struck by a harpoon further north and then swam or floated south where it made landfall on the Oregon coast? After DNA analysis of the bone point, researchers managed to exclude the Vancouver Island elk population as the source of the point but did not manage to rule out the Washington State elk population, a population whose territory may have legitimately spanned the coast from Washington to Oregon. Couple this with evidence reflecting that the elk bone embedded in the humpback whale shares identical genetic sequencing to other bone artifacts found at the site you have a very real possibility that the bone point may have indeed been locally produced.

What can we conclude from this data? Ethnographic accounts from tribes located south of Ozette reflect very little information on the active hunting of large whales, or at least much less information than is available to the north where whaling traditions have been firmly established and proven. This is consistent with the archaeological evidence showing that tools and paraphernalia consistent with a deep-rooted tradition of whale hunting are not present in significant number south of the Olympic Peninsula. Losey instead concludes from his research that the Par-Tee village site’s relationship with whales was likely one of convenience and opportunity, with the humpback whale phalange demonstrating occasional hunting. The fact that the whale was pierced through the phalange, rather than into the side under the flipper as whalers to the north do, suggests a level of inexperience in the hunting of whales and is consistent with the theory that the people of Par-Tee were not experienced and accomplished whale hunters.

There is, however, ongoing research at the University of Oregon being conducted that has caught my eye. Gabriel Sanchez, under the supervision of Jon Erlandson, an archaeology professor at UO and the executive director of the school’s Museum of Natural and Cultural History (MNCH), is looking to corroborate some of the stories and oral histories of tribes such as the Tillamook and Clatsop that pertain to whale hunting and he organization of hunting parties. The Par-Tee site is very intriguing and ambiguous, and I think the archaeological community will benefit from research projects like this one and would continue to benefit by having a greater amount of research done on this question of whale utilization in Oregon and other areas south of Neah Bay and Vancouver Island.
In August, Adam Wernick for Public Radio International (PRI) published on their website an article titled “A successful whale hunt in northern Canada revives an ancient Inuit tradition.” As the title of the article suggests, this summer hunters of the small Inuit town of Clyde River in the Nunavut territory of Northern Canada caught their first bowhead whale in over a century. Amidst the celebrations, Clyde river mayor Jerry Natanine remarks “Our ancestors were whalers, and its always something we’ve wanted to do — to bring back our culture...It’s a good food source and there are plenty of bowhead whales around this area.” This return to bowhead whale hunting comes on the back of a
are plenty of bowhead whales around this area.” This return to bowhead whale hunting comes on the back of a history of commercial whaling in Canada which by 1972 had nearly wiped out this important Inuit cultural symbol and means of sustenance and resulted in the Federal government’s outlawing of commercial whaling.

While initiating a cultural revival of sorts as this Inuit town reconnects with its whaling past and moves forward on a quest to relearn the skill of whale hunting, this had another surprising result according to another article for the National Post. The notorious anti-whaling organization Greenpeace has offered congratulations to the town of Clyde River on its successful whale hunt, declaring that it recognizes and respects the right of indigenous communities to sustainably hunt and fish as per tradition. But such a sudden change of heart will not be enough to win back indigenous communities, especially in Canada where many young Inuit men have committed suicide since the 1970s due to extreme poverty, hopelessness and an inability to feed their own families following the devastating anti-whaling and anti-seal hunting campaigns of organizations like Greenpeace.

In light of this more recent history of extreme poverty and malnutrition amongst Inuit communities due to the loss of both their primary means of subsistence and one of their only economic commodities in seals, this whale hunt in Northern Canada is all the more significant. It is an opportunity for the renewal of hope amongst a community which has been wracked by the loss of one of its sacred cultural rights and by the destruction of many of its families. “There’s a whole generation of young people today who grew up without fathers” reveals Rosemarie Kuptana, former president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council. The revival of whale hunting could be exactly what the Inuit community needs to get back on its feet and move towards a happier and healthier lifestyle.

*Photo by Niore Iqalukjuak

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**Archaeological Case Study: Ozette**

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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL CASE STUDIES**

**ARCHAEOLOGY, BONE TOOLS, NATIVE AMERICANS, NORTHWEST COAST, OZETTE, SUBSISTENCE, WASHINGTON, WHALING**

**4 COMMENTS**
The wet site of Ozette in Neah Bay, Washington emerged as an archaeological gem in 1970. Inundated by a mudslide and remarkably preserved in the anaerobic soil, over 50,000 artifacts have been recovered from this eroding coastal village with approximately 2% of them fashioned partially or completely from whale bone (Huelsbeck 1988). The discovery of this site was exciting for many reasons, but what's truly interesting to me about this find is the data collected from this site demonstrating both the socio-economic importance and antiquity of Makah whaling.

Examining the whale remains at the site identifiable by species, approximately 50% of the whale bones are identifiable as that of gray whale, with another 40% of the whale assemblage belonging to humpback whale and the remaining 10% miscellaneous whale species like orca, right, and minke whale species (Cavanagh 1983: 88). This data suggests that gray and humpback whale were the species of choice, likely for their common occurrence off of the Northwest Coast as well as their high yield of blubber for oil. That being said, Huelsbeck points out in his analysis of the whale bone assemblage at Ozette that as much as 70% of the collection could not be identified to species, meaning that such species ratios could in actuality be slightly different. Based on dendrochronological and radiocarbon dating methods of houses and other associated material remains in the site's Area B70 prehistoric layer, Huelsbeck also identifies over half of the site's identifiable whale bones (approximately 1,889 bones) to about 250-450 BP (over 2000 years old).

Despite the age of these whale bones, not all archaeologists are willing to accept this as evidence for the incredible age of indigenous whale hunting. Robert J. Losey, Director for the University of Alberta Field Research Office, and Dongya Y. Yang (2007) highlight two models of whale use on the Northwest Coast: opportunistic whale use and systematic whale hunting, and turn to an analysis of tools for hunting whales to define these different modes of whale use. They assert that all “probable whaling technology” at Ozette, including toggling harpoon valves large enough to have been conceivably used in whale hunts, date to within the last 1,200 years and suggest that whale remains found much earlier than this at the site could be the result of opportunistically consuming and utilizing beached whales. This argument extends to other sites such as Par-Tee, to be discussed in a later post, whose discovery of whale remains with an elk bone point embedded in one of the phalanges might be able to be explained as a case whereby the whale was injured in a whale hunt further north and swam or drifted south to the Oregon coast.

Despite certain dating discrepancies, the Makah people at Ozette developed a very sophisticated operation for hunting whales, and the assemblage of whaling paraphernalia is unmatched at any other site on the Northwest Coast (Losey et al. 2007: 662). Two large wooden carvings resembling the “saddle” of a whale (a portion of blubber between the head and the dorsal fin, prized by many Native whale hunters) uncovered at Ozette suggest that there was a high level of prestige and elitism associated with the whale hunt, and Cavanagh (1983) proposes that these wooden carving may have served as a more permanent reminder of the chief’s (a key actor in the whale hunt) leadership and prowess. In addition, Ozette contains an impressive number of whale bone tools including spindle whorls, bark shredders, mat creasers, wedges, straight adzes, and tool handles (Huelsbeck 1988: 7). This data upholds the assertion by Native American tribes that almost no part of the whale went to waste, and they were used for much more than just food.

Speaking of food, analyses of the frequency of different mammal remains at Ozette ultimately suggest that whales were probably the most important source of food for the village if the assemblage is representative (Huelsbeck 1988: 8-9). Whale bones at the site represented about 423.3 metric tons of edible food (about 78-88% of all the food available at the site via faunal remains). Compared to all other classes of faunal remains, whales far outnumbered other groups such as land mammals, fish, and other sea mammals in terms of kilograms of food represented. Considering that your average gray whale can also produce about 756 gallons of oil, this firmly establishes the whale as a tremendous source of edible food, natural resources, and economic currency. An animal of this size would more than likely produce more materials than the village needed at any one given time. Ozette provides a truly amazing case for whaling as a way of life for the Makah people of Neah Bay.

Works Cited

Coupland, G. (1998). Maritime adaptation and evolution of the developed Northwest Coast pattern on the central...
To be able to begin talking about archaeology on the Northwest Coast here, it is first a good idea to highlight where exactly the region is and what some of its characteristics are.
As pictured above, the Northwest Coast encompasses the coastline from Southern Alaska all the way down to Northern California (although I have heard some cases of archaeologists not considering California as part of the NW Coast at all). This region has played host to a wide variety of changes over the last 15,000+ years, shaping the coastal region via this dynamic interplay between land and sea as glaciers grew and retreated and sea levels rose and fell before finally stabilizing at around 5,700 cal BP (Ames & Maschner 1999). An ecological and cultural landscape as dynamic as the processes that shaped them thus arose on the coast (appreciably still exists to those of us who call it home).

Archaeologists have generally conceived of the pre-contact indigenous communities of this area as complex hunter-gatherers (although I like the hunter/fisher-gatherer paradigm laid out by Madonna Moss). They lived relatively sedentary lifestyles in large villages, and for years baffled anthropologists with the most sophisticated level of social stratification seen by a non-agrarian society (hence the coinage of the term “complex” hunter-gatherer). Tremendous basketry, masks, and other products of art and craftsmanship come out of this region in addition to a great number of native languages that make it the most linguistically diverse region second only to California. Archaeologically, the region is diverse as well as antiquated, with the first Americans inhabiting North America as early as 14,000 years ago as evidenced by the radiocarbon dating of human coprolites at Paisley Caves in Oregon. Research on this topic is ongoing, however, with a significant amount of evidence for human antiquity and the peopling of the Americas likely submerged under today’s highly elevated (and continually rising) sea level (Moss 2011).

Over these thousands of years, the inhabitants of this region developed a highly specialized maritime culture adapted to the environment that surrounded them. They learned to recognize and manage the variety of plants that populated the region as well as the many different game animals and sea creatures widely available in these ecological edge zones where the mainland forest environment meets the coast (Turner 2003). Being situated on the coast, the hunting of sea animals is a logical and necessary adaptation to a marine environment in addition to the tools required to effectively hunt such creatures. Sea taxa were and are the most important form of subsistence to these communities, actively hunting whales, seals, fish, and other porpoises (Coupland 1998). Whale products alone account for up to 75% of the animal meat and fat at some locations, and I think this helps to firmly establish the whale as, at the very least, a historically and culturally important source of food, oil, and raw material for tools (Huelsbeck 1988). It is because of this importance that I want to further explore the complex spiritual and utilitarian relationship between whales and the indigenous communities who hunt them.

Works Cited


*Map courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts
The Northwest Coast culture area stretches along the Pacific coast between the Cascade Mountains and the ocean. It extends north of California to Alaska. This is an area which is the home to many Indian nations who traditionally based their economy on the use of sea coast and river ecological resources. The Northwest Coast culture area stretches from the Tlingit homelands in Alaska to the Tolowa homelands in northern California. Northwest Coast art is the term commonly applied to a style of art created primarily by artists from Tlingit, Haida, Heiltsuk, Nuxalk, Tsimshian, Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth and other First Nations and Native American tribes of the Northwest Coast of North America, from pre-European-contact times up to the present. Two-dimensional Northwest Coast art is distinguished by the use of formlines, the use of characteristic shapes referred to as ovoids, U forms and S forms, before European contact, the