

# The Dolphin and Whale Magazine

Exploring and Celebrating our Connection with Dolphins and Whales  
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## “Room at the Table” by Eric M. Keen

### Lessons from Lamalera & Its Whales

#### What Aboriginal Whalers Have in Common with Whale Conservationists



*The study of cetaceans.  
To eat dolphin and  
whale.  
Pursuits ‘noble’ and  
‘savage’ -- which use  
does each entail?  
The former feeds the  
mind, perhaps the spirit  
too;  
the latter serves it all  
to a disappearing few.*

Perhaps the reason I enjoyed Lamalera so much, despite the film crew, is that I was surrounded by people who think about whales at least as much as I do. Maybe it is a pattern that the only people in the world who think about whales as much as cetologists are the cetophages. They are even interested in many of the same details: where the whales can be found, where they have been, where they might be going, the abundance and status of their populations, their varieties, their behavior, their group dynamics, etc. Despite their polarized intents, the same information is vital to both the study of and the hunt for whales.



In fact, the similarities do not end there. Both chase whales (one to observe, the other to impale); both have specific instruments by which they apply their trade (one seeks to take identification photographs or implant tracking devices, the other seeks to implant slate spearheads); and dwelling on the whale and its world satisfies a deep hunger in both parties, though the kind and location of that hunger may differ. For the scientists, it is an intellectual voracity. For the whale-eaters of the world, it is a more literal hunger, the gastric kind -- arguably more real, certainly more urgent. But both, if not satiated, soon experience a vacuous listlessness: the ardent cetologist suffering a drought of whale sightings can act just as low as a hunter returning to shore empty-handed, and each eventually must replace their query with a subpar substitute: the

Generally speaking, conservationists are moralists as much as they are scientists. Regardless of how fascinating the hunt is or how beautiful the services are, the fact remains that these Lamalerans are routinely killing some of the most charismatic, sensational, and inspiring animals on earth. Conservation's conventional solution to the 'human problem' has been to draw a line around a forest or a marine zone, distancing people from the lands and species that need to be saved; the result is "glass bowl" or "hands off" conservation, which in turn reinforces and further polarizes the realms of nature and culture. Rather than encouraging human



developments to be compatible with local ecosystems, the language of popular conservation merely delays said development from overtaking certain areas -- a noble mission, but by no means a solution. This type of conservation can never go beyond minimizing loss

to achieve the increasingly urgent role of making gains. The unsustainable and incompatible developments of civilization can be slowed in protected areas, but they will never be solved from within the boundaries of those parks. No, sustainable conservation can only be achieved by changing -- not merely confining -- human endeavors.



Many prominent scientists and writers have insisted precisely this fact, acknowledging that "the old conservationist philosophy of 'Don't Touch' must change "to one of knowing how to touch in the right way."

What is not clear is who has conceded this because they feel 'true' conservation has failed ('if we can't stop people from touching, we might as well mitigate how they do it'), or because they believe that people should touch, that a Conservation of Participation is how it always should have been.

So to have a lama fa and a conservation cetologist share a piece of sperm whale jerky would require more than shared reverence or an interest in whales. What a conservationist would have to realize before she could

grant-starved scientist might have to research some other subject, perhaps a pinniped, a quadruped, or something else easier to study and understand; a family of whale-eaters may have to get by only with manta ray, tuna, or even just plain white rice if the sea continues to deny them their catch. Both substitutes keep their respective parties going, for a while at least, but neither could ever compare to a life lived among whales.



Given all these commonalities, the only significant difference between the cetologist and the cetophage seems to be what they want with the whale. One wants a publication, it seems, and the other wants a meal. But spend time with either of them and you will soon learn that whales mean much more to them than what those motivations might imply. This is because these two pursuits – the study and the consumption of whales – require and engender a deep passion for their query. The whale is more than simple data, it is more than mere meat; it is unendingly legendary. It is

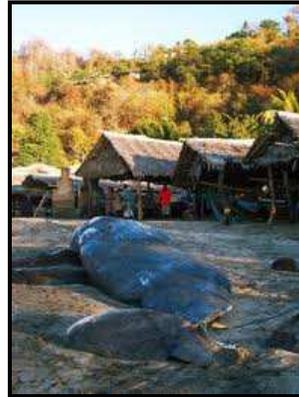
inconceivable. It is a force. It is a wise and sentient spirit, if you'll forgive the term. It is, perhaps above all else, a mystery. My point: what you will always find -- among both the students and the subsistence hunters of whales -- is reverence. That is the true substance of their common ground. Language barriers aside, a scientist and a whale hunter could wile away hours of dinner conversation sharing factual details and anecdotes about whales and their habits, but such common knowledge could not bring them to the same table again and again. Rather, what would do that is reverence -- an abiding awe that emerges from, but ultimately transcends, the cold utility of their respective intents. It is an immense regard for the whale that is impossible without but disproportionate to their use of it. This is the true axis of their fellowship.



Given the shared expertise of subsistence whalers and whale biologists, why do we not expect more collaboration between them? Why, instead of kinship, do we often find animosity? Personally, I would much rather sit down to dinner with a person who depended on whale meat for survival than with someone who did not care a thing about whales. I would rather deal with disagreement than with apathy.

But that said, though I consider myself a conservationist, my opinions on such matters are by no means conventional.

willingly bite into a chunk of whale meat is that, in the long run, perhaps preserving Lamalera's livelihood is more important for the world's biodiversity than saving a couple dozen whales each year. Global civilization is increasingly depauperate of good examples of how humans can use and relate to their land durably and with humility, not to mention how to regard what and how they eat as religiously tantamount.



Could it be that the controversy of aboriginal whaling is distracting us from the most valuable lessons Lamalera is offering to us? Perhaps what civilization needs now, more so than fifteen to twenty four more sperm whales each year, is evidence that humans can still relate to their food and to their basic needs and to their homeland in meaningful and enduring ways. Perhaps we need to have some societies out there that regard their natural resources as something ultimate and sacred, that integrate religion,

community, survival and local economy in a uniquely cohesive way. What we need to preserve now, while we still can, are examples of environmental hope for human communities.



*Yet apart from that hunt, or perhaps because of it, whales have a special place in the human imagination. To different peoples at different times they have represented the power of nature, the mystery of the unknown, a monstrous foe, a spiritual guardian, or a source of*

*wealth. For many of us today whales have come to symbolize our emerging understanding of our place in the natural world, how fragile the world really is, and how profound our impact upon it can be. Our hunt now is for knowledge, applying the lessons of the past to improve the future.*

New Bedford Whaling Museum "From Pursuit to Preservation"



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