

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #144

Whaling

26th Mar, 2021

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about Whaling, the hunting and killing of whales.

[00:00:30] It is one of the **bloodiest**¹ businesses in history, and an example of how **mankind**² almost **eradicated**³ an entire species from the face of the earth.

¹ extremely violent and involving a lot of blood

² the human race

³ destroyed completely

Whaling

[00:00:42] It's also a fascinating story, and in a strange way, it [enabled](#)⁴ a lot of the [conveniences](#)⁵ of modern society.

[00:00:51] So I hope you'll enjoy it.

[00:00:54] Before we get right into that though, let me just quickly remind you that you can listen along with the subtitles, an interactive transcript complete with key vocabulary, for this episode and all of our other 150 or so over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com

[00:01:13] The website is also home to our community, where members do meetups and conversation practice, as well as tonnes of guides on improving your English in a more interesting way.

[00:01:24] So, if you haven't checked that out, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:31] OK then, whaling.

[00:01:34] It has been called the greatest [wildlife](#)⁶ [exploitation](#)⁷ in human history, with an estimated 3 million whales killed in the twentieth century alone.

⁴ made possible

⁵ things that make life easier

⁶ animals and plants that live in the wild, in nature

⁷ the use of something for one's own advantage

Whaling

[00:01:46] Several whale species were hunted [to the brink of⁸ extinction⁹](#), they were nearly [wiped out¹⁰](#) completely, and almost no [stretch¹¹](#) of the ocean was [spared¹²](#) from the whale hunters' boats and their deadly [harpoons¹³](#).

[00:02:02] While whale hunting [peaked¹⁴](#) in relatively recent history, the hunting and killing of whales by humans is not new.

[00:02:13] Indeed, whaling goes back almost 5,000 years, and there is a long history of coastal communities all over the world, from Norway to Japan, Korea to the Native North Americans, hunting whales.

[00:02:29] This, of course, makes sense.

[00:02:32] Whales are pretty large animals, they are relatively easy to hunt, because they are quite friendly and you can get quite close to them in a boat and they have a very large surface area, and if you manage to kill one whale, well then that is lunch for quite a long time.

⁸ to the point of, when something is about to happen

⁹ a situation in which somethings stops to exist

¹⁰ destroyed completely

¹¹ continuous area

¹² left untouched

¹³ long, heavy spears used to kill whales

¹⁴ reached its highest point

Whaling

[00:02:52] Almost every part of the whale would be used.

[00:02:55] The fat, called '[blubber](#)¹⁵', the meat, the internal organs, it was all an excellent source of protein.

[00:03:04] The bones would often be used to make tools, and the [baleen](#)¹⁶, the sort of [nail-like](#)¹⁷ material in a whale's mouth, was often used for making [baskets](#)¹⁸ or even for making roofs for your house.

[00:03:21] So, killing whales made a huge amount of sense, especially for communities in places like the north east coast of America, near the Arctic Circle, where farming animals just wasn't [feasible](#)¹⁹, you couldn't easily do it.

[00:03:37] Different communities in different countries would hunt the whales in different ways. Sometimes the whales would be [chased](#)²⁰ onto the beaches by boats, the boats would form a line and drive the whales towards the land, onto the beach, where they would get stuck, and then be killed by the hunters.

¹⁵ the fat of sea mammals

¹⁶ the nail-like material in a whale's mouth

¹⁷ looking like a nail

¹⁸ a container, used to hold things

¹⁹ possible

²⁰ hunted, driven to

Whaling

[00:03:58] Another early way was by approaching a whale out at sea, sticking a [harpoon](#)²¹ into it, which is a sort of knife with a [hook](#)²² on.

[00:04:09] The whale would, understandably, swim away fast when it was attacked, but attached to the [harpoon](#) would be a long rope, and on the end of that rope, would be something that would [float](#)²³ and slow the whale down.

[00:04:26] Eventually the whale would [tire](#)²⁴, it would become exhausted, and the hunters would be able to kill it.

[00:04:33] Neither of these [outcomes](#)²⁵ were great if you were a whale, but the good news for the whale population overall was that these activities weren't done [en masse](#)²⁶, they were done by small coastal communities to provide food for themselves.

[00:04:51] But, that wasn't to continue forever.

[00:04:55] During the Middle Ages and Renaissance period in Europe, the demand for whale products started to increase.

²¹ long, heavy spears used to kill whales

²² a curved object for catching, pulling or holding

²³ stay on the surface

²⁴ feel the need to rest

²⁵ results of an action

²⁶ in group, all together

Whaling

[00:05:04] You could make oil from whale fat, which could be used for [candles](#)²⁷.

[00:05:10] As people needed to do more things that required light, such as reading, whales started to be hunted not just to support small communities by the sea, but also to be sold on for a profit.

[00:05:26] Then as Europeans sailed across The Atlantic to America, they took their love for whale products with them, and America soon became the world capital for whaling.

[00:05:41] The method for actually capturing the whales hadn't changed a huge amount though - it was still relatively basic.

[00:05:49] One of the main differences was that, instead of just setting off from the [shore](#)²⁸, there would be larger boats that would set off on [voyages](#)²⁹ for months or even years at a time.

[00:06:04] And it was from these larger boats that the smaller boats would be [launched](#)³⁰, off to search for their [prey](#)³¹.

²⁷ a stick that provides light as it slowly burns

²⁸ the land along the edge of the sea

²⁹ long journeys, especially by ship

³⁰ set in motion, pushed into the water

³¹ an animal that is hunted

Whaling

[00:06:13] There's an account from an early 19th century whale hunt that describes 21 men on one of these small boats, that was only 7.5 metres long.

[00:06:25] Now, I should warn you that this will be a little bit [graphic](#)³², a bit [bloody](#)³³, so [skip](#)³⁴ forward a couple of minutes if you don't want to listen to an [account](#)³⁵ of a whale hunt.

[00:06:38] The small boat would get as close as possible to the whale. When it was close enough, a hunter on the boat would throw a [harpoon](#) at the whale's body.

[00:06:50] But this time, instead of the [harpoon](#) being [attached](#)³⁶ to an object that it would drag after it, it was [attached](#) to the boat.

[00:07:00] When the whale was hit, it would swim away as fast as it could, [dragging](#)³⁷ the boat with it.

³² detailed

³³ violent and involving blood

³⁴ move quickly from this point to the next

³⁵ description of an event

³⁶ joined, connected

³⁷ pulling along with force

Whaling

[00:07:06] The boat would be pulled along at [breakneck](#)³⁸ speeds, often with men being thrown aboard into the ice-cold water as the boat bumped up and down over the waves.

[00:07:19] Eventually, the whale would [tire](#), the men would be able to approach it and they would cut open a main [artery](#)³⁹, and a huge [fountain](#)⁴⁰ of blood would [pour out](#)⁴¹, covering the men on the boat.

[00:07:35] They would then [tow](#)⁴² the dead whale back to the main boat, [drag](#)⁴³ it onboard, and proceed to cut it up into small pieces, and boil them in pots to create the [precious](#)⁴⁴ whale oil.

[00:07:51] After having repeated this 40 or 50 times, with 40 or 50 different whales, the ship would return to [shore](#), where they would sell the whale oil, and all the other remaining parts of the whale, for a large profit.

³⁸ fast and dangerous

³⁹ a tube of the body that carries blood from the heart to other parts

⁴⁰ water (usually) that is forced up into the air through a hole

⁴¹ cause a liquid to move out, to flow

⁴² pull (using ropes)

⁴³ pull (using ropes)

⁴⁴ very valuable

Whaling

[00:08:08] Although some of you might be hearing this and thinking “how [disgusting](#)⁴⁵ - I can’t believe people actually did this”, one can imagine how, to these men who spent their entire lives hunting, killing, and then cutting whales into small pieces, that whales weren’t [majestic](#)⁴⁶ creatures of the sea, they were considered just products to take from the ocean and [process](#)⁴⁷.

[00:08:35] Indeed, there is a report of a whale hunter describing a whale as “a [self-propelled](#)⁴⁸ [tub](#)⁴⁹ of high-income [lard](#)⁵⁰”, [lard](#) is a type of fat.

[00:08:48] So to these men, a whale was a big [lump](#)⁵¹ of swimming money, and it was their job to take it from the sea and turn it into products that could be sold.

[00:09:02] And whale hunting had become an incredibly [profitable](#)⁵², big business - indeed by the year 1850 it had become the fifth largest industry in the United States.

⁴⁵ extremely unpleasant, to the point of making you sick

⁴⁶ beautiful, powerful and impressive

⁴⁷ actions taken in order to achieve a result

⁴⁸ being able to move by itself

⁴⁹ a large, round container

⁵⁰ a white substance made from animals and used in cooking, a type of fat

⁵¹ a big piece with no particular shape

⁵² making a profit, money earning

Whaling

[00:09:17] The industrial revolution had meant that there was a huge increase in demand for lighting, and whale oil was one of the most effective products there was to produce light.

[00:09:30] It was also an excellent [lubricant](#)⁵³, and so was used for industrial [machinery](#)⁵⁴, as well as for explosives, and even soap.

[00:09:42] It wasn't just whale oil, though.

[00:09:45] Whale bones were used for [corsets](#)⁵⁵, the tightly fitting piece that women would wear under their clothes to [compress](#)⁵⁶ their body and make them look [thinner](#)⁵⁷.

[00:09:56] And whale bones were also used for umbrellas and to make pieces for board games.

[00:10:03] There's even a substance called Ambergris that comes from the [intestines](#)⁵⁸ of a type of whale called a sperm whale that is used to make perfume, and is incredibly expensive.

⁵³ a liquid that makes two parts of an engine move easily together

⁵⁴ a group of large machines

⁵⁵ a tight piece of underwear worn by women in the past

⁵⁶ press together, squeeze

⁵⁷ with less fat on body

⁵⁸ inner body parts below the stomach

Whaling

[00:10:17] This [heightened](#)⁵⁹ demand for whale products led to more and more men heading out to sea, and to the [untimely](#)⁶⁰ end of more and more whales.

[00:10:29] And although the sea might have looked [never-ending](#)⁶¹, the whale population wasn't [infinite](#)⁶².

[00:10:37] As more and more whales were killed, they became harder and harder to find, and the hunters had to go further and further [afield](#)⁶³.

[00:10:47] Whaling boats went all the way up to the Arctic Ocean, and all the way down to the Antarctic Ocean on the hunt for their [prey](#).

[00:10:58] At the same time, technological advances were making life even more [hazardous](#)⁶⁴ for the whales.

[00:11:05] The boats were faster, and the [harpoons](#) could now be fired from a gun, rather than just by hand.

⁵⁹ increased

⁶⁰ unexpectedly early, before its time

⁶¹ seeming to have no end

⁶² endless

⁶³ away from home

⁶⁴ dangerous

Whaling

[00:11:14] As you might imagine, this led to a huge increase in the number of whales killed.

[00:11:21] Scientists estimate that around 300,000 sperm whales were killed during the 200 years between 1700 and 1900.

[00:11:33] Then it took just another 60 years for whalers to kill the next 300,000.

[00:11:40] The thing that a lot of people don't realise is that, even though there were plenty of other whale-alternative products by the mid 1850s—so using [kerosene](#)⁶⁵ instead of whale oil for lighting, for example—these new technological advances had made whale hunting so much easier, and it continued well into the 20th century.

[00:12:08] The whale populations were reducing dramatically, so much so that in 1927 the League of Nations held a conference on whaling.

[00:12:20] Gradually [quotas](#)⁶⁶ were introduced, limits on how many whales could be killed commercially, and from the 1960s the number of whales killed every year has been decreasing.

⁶⁵ a liquid made from petroleum used as fuel

⁶⁶ a fixed, limited number of whales that is officially allowed to be killed

Whaling

[00:12:34] Still, whales are hunted by 9 different countries, [albeit](#)⁶⁷ now for ‘cultural’ or ‘scientific’ purposes, commercial whaling, the hunting of whales to sell for a profit, has been [banned](#)⁶⁸ since 1986.

[00:12:50] And while whales now might not have to be [fearful](#)⁶⁹ of large, commercial ships coming to [launch](#)⁷⁰ large [harpoons](#) into them and turn them into soap, life as a whale isn’t completely without its [threats](#)⁷¹.

[00:13:07] They are often caught in fishing nets, and it’s estimated that, over the course of a lifetime, 80% of whales in the North Atlantic Ocean are caught in a fishing net at least once.

[00:13:20] Loud noises, from the sounds of ship engines, to the sounds produced by underwater [drills](#)⁷² are very [disconcerting](#)⁷³ for whales, they confuse them, and they can [damage](#)⁷⁴ their hearing.

⁶⁷ although

⁶⁸ prohibited, made illegal

⁶⁹ afraid

⁷⁰ set in motion, shoot

⁷¹ dangers of something harmful happening

⁷² large machines that make holes

⁷³ troubling, worrying

⁷⁴ harm, cause problems to something

Whaling

[00:13:35] And whales are killed in large numbers every year just by being hit by ships.

[00:13:42] Indeed, the WWF, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature reports that, for a particular type of whale called the northern right whale, 90% of the ones that are killed by humans are killed after being hit by ships.

[00:14:00] It's not all bad news for whales though.

[00:14:04] Although it's hard to measure the population of different types of whales, scientists do believe that the numbers are increasing, with the populations of some types of whale almost [approaching](#)⁷⁵ the numbers pre-whaling.

[00:14:21] And when it comes to how we view whaling now, it is easy to look back at it with a combination of [amazement](#)⁷⁶ and [disgust](#)⁷⁷, wondering how we could be so cruel to a creature that is now almost [universally](#)⁷⁸ [admired](#)⁷⁹, and we know is actually pretty intelligent.

[00:14:42] But, as often seems to be a theme with this show, we can't evaluate the past with the same [criteria](#)⁸⁰ as we evaluate the present.

⁷⁵ coming near to

⁷⁶ a feeling of surprise and wonder

⁷⁷ a very unpleasant feeling, to the point of feeling sick

⁷⁸ by everyone

⁷⁹ looked at with respect and pleasure

⁸⁰ the standards that are used for judging something

Whaling

[00:14:52] We are also great [beneficiaries](#)⁸¹, [albeit indirectly](#)⁸², of the whaling industry.

[00:14:58] The reality is that whaling, and the products that came from the bodies of these millions of whales, powered much of life in Europe and the United States in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

[00:15:13] Without a cheap source of light, without a cheap way to power industrial machines, or a way to produce soap, how would the world we live in today be different?

[00:15:26] While that is an interesting question, perhaps an even more interesting question is, in 200 or 300 years, what will people consider to be today's [equivalent](#)⁸³ of the whale?

[00:15:39] What is something that we do now that is widely accepted, but might be considered cruel, [destructive](#)⁸⁴ and highly [unnecessary](#)⁸⁵ in 300 years time?

[00:15:51] And on that positive note, that is it for today's episode on Whaling.

⁸¹ people who benefit from something

⁸² in a way that is not obvious

⁸³ having the same effect as

⁸⁴ causing great damage

⁸⁵ not needed

Whaling

[00:15:57] I hope it's been an interesting one, that you've learned something new, and that you now know, if you didn't already, that we have quite a lot to be thankful to whales for.

[00:16:08] If you are looking for a more [upbeat⁸⁶](#), a more positive episode about whales, then I'd definitely recommend listening to episode number 88, which is all about the amazing life that whales [lead⁸⁷](#). And they certainly do [lead](#) an amazing life indeed.

[00:16:25] And as a final reminder, if you were looking to become a member of Leonardo English, and unlock the transcripts, the subtitles and key vocabulary, and come to our community live sessions, then you can do all of that over on the website, leonardoenglish.com.

[00:16:42] And if you've enjoyed this episode then send me an email and let me know what you thought of the show - you can email hi@leonardoenglish.com.

[00:16:51] I love hearing from each and every one of you, and I read and respond to every single message I receive.

[00:16:58] And if you are already a member of Leonardo English, congratulations, you are fantastic. I look forward to chatting to you about this episode in our members-only community, at community.leonardoenglish.com and to seeing you at our next live events.

⁸⁶ full of hope, very pleasant

⁸⁷ have or experience

Whaling

[00:17:14] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:17:19] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Bloodiest	extremely violent and involving a lot of blood
Mankind	the human race
Eradicated	destroyed completely
Enabled	made possible
Conveniences	things that make life easier
Wildlife	animals and plants that live in the wild, in nature
Exploitation	the use of something for one's own advantage
To the brink of	to the point of, when something is about to happen
Extinction	a situation in which somethings stops to exist
Wiped out	destroyed completely
Stretch	continuous area
Spared	left untouched
Harpoons	long, heavy spears used to kill whales

Whaling

Peaked	reached its highest point
Blubber	the fat of sea mammals
Baleen	the nail-like material in a whale's mouth
Nail-like	looking like a nail
Baskets	a container, used to hold things
Feasible	possible
Chased	hunted, driven to
Harpoon	long, heavy spears used to kill whales
Hook	a curved object for catching, pulling or holding
Float	stay on the surface
Tire	feel the need to rest
Outcomes	results of an action
En masse	in group, all together
Candles	a stick that provides light as it slowly burns
Shore	the land along the edge of the sea

Whaling

Voyages	long journeys, especially by ship
Launched	set in motion, pushed into the water
Prey	an animal that is hunted
Graphic	detailed
Bloody	violent and involving blood
Skip	move quickly from this point to the next
Account	description of an an event
Attached	joined, connected
Dragging	pulling along with force
Breakneck	fast and dangerous
Artery	a tube of the body that carries blood from the heart to other parts
Fountain	water (usually) that is forced up into the air through a hole
Pour out	cause a liquid to move out, to flow
Tow	pull (using ropes)
Drag	pull (using ropes)

Whaling

Precious	very valuable
Disgusting	extremely unpleasant, to the point of making you sick
Majestic	beautiful, powerful and impressive
Process	actions taken in order to achieve a result
Self-propelled	being able to move by itself
Tub	a large, round container
Lard	a white substance made from animals and used in cooking, a type of fat
Lump	a big piece with no particular shape
Profitable	making a profit, money earning
Lubricant	a liquid that makes two parts of an engine move easily together
Machinery	a group of large machines
Corsets	a tight piece of underwear worn by women in the past
Compress	press together, squeeze
Thinner	with less fat on body
Intestines	inner body parts below the stomach

Whaling

Heightened	increased
Untimely	unexpectedly early, before its time
Never-ending	seeming to have no end
Infinite	endless
Afield	away from home
Hazardous	dangerous
Kerosene	a liquid made from petroleum used as fuel
Quotas	a fixed, limited number of whales that is officially allowed to be killed
Albeit	although
Banned	prohibited, made illegal
Fearful	afraid
Launch	set in motion, shoot
Threats	dangers of something harmful happening
Drills	large machines that make holes
Disconcerting	troubling, worrying

Whaling

Damage	harm, cause problems to something
Approaching	coming near to
Amazement	a feeling of surprise and wonder
Disgust	a very unpleasant feeling, to the point of feeling sick
Universally	by everyone
Admired	looked at with respect and pleasure
Criteria	the standards that are used for judging something
Beneficiaries	people who benefit from something
Indirectly	in a way that is not obvious
Equivalent	having the same effect as
Destructive	causing great damage
Unnecessary	not needed
Upbeat	full of hope, very pleasant
Lead	have or experience

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