History of whaling in Trinidad and Tobago

RANDALL R. REEVES*, JALALUDIN A. KHAN†, RANDI R. OLSEN*, STEVEN L. SWARTZ* and TIM D. SMITH‡

Contact e-mail: rreaves@total.net

ABSTRACT

Shore whaling for humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) in Trinidad represents a largely overlooked aspect of North Atlantic whaling history. Literature and archival sources were searched for information on the chronology, nature and extent of this whaling. The first shore station began operations in about 1826 on one of the islands in the Dragon’s Mouth, the strait connecting the southern Caribbean Sea with the Gulf of Paria. At least four stations were active in this area at one time or another and the maximum documented one-year catch was about 35 humpbacks. Whaling effort had begun to decline by the 1850s and was largely ended by the 1880s. Oil for domestic consumption as well as export was the main product. Removals by the shore whalers were in addition to those by American pelagic whalers who occasionally called at Port-of-Spain and whaled in the vicinity of Trinidad and along the Spanish Main. No evidence was found of organised shore whaling in Tobago.

KEYWORDS: DIRECT CAPTURE; EFFORT; WHALING - HISTORICAL; ATLANTIC OCEAN; SOUTH AMERICA; BREEDING GROUNDS

INTRODUCTION

When Henry Nelson Coleridge (1826) entered the northern Gulf of Paria in 1825, he observed

‘enormous whales ever and anon lifting their monstrous bodies quite out of the water in strange gambols, and falling down created a tempest around them, and shot up columns of silver foam.’

These were without doubt humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) and their conspicuous presence in near-shore waters of northern Trinidad had already been noted both by Christopher Columbus in 1498 and by local entrepreneurs who were setting in motion plans to establish a commercial whale fishery in the Dragon’s Mouth, or ‘The Bocas’ as the straits area between Trinidad and Venezuela is called locally (Fig. 1).

Humpback whales were among the species hunted by American and European whalers throughout the North Atlantic Ocean during the 19th century (Mitchell and Reeves, 1983). Whaling vessels from New England began visiting the West Indies in the 1770s in pursuit of sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*), humpbacks and blackfish (short-finned pilot whales, *Globicephala macrorhynchus*). In the months of January to May, they often anchored or cruised in bays and close along island shores. In addition to the activities of pelagic whalers, a number of shore-based operations targeting humpbacks were initiated during the second half of the 19th century in Caribbean coastal waters. The best-known and longest lasting was the fishery at Bequia (Adams, 1970; 1971; 1975; 1994; Price, 1985; Ward, 1988).

Mitchell and Reeves (1983), in their extensive study of humpback whaling in the western North Atlantic, noted the existence of one or more 19th century shore stations in Trinidad, but presented few details about them. In fact, the history of shore whaling in the extreme southeastern corner of the Caribbean has been largely overlooked until recently. This paper represents a first attempt to identify the origins and describe the development of whaling in this region.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In addition to an extensive literature search, discussions were held with individuals in Trinidad and Tobago who had special knowledge of marine affairs and local history. Following their advice, effort was focussed on three 19th century printed sources of information: local contemporary newspapers, yearbooks (almanacs) and colonial trade records (Table 1). Newspapers were examined in both the Trinidad National Archives in Port-of-Spain and the Public Record Office (PRO) in Kew Gardens, London. These were sampled for the period 1825-55. The advertising sections were scanned for notices concerning whale oil and the sale of whaling equipment and attention was focussed on the ‘Shipping Intelligence’ sections for information on whale-product imports and exports. The Trinidad newspapers during the first half of the 19th century were generally published on a three-day cycle. Only a few yearbooks were found, all of them in either the National Archives or the National Heritage Library in Port-of-Spain. Few Trinidad Blue Books, the official annual summaries of colonial accounts, are available in Trinidad or Tobago. Therefore, our search of these documents took place primarily at the Public Record Office in London. Reeves checked a nearly complete series of the Trinidad Blue Books from 1824-73. In addition to their summary lists of imports and exports (quantities in barrels, gallons, etc. and monetary values in Pounds Sterling), the Blue Books have a section called ‘Returns of Manufactures, Mines, and Fisheries’, and that is where most of the information on whaling activities was found. It was assumed that gallons (gal) were imperial gallons. Barrels (bbl) apparently contained approximately 25 imperial gallons (see 1856 entry in Table 3).

* Okapi Wildlife Associates, 27 Chandler Lane, Hudson, Quebec J0P 1H0, Canada.
† Private Bag 357B GPO, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies.
‡ Southeast Fisheries Science Center, NOAA Fisheries, 75 Virginia Beach Drive, Miami, FL 33149, USA.
§ Northeast Fisheries Science Center, NOAA Fisheries, 166 Water St., Woods Hole, MA 02543, USA.
information is reported in this paper (also see Reeves Table 4). Some of these were examined and the relevant whaling voyages that included visits to Trinidad or Tobago Francis of Bermuda (1823). Whale oil was being imported in 1823, e.g. on the schooner Train oil (i.e. oil from marine mammals) was still being imported in large quantities through 1829 (11,003gal that year, from Great Britain and British colonies) but the quantity imported dropped sharply in 1830 (to only 270gal) and was thereafter nil until the 1860s according to the Blue Books. The arrival in November 1851 and October 1852 of ships from Baltimore with 10 and 50bbl of whale oil on board, respectively, may indicate that the domestic oil supply was by then insufficient to meet demand (advertisements in The Trinidadian, 7 and 12 November 1851; 9 and 16 October 1852). In 1826, local entrepreneurs were advertising oil, ‘fresh from the Trinidad Whale Fishery, of a better quality, and at a lower rate than it can possibly be imported’ (Port of Spain Gazette, 18 March 1826). The 1826

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of documents</th>
<th>Years published</th>
<th>Years available</th>
<th>Years searched</th>
<th>Collections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Guppy’s) Trinidad Commercial Register and Almanac</td>
<td>1866-1880s</td>
<td>1866-79</td>
<td>1866-79</td>
<td>National Heritage Library, Port-of-Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Collens’) Trinidad Commercial Register and Almanac</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1882, 1886</td>
<td>1882, 1886</td>
<td>National Archives, Port-of-Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad Blue Books</td>
<td>1821-1935</td>
<td>1876-77, 1880-81, 1901-02</td>
<td>1876-77, 1880-81, 1901-02</td>
<td>National Archives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port of Spain Gazette</td>
<td>1825-1936(?)</td>
<td>1826-79</td>
<td>1826-79</td>
<td>National Archives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad Standard and West Indian Journal</td>
<td>1838-1946(?)</td>
<td>1828-55 (incomplete)</td>
<td>1828-44, 1854-55</td>
<td>National Archives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad Gazette</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1837-42</td>
<td>1837-40</td>
<td>National Archives, Port-of-Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad Guardian</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1826-27-1830/31</td>
<td>1828-29</td>
<td>Public Record Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad Spectator and Port of Spain and San Fernando Advertiser</td>
<td>1845-48</td>
<td>1845-48</td>
<td>1845-48</td>
<td>Public Record Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trinidadian</td>
<td>1848-</td>
<td>1848-53</td>
<td>1848-53</td>
<td>Public Record Office</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Beginnings of shore whaling and development of a domestic whale oil market

Whale oil was being imported in 1823, e.g. on the schooner Francis of Bermuda (Trinidad Gazette, 8 November 1823). Train oil (i.e. oil from marine mammals) was still being imported in large quantities through 1829 (11,003gal that year, from Great Britain and British colonies) but the quantity imported dropped sharply in 1830 (to only 270gal) and was thereafter nil until the 1860s according to the Blue Books. The arrival in November 1851 and October 1852 of ships from Baltimore with 10 and 50bbl of whale oil on board, respectively, may indicate that the domestic oil supply was by then insufficient to meet demand (advertisements in The Trinidadian, 7 and 12 November 1851; 9 and 16 October 1852). In 1826, local entrepreneurs were advertising oil, ‘fresh from the Trinidad Whale Fishery, of a better quality, and at a lower rate than it can possibly be imported’ (Port of Spain Gazette, 18 March 1826). The 1826

Fig. 1. Map of Trinidad and Tobago showing the main locations mentioned in the text.

Table 1

Documents searched.
Trinidad Blue Book states that the whale fishery was established that year by C.A. White, employing a sloop and three whaleboats. The catch of five ‘cows’ and six ‘calves’ yielded only 6,000gal of oil: ‘From being the first essay much blubber was lost’.

In 1831, a local newspaper called attention to ‘the praiseworthy exertions of the proprietors of the Whale Establishment’ (Port of Spain Gazette, 19 January 1831). A large whale had been taken on 18 January and the editorialist saw fit to encourage local consumption of the oil:

‘To the planters particularly of this, as well as of the neighbouring colonies, we would recommend the use of the oil produced at the above establishment [at Gaspar Grande] - its quality, we have been assured by several persons who have used it, is equal to that of any imported, and the saving which may be effected by its very low price, we need scarcely add, presents an invitation most acceptable in these times, and, therefore, do we take it upon ourselves thus publicly to call the attention of the community to it. The fashionable will derive much sport from the operations of the Fishery, which are certainly worth witnessing.’

Both before and after that date, advertisements for locally produced whale oil appeared from time to time in Port-of-Spain newspapers (e.g., 25 January 1828 [‘lamp oil’]; 22 September 1830; 17 November 1830; 29 January 1831; 9 February 1831; 28 January 1832; 4 February 1832; 11 February 1832; 30 November 1832; 28 March 1834; 8 May 1835; 9 February 1838; 14 August 1838; 24 January 1839; 24 January 1840; 1 February 1844; 7 March 1849; 2 March 1850; 3 June 1854). One of these notices emphasises that whale oil, ‘after being refined by a particular process, is fit to be used in lieu of Coco Nut Oil’. It is said, in comparison to coconut oil, to have no smell and to give as good a light, last longer, and cost less (Port of Spain Gazette, 18 February 1832). A major challenge facing Trinidad’s first whalers, in addition to catching and processing the whales, was to make inroads on the market for coconut oil. Although most evidence points to burning in lamps as the chief use of whale oil (cf. Stackpole, 1972), DeVerteuil (1994) noted that in Trinidad it was also used (mixed with honey) as a flu remedy.

After the whaling season in 1828, Richard Joell announced his intention to fix the retail price of whale oil at seven shillings for the 1829 season, and he promised a ‘further reduction’ of the price if his enterprise were to prove successful (Trinidad Guardian, 20 June 1828). In 1830, Joell endeavoured to obtain pre-season orders for lamp oil from his whaling station, offering subscribers committed to receiving deliveries of 100gal or more a special price of five shillings/gal. In this way, he proposed to ensure that ‘a sufficient quantity of Oil may be retained in the Colony for its consumption’ (Port of Spain Gazette, 17 November 1830). The retail price of Trinidad whale oil in the early 1830s was generally six shillings/gal (Port of Spain Gazette, 22 September 1830, 29 January 1831, 9 February 1831, 4 February 1832).

In December 1833, Joell posted a notice that he wished to hire 10-15 ‘able Boatmen, for his Whale Fishery at Gasparil, to carry on the Whale Fishery’ (Port of Spain Gazette, 24 December 1833). In 1837, Trinidad Foundry advertised ‘a few superior Whale Harpoons’ for sale (Port of Spain Gazette, 9 May 1837) and another concern at King’s Wharf (Simon Agostini) reported earlier in the same year having received whaling harpoons in shipments on the Rosalind of London and Hardware of Liverpool (Port of Spain Gazette, 31 January 1837). By the early 1830s the Trinidad whaling industry was a well-established feature of the island economy.

Exports of whale oil and baleen
Some exportation of whale oil appears to have taken place from the beginning of the Trinidad fishery (Table 2) even though much, and probably most, of the oil was consumed within the colony. The Blue Books provide only limited, sometimes ambiguous, data on exports. One of the problems is that in many years, whale oil apparently was subsumed under the heading of ‘sundry’ or ‘other’ oils rather than being listed as a separate commodity. Blue Books rarely specify the importing colony, so most of what is known about the actual distribution of Trinidad whale oil comes from the newspaper information on departures from Port-of-Spain. Large shipments were made at least occasionally to London and Glasgow. Within the Caribbean region, oil was shipped to various British colonies between Jamaica in the north and Demerara (British Guiana) in the south (Table 2). It is emphasised that the data in Table 2 are biassed by the fact that our newspaper search centred on the 1830s and 1840s.

Starting in 1846, small amounts of baleen (whalebone or whale fins) were exported, primarily to Great Britain. Records in the Blue Books give no insight concerning the dates of export, but the whalebone shipments reported in newspapers were mainly in July. This might be interpreted to mean that the whalers set the baleen aside and waited until the whaling season was over before cleaning and packaging it for shipment. A small market existed for humpback baleen in the corset manufacturing industry (Mitchell and Reeves, 1983), but no direct information was found regarding the nature or size of the market for this baleen from Trinidad.

Target species
One non-scientific source (DeVerteuil, L.A.A., 1858) identified the species hunted at Trinidad as the ‘Rorqual (Balaenoptera Boops)’ (p.118) or ‘balaenoptera (razor-back)’ (p.279). Both of the Latin names used by DeVerteuil in describing the Trinidad whales - Balaenoptera and Boops - are in the 19th century synonymy of Megaptera novaeangliae (Hershkovitz, 1966), so it is not particularly surprising that he used them. However, the term ‘ razor back’ was historically applied to the fin whale (Balaenoptera physalus) and perhaps other balaenopterines but not to the humpback. Thus, his account causes genuine confusion. This confusion is compounded by DeVerteuil’s (1994) claim that Trinidad’s ‘ razor-back whales’ were up to 80ft long, ‘dark on top and pure white underneath’. Such a description more clearly fits the fin whale than the humpback. However, DeVerteuil’s (1858) account stands alone in suggesting that any species other than the humpback formed the basis of the early 19th century Trinidad whale fishery. All of the circumstantial evidence, e.g. the whales’ seasonal appearance in the region, the near-shore occurrence of mother-calf pairs, the ability of the whalers to capture them using oar-powered open boats and hand-thrown harpoons, the whales’ oil yield (see below) and the lack of references to whalebone as a valuable product, points to the humpback. Moreover, whaler logbooks (Reeves et al., 2001) and various contemporary accounts other than DeVerteuil’s (cf. Anon., 1869; Clark, 1887; and references in Mitchell and Reeves, 1983) make it clear that the humpback was the primary, if not sole, species hunted. The implication in Ottley et al. (1988) that pilot whales were the primary targets of early shore whaling is completely without foundation, although the possibility that they were taken occasionally by whalers in The Bocas when opportunity arose cannot be ruled out.
Table 2
Trinidad exports of whale oil (and other products, as noted). POS: Port-of-Spain; unspec. = unspecified; bbl = barrels; tpc = tiers; bdl = bundles; csk = casks; pun = puncheons; hhd = hogsheads. ‘Whale fins’ are baleen (as are whalebone and whale bones).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Destination (nominally given in newspaper record of POS departure)</th>
<th>Reference source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1826</td>
<td>24pun, 5tcs, 1bbl</td>
<td>Demerara</td>
<td>POS Gazette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>3pun, 3tcs</td>
<td>Barbados</td>
<td>POS Gazette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>4csk, 5csks</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>POS Gazette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1832</td>
<td>100csk, 25csks + 2 unspec. shipments</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>POS Gazette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>100bbl</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>POS Gazette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1835</td>
<td>100bbl</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>POS Gazette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1836</td>
<td>21bbl</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>POS Gazette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1838</td>
<td>9bbl</td>
<td>Bermuda</td>
<td>POS Gazette; Trinidad Standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td>100bbl</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>POS Gazette; Trinidad Standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>20bbl</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>POS Gazette; Trinidad Standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841</td>
<td>3 unspec. shipments</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Trinidad Standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1842</td>
<td>2 unspec. shipments</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Trinidad Standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843</td>
<td>7 unspec. shipments</td>
<td>Barbados</td>
<td>Trinidad Standard; POS Gazette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>2bbl</td>
<td>St Vincent</td>
<td>Trinidad Standard; POS Gazette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1846</td>
<td>5bbl</td>
<td>Barbados</td>
<td>Trinidad Standard; Trinidad Spectator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>865gal (73)</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>Trinidad Spectator; Trinidadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>480gal (f3 worth)</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Blue Book</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

cont...

REEVES et al.: HISTORY OF WHALING IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
Whaling sites

At least four and possibly five whaling stations existed at one time or another on three separate islands: Gaspar Grande (also known as Gasparee or Gasparil), Monos, and Chacachacare (also known as St Joseph’s), owned by the Tardieu’s (Carmichael, 1961; De Verteuil, A., 1994; A. De Verteuil, pers. comm., Sept. 2000). According to Brierly (1912), writing from the perspective of the early 20th century, the Tardieu’s had owned ‘several whale-fishing depots, and the tanks in which the whale oil was stored can still be seen on the western shore of Gasparee’.

Monos

The station at Copperhole (also known as Jenny Point or La Jeune Point[?]) was owned initially by the Gerold’s (De Verteuil, A., 1994) and later by Messrs Gerold and Urich (A. De Verteuil, pers. comm., Sept. 2000). In 1832, the ‘whale expert and harpooner’ at this station was named Hilsen (Urich, 1995).

The whaling station at La Jeune Point was sold in 1838 by Louis Charbonne, and the sale notice (Port of Spain Gazette, 22 June 1838) summarises the inventory of what may be considered a typical Trinidad whaling station:

‘... comprising Eleven Quarrées of Land, on lease from the Cabildo; a new Dwelling House, two Boat Houses, also new; the oil Manufactury, with Boilers, Cisterns, Store, Harpoons, Lances, Axes, Saws, Knives, etc. Four Fishing Shallops, two of which are Bermudian built, one American and the other constructed in the island; a large Store for Ropes and other fishing utensils, all in perfect order; a new Building for the boats’ crew, etc.’

A newspaper advertisement for oil from a Monos whaling station (The Trinidadian, 7 March 1849) demonstrates that it was active and had some success in 1849. An active station on Monos is also mentioned in the logbook of an American whale ship, the Solon, in 1853 (see later under ‘Relations with American pelagic whalers’). In 1859, Trollope (1859) observed the Monos whaling site and was impressed by its crudeness:

‘From the look of the place I should not say that the trade was flourishing. The whaling huts are very picturesque, but do not say much for the commercial enterprise of the proprietors.’

Chacachacare [Chicachicara]

One source (Hart, 1866) claims that there were 3-4 whaling establishments on this island, apparently during the 1860s. These were said, by Hart, to have been owned by Messrs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount1</th>
<th>Destination (nominally given in newspaper record of POS departure)</th>
<th>Reference source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1852</td>
<td>2 unspec. shipments 'whalebones' (f47 worth) Some oil (f84) Some oil (f3)</td>
<td>Grenada Great Britain British West Indies</td>
<td>Trinidadian Blue Book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>'whale fins' (f19 worth) Uns. spec. (f14 worth)</td>
<td>Great Britain British West Indies (of which at least 1 unspec. shipment Grenada; Trinidadian)</td>
<td>Blue Book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1854</td>
<td>'whale fins' (f2 worth) Uns. spec. (f40 worth)</td>
<td>Great Britain British West Indies (of which at least 1 unspec. shipment Grenada; POS Gazette)</td>
<td>Blue Book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>'whale fins' (f13 worth) Uns. spec. (f53 worth)</td>
<td>Great Britain (of which 9 bales to London on 18 July; POS Gazette) British West Indies (of which at least 5 unspec. shipments Grenada; POS Gazette)</td>
<td>Blue Book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>10bd 'whale fins' (f10) 5bd 'whale fins' (f4)</td>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>Blue Book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>43bd 'whale fins' (f25 worth) Apparenly some (f2 worth)</td>
<td>In British vessels Barbados</td>
<td>Blue Book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>10rc oil, 17 bales 'whale fins' (altogether worth f175)</td>
<td>Great Britain (however, unclear whether these quantities were trans-shipped or produced in Trinidad)</td>
<td>Blue Book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>'sundry packages' of 'whale fins' (f10,12s,6d)</td>
<td>In British vessels Questionable</td>
<td>Blue Book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>Same entry as 1860 5bd</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Blue Book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>Uns. spec. (worth f6,10s) Uns. spec. (worth f15,14s)</td>
<td>British West Indies</td>
<td>Blue Book</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Consignments showing the value of the various whitish by-products, under which category whale oil would be included.

---

Table 2 continued.
Gerold and Urich, Tardieu, and F. Urich and Son. However, we consider Hart’s statement to apply to The Bocas generally and not to Chacachacare alone. No evidence was found that there was more than a single whaling station on this island.

Henry Joell is believed to have established the whaling station on Chacachacare some time in the 1820s (A. De Verteuil, pers. comm., Sept. 2000). Upon his death in 1842, it was sold, including ‘all the Boats, Whaling Implements, and Apparatus thereto attached’ (Trinidad Standard, 6 October 1842).

Whaling in Tobago

The American whaling innovator Thomas Welcome Roys visited Tobago and took ‘several’ humpbacks there (Schmitt et al., 1980) during an experimental expedition on the brig *William F. Safford* of Sag Harbor. The whales apparently were taken in the last few days of December or first week of January (the vessel having arrived at Barbados on 10 January 1859; Schmitt et al., 1980). The literature reveals few other observations of humpbacks at Tobago in spite of Lindeman’s (1880; see True, 1904) reference to ‘fair results’ experienced there by American whalers. The brig *Annawan* of Rochester (Annawan, 1836-372) passed along the north shore of Tobago on 3 February 1837, but did not linger before heading to the Dragon’s Mouth and Gulf of Paria in search of humpbacks (see below).

In 1878, the *Rising Sun* sailed directly to Tobago from Provincetown and began daily cruises for humpbacks on 26 February (Rising Sun, 1875-83;2 see Reeves et al., 2001). Although humpbacks were sighted at Tobago on 1-4 March, the schooner headed northwards on 7 March to spend the next month humpbacking near St Vincent and the Grenadines. The brig *Falcon* of Salem was at Tobago on 20 February 1865 ‘clean’ (no oil since sailing on 11 January), then shipped home 105bbl of humpback oil and 470lb of baleen from Barbados on 3 May (Starbuck, 1878; Wood, n.d.). It is unclear, however, where or when (between the stated dates) the humpbacks were taken.

No written evidence of shore whaling in Tobago was found and it was therefore concluded that organised whaling did not take place there. However, some salvaging of stranded whales certainly occurred, with the blubber being tried out in iron kettles and distributed for local use (Winston Dillon, pers. comm.).

Whaling season and methods

Whaling activity in Trinidad was strictly confined to the boreal winter and spring, particularly the months of January to May. This is when North Atlantic humpbacks are in low latitudes at the breeding end of their annual migration. According to De Verteuil (1858), the whales began arriving in local waters in December but were ‘wild’ and thus difficult to hunt until later in the season. He also noted that they left the area by the end of May. His statement that the peak whaling season was February-May is consistent with the evidence found in our newspaper searches and with notes that appear occasionally in the Blue Books. Another source indicates that the season was January to March (Anon., 1869).

Catch levels

The Blue Books provide information on catches for some years (Table 3). The highest reported one-year catch was 34 whales (in 1838) or ‘about’ 35 (in 1848). Other evidence in newspapers confirms good catches in some years. For example, an advertisement in September 1830 indicates that one whaler (Richard Joell) had on hand ‘a good supply of Oil, manufactured at his Whaling Establishment at Gasparé Island’ (Port of Spain Gazette, 22 September 1830). Other advertisements for locally produced whale oil (see above) prove that catches were made in at least 1828, 1830-32, 1834-35, 1838-40, 1844, 1849-50 and 1854. For some of these years (1834, 1854), the Blue Books are silent concerning whaling but the newspaper evidence provides a basis for interpolation. On one occasion in February 1844, 50bbl was advertised, suggesting a recent catch of at least one or two humpbacks in January (Trinidad Standard, 1 February). Exportation of whale oil can also be interpreted as indicating a whale catch, and such evidence exists for at least 1826, 1830-33, 1835-44, 1846, 1848-58 and 1861 (Table 2). Again, this evidence helps to fill gaps in the Blue Book data (e.g. for 1836-37, 1843, 1853-54). Of particular importance are the years 1836-37, for which no Blue Books were available. In these years, more than 210 and 14bbl of oil, respectively, were exported (assuming at least 1bbl for each ‘unspecified’ shipment and that a cask is equivalent to a barrel). In 1853, a year when no catch is given in the Blue Book and only small amounts of oil and baleen were exported (Table 2), at least two whales were taken at Monos in February (see later under ‘Relations with American pelagic whalers’).

The Blue Book data on number of whales caught or amount of oil produced apparently are not always based on actual returns from the fishery. For example, the total Trinidad catch in 1840 is given as 29 whales, producing 28,545gal of oil worth £2,931 at 2s.1d./gal. The next year’s reported catch is 28 whales, producing 27,561gal valued at £2,872 (also see Anon., 1847). As the average yield is exactly the same (984gal/whale) both years, either the numbers of whales must have been derived from the oil production figures or vice-versa.

Writing in the 1850s, De Verteuil (1858) gave the annual secured catch in Trinidad as 25-30 whales, producing about 20,000gal of oil. It can be inferred, having checked the Blue Books for this period, that De Verteuil either consulted the same source as the Blue Book compiler or in fact used the Blue Books for his rough guess at ‘average’ annual catch (see Table 3). Using De Verteuil’s numbers, the per capita yield of oil can be estimated at about 660-800 imperial gal. Humpbacks taken at Bequia were said (Brown, 1945) to yield 400gal (small individuals), 800gal (medium) to 1,500gal (‘very large’), the average being slightly more than 1,000gal (Adams, 1971). It is unclear whether these authors were using imperial or standard gallons, but we suspect that they were using the former. Taking the Trinidad Blue Book data at face value, the one-year average yield ranged from 400-1,200gal/whale.

---


Inferred take levels based on oil production would be negatively biased because of the large amounts of blubber scavenged by sharks. Killed whales were towed to protected bays and fished in the water as near to shore as possible. Several descriptions of whaling in Trinidad emphasise that large numbers of sharks always gathered round the whale carcasses and usually succeeded in removing substantial quantities of blubber before flensing could be completed (Joseph, 1838; De Verteuil, L.A.A., 1858; Kingsley, 1871). According to De Verteuil (1858), ‘great waste’ attended the fishery.

It was standard practice among the Trinidad shore whalers to attack and wound humpback calves so that their mothers could be more easily secured (De Verteuil, L.A.A., 1858; Urich, 1995). This ensured high mortality of injured or orphaned calves.

**Hunting loss**

The loss of harpooned whales has been a feature of all whaling operations and Trinidad’s were no exception. There is no basis for quantifying the hunting loss in the Trinidad fishery but several sources refer to occasions when harpooned whales escaped or sank (e.g. Cothonay, 1893). One nineteenth-century source (De Gannes, 1872, quoted in De Verteuil, A., 2000) emphasises that, notwithstanding the romantic gloss imposed by literary accounts, Trinidad whalers experienced their share of gear damage and loss, as well as personal injury. His reference to the fact that documentation for these aspects could be found in the Gerold and Urich account books implies that such documents may still exist, perhaps in a company’s warehouse or a family’s attic. If they do, it would be beneficial to examine them for catch and other data.
In 1838, a civil suit was reported involving the capture of a whale in The Bocas (Port of Spain Gazette, 6 February 1838). The claim was for £1,500, ‘being the value of a Whale taken by the defendant [Joell] after being harpooned by the Whalers in the employ of the plaintiff [Charbonnê].’ It was noted that

‘there was much property in the Island [Trinidad] embarked in the Whale fisheries of the Gulf of Paria; and it was but right that a good understanding should become at, as to the right of property in Whales by those who first struck them, as otherwise much hostility would result not only from people of this Island who fished for Whales, but also Americans of the United States who were in the habit of carrying on Whaling here during the season.’

The chief justice noted that

‘if the Americans carried on their whaling out of this jurisdiction, it was useless to talk about it, but they certainly ought not to be allowed to fish for Whales off this Island to the detriment of the inhabitants who were employed in the Whale trade, as the inhabitants of Trinidad would certainly not be permitted to carry on this pursuit on the shores of the United States.’

Jean Louis Antoine, a whaleboat captain, was called as a witness. He stated that in the previous March (1837), ‘near the Bocas’, he saw a whale ‘and aimed a harpoon at it, which he drove into the Whale up to the hilt.’ The whale reportedly ‘dived as usual on such occasions, and took down 160 fathoms of line.’ At that point, with no more line to pay out, the boat was pulled 10 feet under water, forcing the crew to cut the line. As they scrambled onto the upturned boat, the whale surfaced ‘bleeding profusely’. It was ‘floundering about very sick (bien malade) as though it was dying.’

Antoine then called for assistance from two boats owned by Tardieu. Tardieu’s men ‘aided them to right the boat and then went, at the witness’s request, in pursuit of the Whale’. However, in the meantime, one of Joell’s crews, ‘who were a head of the Whale, intercepted it, struck, and killed it’. A Tardieu spokesman requested half the blubber as was thought to be customary, but Joell’s group refused to share the proceeds. They did, however, return the harpoon after recovering it from the carcass. The matter was referred to arbitration by the Port-of-Spain harbour master. A report on the outcome could not be found in subsequent issues of the newspaper.

**Relations with American pelagic whalers**

American whaling vessels visited Trinidad waters occasionally in pursuit of humpback whales (Mitchell and Reeves, 1983; Reeves et al., 2001). This visitation seems not to have begun until the 1830s and it continued into the late 1860s or early 1870s (Reeves et al., 2001; Table 4). Although no evidence was found of outright hostility between the shore and pelagic whalers, it is clear that the shore whalers viewed the Americans as interlopers. For example, when the schooner Harmony of Nantucket arrived at Port-of-Spain on 31 December 1833 and sought permission ‘to take Whales in the Gulf of Paria’, local whalers petitioned against it (Hill, 1834). Recognising that he had no legal grounds on which to exclude the Harmony from whaling in the Gulf, the governor simply refused to confer an explicit permit to whale. He also warned that the Harmony would not be allowed to use Trinidad’s shores or harbours for processing whales, and that if the vessel were to remain within three miles of the coast it would need to come into port. In the event, the Harmony ‘sailed ... for the Shores of the Spanish Main’ (Hill, 1834). According to Starbuck (1878), the Harmony obtained only sperm oil in cruises spanning the winters of 1834 and 1834-35 (although there is ambiguity in his tables - see e.g. his pp. 300-01, where a Harmony voyage is indicated to have started on 14 November 1833 and ended on 17 September 1833 [sic], with a combined catch of ‘15 whale’ [i.e. 15bbi of whale oil] for this voyage and an earlier one beginning 12 June 1833 [no end date given]). It is therefore uncertain whether the Harmony made any effort to catch humpbacks off Trinidad in the winter of 1833-34.

As the brig Amaranth of Rochester approached the Dragon’s Mouth on 3 February 1837, the master reported in his journal, ‘Saw a great number of humpbacks’. After a brief visit to Port-of-Spain, the vessel cruised westwards...
along the Spanish Main (apparently staying inside the Gulf of Paria on the coast of Venezuela) for about ten days. Humpbacks were encountered near shore and chased daily from 5-11 February, including a cow-calf pair on 6 February. At least two other vessels were humpbacking in the same area - an English bark and the bark Popmunnet of Falmouth (with 30bbl of humpback oil on board on 7 February). The Popmunnet apparently had preceded the Annawan, having called at Port-of-Spain on 30 January (Table 4). After several days of finding no whales, the Annawan left the Gulf on 17 February and headed rapidly northwards to Puerto Rico (Annawan, 1836-37). The Popmunnet seems to have been more successful than the Annawan, returning in September 1837 from a nine-month cruise with 300bbl of humpback oil on board (Wood, n.d.). Several seasons later (1843-45) the Popmunnet, then sailing out of Sippican, visited Trinidad on the outbound leg of a cruise to the South Atlantic (February 1844). On 25 March 1845, upon leaving Bahia, Brazil, to head home, the bark was said to be ‘bound to Gulf Para for humpbacks’ (Wood, n.d.).

Judging by events recorded in the logbook of the bark Solon of Westport, Americans persisted in their attempts to whale within the Gulf of Paria (Solon, 1852-53; see Reeves et al., 2001). In late January 1853, the Solon sailed directly from Barbados to the north coast of Trinidad. While steering between Monos and Isla Soldado (work back and forth across the Gulf of Paria Boca (one was struck but lost). For the rest of the month the humpbacks were reported to be plentiful just outside the Grande (in company with the bark Rock) and along the south side of the Paria Peninsula (blackfish whaling at Barrouallie, St Vincent, challenges struck. At least two were secured by the shore whalers at Land
certainly was a Bermuda connection of some sort. A sea Captain from Bermuda petitioned the Cabildo in 1827 to establish a whaling industry in Trinidad (De Verteuil, A., 1994). Indeed, the 1826 Blue Book refers to White as the proprietor in 1961). Another the large whaling station at Pointe Baleine (cf. Carmichael, 1961). Another ‘Bermudan whaler’ known as Old Abraham

lived at Monos and participated in the whaling there (De Verteuil, A., 2000). Finally, as indicated above, some of the whale boats used in Trinidad were built in Bermuda.

The end of shore whaling
At least one of the whaling stations was still operating in 1870 although ‘the whales had not yet come in’ by early January of that year, when Kingsley (1871) visited the site. The Blue Books make no mention of a whaling industry’s existence in Trinidad after 1865, suggesting that whaling activity was only sporadic and desultory after this time. Whaling had certainly ended as a regular enterprise in Trinidad by the 1880s. Collins (1888) noted that ‘several’ whaling stations still existed near The Bocas in his time and that whales were ‘still occasionally caught, though not often’. According to Russell (1922), ‘Whaling was till comparatively recent times a considerable industry in the Gulf of Paria.’ There is no reason to believe, however, that the Trinidad shore whaling industry lasted to the end of the 19th century.

CONCLUSIONS
Whaling in Trinidad seems to have developed as a result of local initiatives, supplemented by important involvement of experienced whalers from Bermuda and Germany (De Verteuil, A., 1994). No evidence was found suggesting that American (‘Yankee’) whalers played a direct or instigative role in the early years. They did, however, hunt whales in local waters from at least as early as the mid-1830s, and they certainly had some interaction with the shore whalers. It is curious that no reference to the local consumption of whale meat in Trinidad was found. This contrasts with the situations in Barbados (Archer, 1881; Sambon, 1923), Bermuda (Jones, 1884) and the Grenadines (Fenger, 1913; Adams, 1970; 1971) where whale meat was relished and thus provided a major incentive for the development and continuation of the whale fisheries. It appears that in Trinidad, oil, and for a time small amounts of baleen, were the sole products of the whale hunt.

It is unclear why shore whaling ended in Trinidad, but depletion of the local humpback population is one plausible hypothesis. The American hunt for humpbacks reached its peak of intensity during the 1860s-1870s and had become more or less desultory by the 1880s (Mitchell and Reeves, 1983). In addition, regional sources of whale oil were becoming increasingly available as the whale fisheries in Barbados and the Grenadines flourished during the 1870s. In fact, Archer (1881) reported that his own export market for Barbados whale oil in Trinidad became glutted, apparently sometime in the 1870s, by ‘the great influx of oil from Grenada, St. Vincent, etc.’ Perhaps in the face of declining numbers of humpbacks visiting The Bocas, together with increased availability of kerosene and the alternative of importing whale oil from other Caribbean islands, whaling was simply no longer sufficiently profitable in Trinidad to keep the industry alive. Recent surveys confirm that humpbacks still occur off the north and east coasts of the island but they appear not to have returned to The Bocas and the northern Gulf of Paria (Swartz et al., 2000).

It is worth emphasising that this study did not specifically attempt to reveal all aspects of Trinidad whaling that would be of interest to historians, e.g. economic structure, social dimensions and technology. Our principal concern centred on biological aspects of the fishery and on the magnitude of removals from the whale population. It is hoped that other
scholars will pursue those features of Trinidad (and Tobago?) whaling that were either overlooked or ignored in this paper.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Father Anthony de Verteuil generously shared his knowledge of Trinidad history and guided us to important references. Dr Stuart Miller of Port-of-Spain gave us free access to his valuable collection of old books. We appreciate the advice and support of Winston Dillon, Edward Hernández (Curator of the George Museum, Tobago), Prof. Keith Laurence (University of the West Indies, retired), Donna Spencer (Marine Research Institute, Port-of-Spain), and Hans E.A. Boos (Curator, Emperor Valley Zoo, Zoological Society of Trinidad and Tobago, retired). Stuart Frank, one of the reviewers, encouraged us to add more information on American whaling in the Gulf of Paria, and Frank, one of the reviewers, encouraged us to add this paper.

REFERENCES


Anon. 1847. Guide to the West Indies, Madeira, Mexico, New Orleans, Northern South-America etc., etc., compiled from documents specially furnished by the agents of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, the Board of Trade, and other authentic sources. 5th Edn. Simpkin and Marshall, London. xiii + 316pp.

Anon. 1869. Reminiscences of Trinidad - from a visit to Port Spain as it was. The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle for 1869 (London):362-72.


De Gannes, L. 1872. Journal secret. [Pamphlet]. [Not seen by the authors; cited from De Verteuil, 2000].


Hart, D. 1866. Trinidad and the other West India Islands and Colonies. The ‘Chronicle’ Publishing Office, Trinidad. 250pp.


Lindemann, M. 1880. Die Seefischereien, ihre gebiete, betrieb und erträge in den jahren 1869-1878. Petermann’s geographische mittheilungen, Gotha. Ergänzungssheft No. 60, pp. i-95, 3 maps. [In German]. [See True 1904, pp.61-62 for an English translation of relevant portions].


History of Trinidad and Tobago. Colonial period. When Christopher Columbus reached Trinidad in 1498 on his third voyage, the island was inhabited by Arawakan-speaking tribal groups originally from the Orinoco River delta region and a smaller number of Cariban speakers. In the 16th century many of these Trinidadian Indians were captured by Spanish slave traders and sent to work in other Spanish possessions, but there was no effective Spanish presence on the island until 1592. In that year Antonio de Berrio came in search of Eldorado (the mythical land of gold); he took official possession of the islands in 1592. Trinidad and Tobago are two islands joined as one nation with very different characters. Trinidad, near Venezuela, is the busier of the two and the southernmost of all the West Indian islands. In the bustling capital, Port of Spain, you will find some impressive examples of colonial and Renaissance-style architecture, as well as an eclectic cultural mix of Creoles, Africans, Amerindians, Europeans, and East Indians. Popular palm-fringed beaches are nearby, and three forest-cloaked mountain ranges dissect the island, creating some striking landscapes. Also on the grounds, The Tobago Museum adds context to the fort's history. It displays collections of antique maps, African Art, Amerindian artifacts, coins, and shells. Subscribe to our Newsletter. PDF | Shore whaling for humpback whales (Megaptera novaeangliae) in Trinidad represents a largely overlooked aspect of North Atlantic whaling history. | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. Whaling in Tobago. The American whaling innovator Thomas Welcome Roys visited Tobago and took several humpbacks there (Schmitt et al., 1980) during an experimental expedition on the brig. William F. Safford of Sag Harbor.