

Fielding, R. *The Wake of the Whale: Hunter Societies in the Caribbean and North Atlantic*. Harvard University Press. 2018. (pp. 342) Monograph (ISBN: 978-0-674-98637-4) \$27.95.

### ***The Wake of the Whale***

Whaling has long been fertile terrain for social science – indeed, humanity’s relationship with whales and nature as a whole are linked in many people’s eyes. With recent reports that Japan will resume commercial whaling, potentially changing a thirty-odd year stalemate in the International Whaling Commission, the hunting of whales is likely to remain a prominent environmental issue. In *The Wake of the Whale*, geographer Russell Fielding steers clear of the larger whaling countries, focusing upon two extant examples of subsistence whaling: the notorious *grindadráp* of the Faroe Islands in the North Atlantic and the small-scale operations of the village of Barrouallie in Saint Vincent in the Caribbean. Fielding artfully connects these two disparate practices: the first a spontaneous, community drive with ad hoc participation and killing by hand at the shoreline, the other involving small whaleboat crews actively hunting whales on the open ocean utilising locally constructed harpoon guns. The commonalities highlighted are: both hunt pilot whales; both are arguably sustainable hunting institutions (more below); and they are linked by a shared North Atlantic ecosystem. By comparing these two cases, Fielding sets himself several tasks: firstly, to explore why whaling has remained popular in these disparate places despite changing attitudes in other parts of the world. Secondly, to understand how Faroese and Vincentian whalers have ensured the sustainability of the practices and what their future prospects are. Finally, Fielding seeks to identify what broader lessons can be drawn from these cases for other, non-whaling societies.

*The Wake of the Whale*’s arguments are based primarily upon Fielding’s own very impressive research experiences over the past ten years. During this time he has had the chance to befriend many key informants, participate in *grindadráp* and, perhaps uniquely for a researcher, work as part of the three-person crew of a Vincentian whaling boat. The ethnography is supplemented by an array of documentary material, much of it painstakingly collected alongside other primary data – for example he has personally measured the depth gradations of different Faroese whaling beaches.

The book proceeds in a fairly linear fashion, discussing Faroese and Vincentian whaling side-by-side, from the process of catching whales (chapters 1–4) to their processing and the distribution of meat (Chapters 6–10) with an interlude to discuss the history of global whaling more generally (Chapter 5). The changing nature of whaling practice is discussed with description of the different social institutions of

the respective countries. This thus explains the peculiarity of the continuation of whaling on different sides of the Atlantic. Through this description, an argument is made that although there are considerable differences between the Faroe Islands and Saint Vincent, a point of commonality is that societal institutions in effect act as a brake on the overexploitation of cetacean populations. The narrative also examines on-going whaling conflicts (particularly with foreign environmentalists in the Faroe Islands) and other potential threats to the whaling (noting increasing levels of environmental toxins in cetacean meat and blubber rendering them inedible). The book then concludes with some reflections on the changing nature of whaling operations and consideration of the state of the world’s oceans. Fielding argues that the cultural embeddedness and *love* of whaling among certain members of Faroese and Vincentian societies actually aligns them with some of their heaviest critics in the environmental movement: both groups have a deep concern for the state of the oceans and a desire for cetacean populations to flourish. However, whalers’ interest in cetaceans should not be interpreted as purely instrumental, the book provides numerous examples of whalers appreciating the animals away from hunting them. Fielding thus argues that whalers need not choose between loving the animals they hunt as living creatures or as a resource. He ends on a broader critical note, pointing out that many of the problems cetaceans face are in no small part caused by the indifference of the majority of the world’s population. Whalers (and their most active opponents) cannot be accused of that. As such, maybe it’s time for people in different parts of the world to reflect on what a sustainable or ‘civilised’ approach to nature and the food that naturally must come from it is.

To this reader, there are two great strengths of *the Wake of the Whale* that go hand-in-hand. Firstly, the writing is excellent, resembling a good travel-book at times. This then plays to the second strength, which is the detailed quality of the ethnography. As such, some of the accounts are genuine page-turners – I found myself gripped by an account of Fielding’s rush to a *grindadráp*, capturing the excitement the spontaneous events elicit in local people and the ordered, bloody chaos that then ensues (29–33). Such strong writing also helps Fielding avoid a potential criticism of his book: that in labelling Faroese and Vincentian whalers as a type of natural conservationist he is depicting them as noble savages. Such stereotyping is avoided by being frank about the unpleasant aspects of whaling – whales die, sometimes painfully and this provokes criticism and soul-searching. I found myself particularly moved by Fielding’s description of

the sound a dying dolphin makes in chapter 7, and shared in his sadness that he could not end its misery since whales and dolphins delivered alive garner a higher price in Saint Vincent (176–177). He is thus also able to highlight the issues and ambivalences around whaling within and outside both societies and discusses the different criticisms that are raised as well as the problematic ethical nature of his own position, having become a whaler himself. Written description is supported by much vivid high- quality photography (some pictures are not for the squeamish) in both colour and monochrome that clearly illustrate the different whaling technologies, people and techniques.

Fielding is a thorough scholar, fairly exhaustive in his detail without letting it become overpowering. Indeed, the quality of his knowledge around *grindadráp* (which I am more familiar with) reassured me about his statements on Saint Vincent, which has been much less researched by others. There are perhaps periodic missteps – I didn't much understand the separation of historic whaling regions into northern 'drive' and southern 'harpoon' zones (particularly as Norway is usually credited as the place the explosive harpoon was invented). Likewise, I think local opposition to whaling in both the Faroe Islands and Saint Vincent could have been discussed a little more as it sometimes feels that whalers in Fielding's narrative only respond to outside criticism, something my Faroese friends might well dispute. As an ethnography, *The Wake of the Whale* with its painstaking collection of facts on all aspects of whaling, feels a bit old-fashioned. This is a book that aims to present all the information of two clearly demarcated research objects. I personally found this refreshing – it's largely jargon-free and clear what is being discussed. The flipside of this is that *The Wake of the Whale* does not seek to make a single clear theoretical contribution within social science. However, this is not to say theory is absent and much of what unfolds can be easily interpreted within e.g. political ecological frameworks amongst others. As such, scholars will find an abundance of material to incorporate in their own theoretical discussions but they will need to do some active work themselves to make the most of it.

While I found myself agreeing largely with Fielding's broader point about different societies' relationships to nature I had as ever a few quibbles. Firstly, Fielding's book argues both whaling practices are sustainable. This is not unexpected regarding Faroese whaling, numerous scholars (myself included) have argued that *grindadráp* represents a sustainable common-pool resource institution (e.g. Kerins 2010). However, I found I wasn't quite as convinced in his discussion of Vincentian whaling. Indeed, Fielding acknowledges the lack of accurate population estimates for Caribbean cetacean species makes evaluating sustainability tricky. He argues that constant total take of cetaceans matching consistent effort is probably a provisional indicator that the practice is sustainable. What

confused me however was that it appears that Vincentian whalers have switched target species through time with e.g. pilot whale takes dropping and being replaced by other animals. I would have appreciated clearer discussion of why switching species is evidence of a local sustainability-ensuring strategy rather than a sign of certain stocks becoming exhausted in turn (214). That is after all, the pattern that occurred in the bad old days of commercial whaling for oil.

In sum, this is an enjoyable read for those inside and outside of academia. It provides an abundance of raw material for a wide range of social scientists to draw upon. In terms of whaling studies, its main contribution is its full description of the much under-researched topic of Vincentian whaling (which also includes a few exciting tidbits on other, even less well-known Caribbean whaling operations). Fielding doesn't provide masses of new material on *grindadráp*, although it does describe a couple of recent changes such as the institution of a licensing system for those tasked with actually killing the whales. In this case the main advantage of *The Wake of the Whale* over other accounts is its sheer readability, making a complex practice more explicable to both laymen and academics. More broadly, *The Wake of the Whale* provokes numerous critical thoughts regarding the morality of different practices in post-domestic societies.

*Disclaimer: I have co-authored two articles with Russell Fielding on pilot whaling in the Faroe Islands, although we have not yet met face-to-face. At no point have I discussed the content of this review with him.*

## REFERENCE

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