

# Until the Whales Were Gone: An Environmental History of Whaling in Bermuda

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Bermuda was the first non-continental area of the Americas in which whaling was carried out by European residents. They initially concentrated on humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), but as this species became scarce they shifted to sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*). Interest of whales and whaling surged almost as soon as the islands were populated by the British in 1609 due to the discovery of a large piece of ambergris. Whaling in Bermuda was always a shore-based operation carried out by locals on a seasonal basis. Yet, Bermuda was also visited by a number of Yankee whalers in the nineteenth century. Several whaling stations were erected and the remains of a few are still in place. Initial whaling attempts were unsuccessful due to the lack of skills by British seamen. The first successful whaling season took place in 1663 and those operations intensified throughout the rest of the seventeenth century. By 1700 more than 200 humpbacks had been taken and additional landings in the eighteenth century resulted, by all accounts, on the depletion of the local population of humpbacks. Today sightings of humpbacks in Bermudian waters are rare and far from the most coastal areas they used to visit and where they were hunted. The figure of more than 200 animals killed in a relatively short period of time for a small area leading to the local extinction of this species, is consistent with those of Caribbean islands of similar size and similar exploitation patterns which lead to the same results from a populational viewpoint. Despite shifting to exploiting of sperm whales and the introduction of new tools such as harpoon guns, only few whales were taken in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whaling techniques were exported to Trinidad, W.I., and from there to the rest of the Caribbean.