

# Worrying about whales instead of managing fisheries: a personal account of a meeting in Senegal

by Daniel Pauly

On May 8 and 9, 2008, I had the opportunity to attend a workshop in Dakar, Senegal, organized by WWF and the Lenfest Ocean Program (LOP), which was devoted to the interaction between the great whale and fisheries of northwest Africa. The workshop was titled *Whales & Fish Interactions: Are Great Whale a Threat to Fisheries?* and was attended by officials from the fishery ministries of half a dozen countries in the region, from Mauritania to Guinea, WWF and LOP staff, a few scientists, and, most interestingly, by parliamentarians from the host country.

The great whales in that part of the world come to reproduce and there are no



*Two whales off Nosy Be island, Madagascar, July, 2007. Copyright: IRD, M.-N. Favier*

live observations or stomach content analyses indicating that they actively feed (even from several decades ago, when there was some occasional whaling off Northwest Africa). This is in line with what is known about great whales elsewhere in the tropics. Baleen whales, when they feed, rely mostly on krill and other small plankton organisms, and thus they would not, in any case, interact with the demersal and tuna

fisheries prevailing off northwest Africa. So why a workshop on this outlandish topic? Why not Fisheries vs the Martians?

The reason for the workshop was not only the fact that the countries in the

Northwest African region increasingly vote with Japan at meetings of the International Whaling Commission. Rather, it was the fact that their delegates justify such votes on the grounds that their fisheries are negatively impacted by baleen whales. Indeed, they argue that the whole ecosystem is "out of balance": a balance that can be re-established only by killing whales - which flies

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in the face of everything known about the fisheries of the region, whale biology and common sense. And it does get better when it is tailored for local consumption.

This was a very awkward situation for me to be in. I have worked for years on West African fisheries, with colleagues from the region, and have supported their countries' interest vis-à-vis people justifying the activity of EU-based or other distant-water fleets operating in West Africa on the basis of questionable 'agreements', which the coastal countries were blackmailed into signing, and through which their fisheries resources were made available at less than bargain prices (see Kaczynski and Fluharty 2001). These distant

water fleets, jointly with the local, totally unmanaged and overgrown 'small-scale' fisheries have reduced the fisheries resources off West Africa to shadows of their former selves, which makes management of these fisheries, and especially a reduction of their aggregate effort, a priority.

This, in fact, was the main result of the EU-funded international research project called 'Système d'Information et d'Analyse des Pêches de l'Afrique du Nord-Ouest' (SIAP). This project provided for West African scientists and others to collaborate on the analysis of over half a century's worth of catch time series and other data, with the results presented at an international conference held in Dakar in 2002 (see Chavance *et al.* 2004), amidst a flurry of articles in the local press.

This was not the first time, obviously, that such findings were reported. In fact, the SIAP project was largely based on gathering and analyzing the vast literature, spanning several decades, which tracked the declining trajectory of the fisheries off West Africa. This literature, and the syntheses which resulted from the SIAP project, are available to inform local policy-makers interested in reforming fisheries policies. The most crucial reform would be moving from a situation

where West African waters are seen as larder from which an endless supply of fish can be extracted to supply foreign markets (Alder and Sumaila 2004) to one where West African countries could build on export and processing of fish to strengthen their own economy, and benefit their own people.

The government positions that I heard at this meeting suggest, however, that such reforms are not being contemplated. Instead, the top fisheries officials of West African countries appear to have thrown in their lot with their Japanese advisors, and their whales-eat-our-fish mantra, for reasons that are either obscure, or too obvious to mention. The excellent scientific presentations at the workshop, by Drs Kristin Kaschner and Lyne Morissette, dealt with the identity of the great whales off West Africa, their behaviour, their incorporation in (Ecopath) trophic models, and the results of some preliminary simulations (with Ecosim), which suggested that killing all the whales off West Africa – even if it could be done - would have little effect on the fishery resources and catches.

At every step, their findings and assumptions were questioned by one or the other government officials, using concepts (such as 'ecosystem balance') and

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Our mailing address is: *Sea Around Us* project, Aquatic Ecosystems Research Laboratory, 2202 Main Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, V6T 1Z4. Our fax number is (604) 822-8934, and our email address is [SeaNotes@fisheries.ubc.ca](mailto:SeaNotes@fisheries.ubc.ca). All queries (including reprint requests), subscription requests, and address changes should be addressed to Robyn Forrest, *Sea Around Us* Newsletter Editor.

The *Sea Around Us* website may be found at [www.seaaroundus.org](http://www.seaaroundus.org) and contains up-to-date information on the project.



**T**he *Sea Around Us* project is a Fisheries Centre partnership with the Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia, USA. The Trusts support nonprofit activities in the areas of culture, education, the environment, health and human services, public policy and religion. Based in Philadelphia, the Trusts make strategic investments to help organisations and citizens develop practical solutions to difficult problems. In 2000, with approximately \$4.8 billion in assets, the Trusts committed over \$235 million to 302 nonprofit organisations.

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arguments ('you have not studied the stomachs of newborn calves off West Africa, so you don't really know that they don't eat our fish') originating in the Tokyo-based Cetacean Research Institute. The only evidence they presented was evidence of bad faith, the whole line of arguments being based on absent data. These purely negative arguments, indeed, are of the same kind as those that advocates of the so-called 'intelligent design' use to criticize evolution by natural selection, but who (for good reasons) never offer a positive argument for the case they attempt to make.

There was a ray of hope, though. The participating Senegalese parliamentarians, both from the Senate and the Lower House,

were united in their questioning of their government's position, and in mentioning their surprise at a government policy that has never been publicly debated and which is actually alien to the culture of their constituents. Indeed, this very point was emphasized by a parliamentarian and mayor of a fishing town, who mentioned that her constituents, far from considering whales to be their competitors, consider them their guardians and want to see them protected. This view was echoed by participants from other West African countries.

Still, I left Dakar with a heavy heart. To see that such a great country as Japan has twisted its entire development aid, and corrupted fisheries officials of an entire region for the sake of its tiny, heavily-subsidized whaling industry is sad. It will probably be

years before the countries targeted by these delusional policies will see through these manoeuvres, and free themselves from the officials who mislead them. Also, the real potential of whale eco-tourism is not being explored, although it has become a serious source of foreign currency in various other countries, e.g., in Argentina.

Foremost, however, the countries successfully targeted by the whales-eat-our fish delusion fail to concentrate on the real problem they have. This was brutally recalled by the senior parliamentarian at the workshop, who put the issue of the mismanagement of fisheries in the general context of food production in Senegal. He recalled that only a few years

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*Clockwise from top left:*

*1. Participants at the workshop Whales & Fish Interactions: Are Great Whale a Threat to Fisheries? in Dakar, Senegal. See [www.lenfestocean.org/Dakar\\_Participants\\_List\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.lenfestocean.org/Dakar_Participants_List_ENG.pdf) for a full list of participants.*

*2. His Excellency Mr Souleymane Ndéné Ndiaye, State Minister of Maritime Economy, Fisheries and Aquaculture of Senegal, gives a press conference after the first day of the workshop.*

*3. (L-R) Lyne Morissette (Arizona State University) with a local child; Margaret Bowman (Director, Lenfest Ocean Program); Rémi Parmentier (Workshop Joint Secretariat, Lenfest-WWF WAMER); and Mamadou Diallo (Program Manager, WWF-WAMER in Senegal) in front of the WWF office in Dakar.*

*Photos: Lyne Morissette*

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ago, his country allowed its own rice production to be destroyed by cheap imports from Taiwan, only to be hit a few years later with massive price increases, which have put the now-imported staple out of the reach of most of his compatriots. And he warned that the whales-eat-our-fish issue could have similar effect, by diverting attention from the task of putting Senegalese fisheries on a sustainable track.

... the whales-eat-our-fish issue could divert attention from the task of putting Senegalese fisheries on a sustainable track

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## Welcome

**T**his summer, the *Sea Around Us* project employed five new research assistants to work with Dirk Zeller on various catch reconstruction projects. Please join us in making them all feel very welcome.

Former student **Peter Rossing** has joined us to work on an exciting new project. The *Sea Around Us* project recently entered a partnership with the Baltic Sea 2020 Foundation to reconstruct fisheries catch time series from 1950 to the present for all the Baltic countries (see *Sea Around Us* Issues 28, 35, 39 and 45 for descriptions of similar projects for other regions). This work will help provide a better baseline for analyzing long-term trends in fishing and management by providing data that reflect a more accurate picture of historical catches in the Baltic Sea.

In addition to this work, Peter recently travelled to Japan to collect fifty years' worth of Japanese import and export trade statistics, generously provided by the Japanese Ministry of Finance. This was to assist Rashid Sumaila and Wilf Swartz, who are engaged in a project to evaluate economic impacts of the international fish trade globally. As Tokyo remains one of the few places in the world where communicating in English is virtually impossible, Peter would not have been able to complete this work without the help of his wife Miki, who acted as a translator. It was probably an unusual sight for the Japanese Ministry staff to see Peter and Miki travelling the Ministry's corridors with their two young children in tow!

**Kenneth Buck** has joined us as a summer research assistant, working with Shawn Booth and Dirk Zeller on catch reconstructions for the Pacific islands. He recently completed his BSc at the University of Calgary and plans to begin a computer science degree in the fall.

**Rhona Govender** is reconstructing Israeli fisheries catches for the Red Sea and Mediterranean and Jordanian catches from the Red Sea. She has just finished her undergraduate degree at UBC in Animal Biology, and will begin an MSc with Daniel Pauly in 2009.

**Lo Persson** is a student from Sweden and is working this summer with Peter Rossing on the Baltic Sea catch reconstruction project, with particular focus on Swedish fisheries. She will continue this work when she returns to Sweden in the fall and hopes to use the project as the basis of her Master's thesis.

**Liane Veitch** is working with Shawn Booth and Dirk Zeller on catch reconstructions for the Pacific islands and French territories (French Guiana, Guadelupe and Martinique). She hopes to begin an MSc in conservation science in the UK next fall.