

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left side of a dark blue header bar.

# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## Consider the Whale

*Reviewed by Edmund Searles*

*Contesting Leviathan: Activists, Hunters, and State Power in the Makah Whaling Conflict*

Les Beldo begins his ethnography by recounting a historic event that some recall with pride and joy and others with sadness and pain. On May 17, 1999, a dugout canoe full of men from the Makah Indian Nation paddled vigorously in the shallow ocean waters off of Cape Alva in Neah Bay for hours, attempting to harpoon a gray whale in a fashion similar to their ancestors. Long before this particular hunt began, the news of it had spread far and wide. The last Makah whaling hunt took place more than seven decades ago, and the media, circling above in helicopters, were eager to capture this momentous occasion on film. Circling around the canoe below were other boats loaded with onlookers, some hostile and others supportive. At least one of the boats belonged to the federal government, which authorized the hunt; observers on board were charged with ensuring that the hunt proceeded safely and legally. Other boats belonged to anti-whaling activist groups determined to disrupt the hunt at any cost; their priority was to save the whales. After two days of paddling around without success, the whalers finally killed a young female gray whale and hauled her body to shore, bringing to a climax the event, which had been in the planning stages for years.

The most important anthropological significance of this event, according to Beldo, is not related to the “clash of cultures” – Indigenous whalers and the federal government vs. animal rights activists. Rather, it is related to whales; in particular, humanity’s inability to consider whales as individual autonomous agents with values and desires of their own: “As an ethnographic theory and method,” writes Beldo “decentering the human is among the worthiest of anthropological aspirations. . . .” (7). In this context, decentering the human means exploring why that particular young female whale approached the hunters’ canoe when she did. Beldo admits that this is very difficult to do, considering that the other participants in this story already speak for whales if they consider the whale’s perspective at all. The federal government falls into this latter category, as its

agents regard the whale as a fish—a resource to be managed. The Makah, by contrast, believe that the whale wanted to be killed, underscoring a spiritual connection uniting predator and prey. The anti-whaling activists, for their part, claimed that this whale was deceived; she approached the hunters thinking they would pet her as other whale-watching tourists do.

To Beldo, these one-sentence descriptions of the whale's alleged motives are deceptively simple; they conceal a more complicated set of perspectives and opinions about animals, humanity, and the ways in which these two groups relate (and/or ideas about how they *should* relate) to each other. While renting a modest apartment on the Makah Reservation during his eight months of fieldwork, Beldo visited with many local families, including those who supported the revival of Makah whaling from the beginning and those who were more recent converts. He also conducted extensive interviews in the homes of anti-whaling activists living in neighboring towns, many of whom had supported the Makah on other environmental issues. In addition to participant-observation and interviews, Beldo's research also involved sifting through a significant amount of archival material – the texts of federal laws, trial proceedings, court rulings, newspaper clippings, press releases, minutes of public meetings, environmental management plans, and the marketing materials of the Makah Cultural and Research Center.

The book is organized into a series of eight skillfully-crafted chapters, four of which I consider in this review. Chapter One traces the history of whaling as practiced by the Makah Nation, including its recent emergence as a political act of affirming Indigenous sovereignty. Beldo notes that whaling only gained broad support among tribal members after anti-whaling activists announced their intention to oppose it. Chapter Two examines whale meat as a source of unity within the Makah Nation and moral difference outside of it. Although Beldo explains that not all Makah agree that whale meat is tasty, he writes: “The edibility of whales is one of the few points on which I am comfortable arguing that there is such a thing as a (mostly) unified and distinct Makah point of view” (63). Whereas individual Makah regularly refer to whale meat as “Yum!,” Beldo argues that this *yum* response is less about taste as it is about the “moral difference between whalers and anti-whaling activists” (63). What is “yummy” to Makah isn't supposed to be a source of food at all according to the activists.

In Chapter Three, Beldo engages with Makah spirituality, particularly as it “surrounds local conversations on Makah whaling” (86). Despite the fact that Makah and other community members emphasize the spirituality of whaling, Beldo is skeptical about the usefulness of this concept in understanding the relationship between Makah and whales. “Any discussion of the spiritual aspect of Makah whaling must acknowledge,” Beldo writes, “that some Makah whalers engage in no spiritual practices at all” (92).

Beldo problematizes how spirituality is portrayed in the rhetoric of tribal council documents, as a system that connects the Makah to each other, to animals, and to ancestors. Through stories and quotes from his research participants, Beldo demonstrates that spirituality is highly variable, personal, and idiosyncratic (88).

Chapter Four traces the partnership forged between the Makah and the federal government in laying the groundwork for the modern revitalization of gray whale hunting. After whales were removed from the endangered species list in 1994, the Makah began to partner with the federal government to prepare for the first hunt. This alliance is deeply problematic, Beldo argues, because it means the Makah have to comply with the federal government's definition of whales as "fish." But Beldo understands why the Makah are willing to accept the arrangement. He writes: "Despite some epistemological tensions and the fetters that federal co-management places on tribal sovereignty, the overlap between Makah ethics of human-animal interaction and the federal fisheries management model has allowed the tribe to pursue, with federal legitimacy and protection, the revival of a practice that runs counter to the stated moral beliefs of an overwhelming majority of Americans" (119).

Beldo is a bold polemicist and a gifted writer. He's also a perceptive ethnographer; readers learn a great deal about Makah whaling and its connection to other aspects of their lives. Personally, I found it a very useful text for the classroom. I recently taught it in an advanced undergraduate seminar for anthropology majors, and it generated enthusiastic discussions on a range of topics.

Despite Beldo's commitment to give voice to all sides of this multifaceted debate, subtle cues throughout the book reveal that his sympathies lie with the anti-whaling activists: that it is unethical to kill a whale for any reason. This moral position will pose a challenge to some anthropologists, especially those who have witnessed the social and economic devastation that animal rights organizations have inflicted on indigenous communities. Some readers might want to hear more, for example, about what Beldo's Makah interlocutors think about the fact that animal rights organizations have raised thousands, even millions, of dollars from images of Indigenous hunters killing seals, whales, and other animals.

At this point, I return to one of Beldo's overarching theoretical goals for the book: to decenter humans from the anthropological project. This decentering rests on ascertaining the whale's perspective. For Beldo, this means separating the world of humans from the world of whales, and this is done by not treating whales as prey, fish, or any means to a human end (e.g. cultural, economic, social, spiritual). Despite the ambitious project of decentering, however, the reader learns surprisingly little about whales. Beldo confesses that he only spotted one whale during the time he lived on the

reservation; the whale surfaced far off shore and then disappeared. In the end, it is Beldo's reluctance to consider whaling as a path toward understanding whales that prevents him from fully realizing his ethnographic project of decentering humans. Indigenous hunters who carefully study the behavior of whales, track them for days on end, butcher them with precision and skill, and obtain health benefits by consuming them, season after season, year after year, know far more about the whale's perspective than the anti-whaling activists who defend whales, the tourists who photograph them, and the anthropologists who write about them. Ironically, dedicating more time to accessing the insights and experiences of veteran Indigenous whale hunters might have brought Beldo closer to shifting the anthropological gaze away from humans and onto other species.

**Edmund (Ned)** Searles is Professor of Anthropology and Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Bucknell University. He has conducted long-term ethnographic research in the Canadian Arctic. His research specializations include environmental anthropology, ethnicity and identity, and local responses to food insecurity in Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut. He has published articles in *Anthropology and Humanism*, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, *Food and Foodways*, and *Hunter Gatherer Research*. At Bucknell he teaches courses on the anthropology of Native North America, human-environment relations, and the anthropology of place. He is currently writing a book on the sociocultural dimensions of place and identity among Nunavut Inuit.



© 2020 Edmund Searles