*A Whale Hunt: Two Years on the Olympic Peninsula with the Makah and their Canoe.*


Most Americans love whales for their strength and grace. Most Americans have favorable sentiments toward Native Americans and their cultures. When whales and Native Americans come into conflict, most of us have ambivalent feelings. A few of us will have such strong feelings one way or another that militant protests are the result. This is what happened when the Makah, an Indian tribe living at the northwest far corner of the state of Washington, received permission to hold a limited whale hunt using their old traditional canoes, weapons, and methods. Author Robert Sullivan chronicled the two-year struggle of the Makah to organize, hunt, and finally harpoon and kill a 3-year-old gray whale.

Sullivan writes from the perspective of a participant-observer rather than as an objective reporter. During his two-year stay with the Makah, he became close to the tribe and the members of the hunting crew; he was actually involved in the training for the hunt, and had access to tribal leaders. Despite his attempt to meet with and understand the protestors, he clearly identified with the Makah and especially the appointed leader of the hunt.

Sullivan gives good descriptions of the Pacific whales and their migration patterns, and documents their decimation by massive slaughters in the past. He also gives a good historic review of the Makah who are related to the Nootka Indians of Vancouver Island, an aggressive and brave people who used to enslave their neighbors and hunted whales in dugout canoes (a dangerous activity that stopped in the 1920s because of the scarcity of whales).

The Makah are known to me personally from the time I spent on their reservation. They are a gracious people, whose culture has been markedly changed by the impact of Middle America. They continue to struggle with unemployment, poverty, and a high rate of alcoholism. The main goal of their whale hunt was to restore a cultural tradition and to instill a sense of pride in a dispirited people. Actually, in the recent years, they have made good progress with archeological digs on their reservation and they have established a wonderful museum depicting the history of a formerly rich culture.

Obviously to hunt an animal just off the endangered species list meant that many national and international requirements had to be met. The preparations were also complicated by the tribal organization (or disorganization) and by apparently arbitrary changes in assigned roles and leadership. There were also problems in enforcing crew participation in the training exercises and rituals. Finally, there were mutual antagonisms and personality clashes among the members of the crew as well as tensions over issues of social status (e.g. whose ancestors had been chiefs and whose had been slaves). Hostilities based on tribal history and old arguments would arise periodically, and seemed unpredictable to outsiders.

When the members of the crew weren't quarreling with each other, they were confronted by protestors both on the land and in the water. The Coast Guard had to be called in to keep the groups apart. Many protesters lost public sympathy because of their aggressiveness, while the
Makah, for the most part, kept their cool.

Finally, on a day when protestors were not around, a gray whale was harpooned and shot. It was slowly towed back to Neah Bay (the Makah village), butchered, and divided for a feast. In the celebration that followed, many speeches were given, but the leader (who worked for over a year in planning and organizing) was not asked to speak. Such is the rather arbitrary protocol in Indians villages. Feelings are frequently hurt, and slights are sometimes not forgotten.

In this story of conflicting values (Save the Whales v. Resurrect a Tradition) empirical questions remain. Did the whale hunt restore pride, dignity, and especially mental health to a people who were in need? If so, was it worth the loss of a whale? It is an unresolved but important issue.