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Review: Scientific Uncertainty and the Politics of Whaling

By Michael Heazle

Reviewed by [Ryder W. Miller](#)
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Michael Heazle. *Scientific Uncertainty and the Politics of Whaling*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006. 240 pp. ISBN: 0-295-98605-0 (trade cloth) Acid free paper. US\$60.00.

Michael Heazle, a Research Fellow at the Griffith Asia Institute at Griffith University in Australia, chronicles the history of whaling in the Antarctic oceans. The concept of "scientific truth" is on trial in this detailed and intricate history with scientists of the past not being able to convince the whaling industry that they needed to curtail their hunting in order to maintain sustainability of the blue, fin and humpback whale stocks. Whales were once abundant in the Antarctic oceans, but extensive hunting led to a collapse of the whaling stocks and a "sea change" in the treatment of scientific advice. Before the collapse, the claim of a lack of "scientific certainty" benefited the whaling industry which did not heed the warning of the scientists who were not deemed to have convincing evidence that whale hunting would lead to the demise of the whaling stocks. After the collapse, the burden of proof fell on the whaling industry, which had to argue that hunting would not lead to further damage to the whale populations. Sustainability efforts were also bolstered by the "precautionary principle" which weighed on the side of protecting the whales.

Heazle, writing from the perspective of an observer, rather than an involved or idealistic scientist, asks: "To what ends do governments and non governmental organizations use empirical scientific methods and why?" (Page 32) He argues that "The actions of the IWC's [International Whaling Commission] members at the 1964 meeting in Sandefjord clearly illustrate what this study is attempting to demonstrate: that the treatment of scientific advice by policy makers in the IWC (and in other wildlife and environmental regimes) is determined almost entirely by how well it fits with individual priorities, rather than the extent (contrived, imagined, or otherwise) to which a piece of scientific research may or may not be said to accurately describe and explain reality." (Page 111) As the author presents them, the reasons for the ending of most whaling were the lessons learned from the Antarctic collapse, the political power of environmentalism, the lack of a need for whaling in the late 1900's, and the replacement of whaling oil with vegetable oil. There was no economic need to continue whaling, which became unpopular because of the environmental movement. . In fact, Heazle argues that in the case of Antarctic whaling, the scientific truth was

debatable and not the most important historical factor.

This examination also sheds light on at least two other environmental issues that have also undergone a "sea change" in recent times. One is the argument about the "sustainability only" eating of fish, and the other centers on the actions necessary to halt global warming. Scientific uncertainty as an excuse has been used to justify the status quo for those who do not want to make changes, but we are now seeing the damage that was caused by our lack of action. The evidence has piled up and we need to make drastic changes in which fish we eat, and how, or there will be extinction of certain ocean animals. The sustainability fish eating guides may have been too late. We are also now convinced that we will face the adverse effects of global warming. In recent times we have seen the machinations that will hopefully lead to the necessary changes, but have we been too late? The pattern is clear: societal change follows crisis. The thesis Heazle advances may help us with future difficult decisions of how we distinguish between various scientific findings and theories and whom we should listen to .

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Ryder W. Miller, Freelance environmental and science reporter who has been published in Sierra Magazine, California Coast & Ocean, California Wild, and Hydrosphere.