

Early descriptions of whales

Many of the early descriptions of whales and their behaviour and ecology, were published in languages other than English. These were often sections in books or articles that were more broad in scope, for example general works on zoology or geography. If translations into English exist at all, they are often not very precise with respect to the cetacean component. The Journal invites submissions of such descriptions. Submissions should include: full bibliographic information; a brief introduction to the author and the work in which the description is included; the full text in the original language; and a careful translation.

H. STRØM. 1762. PHYSICAL AND ECONOMIC DESCRIPTION OF THE DISTRICT OF SUNNMØRE IN THE DIOCESE OF BERGEN IN NORWAY, 1ST PART, SORØE. [PHYSISK OG OECONOMISK BESKRIVELSE OVER FOGDERIET SØNDMØR BELIGGENDE I BERGENS STIFT I NORGE, FØRSTE PART, SORØE] [UNIVERSITY PRESS].

Introduction

Hans Strøm was a Norwegian parson from the 18th century. Although the book is well known in Norway, few people have actually read it. The only edition available is the original from 1762. Following the publication of the book, Strøm was elected as a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Science on a proposal from Carl Linne. In the book, he *inter alia* gave the first detailed description of the Norwegian coastal cod fishery including all equipment used. He also gave a very precise description of some aspects of whale feeding behaviour as can be seen from the extracts from Chapter 5 below.

English translation

Chapter 5: On the fisheries in Sunnmøre

...Several kinds of whales occur here, including the humpback whale, which is of greater size than the other kinds and has a hump or large bulge on its head....

Rorqual whales are occasionally seen on their own, but also in company with the species mentioned above. It has an upright fin not far from the tail and is without doubt the "fin-fish" described in Mr. Egede's writings....

The herring whale is a small kind of whale that resembles the rorqual whale and has for many years driven the herring from the open sea towards our coasts every spring....

The killer whale is another small whale, which is easily recognized by the narrow, pointed fin about six feet high on its back. It is also called 'pole-whale' because of the tall, narrow dorsal fin, which resembles a post or an upright pole. And because it is a great hunter of common seals, it is also known as the 'seal-master', although it could equally well be called the 'porpoise-master', since it sometimes chases porpoises right up on to the shore.

Huge numbers of these kinds of whales, especially herring whales, appear every year just after Christmas and shortly before the arrival of the spring cod. They chase the spring herring through Bresund in indescribable numbers, and provide a fascinating spectacle as well as the opportunity for rich catches of herring. At one moment, they surface to breathe and expel jets of air through their blowholes, making an explosive sound; the next moment, they vanish down into the depths again, striking the water surface sharply with the tail as they do so, or diving head first with the tail pointing straight up into the air. Now they can be heard howling and bellowing across the water, now there are strange underwater

squeaks and whistles*. Sometimes two whales can be seen mating; sometimes they breach, leaping into the air so that the whole body is a fathom or more above the sea and then falling back into the water with a great splash. But the real tragicomedy is played out with the herring, which they chase almost constantly. Often, three or four whales help each other to herd the fish and surround them, so that they cannot escape, since the whales are so close that they touch each other and swim upright in the water with open mouths, so near the surface that you can easily see them swallowing the herring. In this way unbelievable numbers of herring are not only swallowed but also suffocated^o by the whales, which are sometimes so eager in the chase that they swim straight on to the shore. Usually they seem to manage to free themselves and swim off again. However, it happened a few years ago that one of the fin whales remained stranded until people were able to attach it with ropes and cables and thus capture it. In order to suffocate and kill the whale, they dropped a number of stones into its blowhole. It blew them high into the air with a loud blast, but finally had to give up the struggle.

Original text

Femte Kapitel: Om Søndmørs Fiske

Qval eller Hval forekommer her af adskillig Slags, saasom Tue-Qval, som er større end de andre hvale, og har en Tue eller stor Pukkel paa Hovedet....

Rør-Qval sees enten af og til for sig selv, eller og i Selskab med de forbemeldte Hvale. Den har en opstaende Finne hen ved Sporen og bliver uden Tvivl Hr. Egedes Finne-Fisk....

Sild-Qval er et Slags smaa Hvale, som meest ligner Rør-Hvalen og har nu i mange Aar drevet Vaar-Silden fra Havet ind til vore Kyster....

* This type of sound, which is locally known as fish-cries, is generally attributed to the whales, and is very unpleasant to listen to, especially for those who are unused to it or for the ignorant, who are often terrified by it.

^o A few years ago, for instance, whales killed such huge numbers of herring near the farm Alnæss in Borgund parish that after the dead fish had sunk to the bottom of the sea, a large amount of oil continued to rise from them for several months, creating a dead calm even in strong winds. Many fishermen sailing past, who knew nothing of the reason for this, were not only amazed but sometimes even in danger, because squalls from land could catch their sails before they were visible on the water.

Den saa kaldte Staur-Hynning er ligeledes et Slags smaa Hvale og kiendes let deraf, at den har en smal, spids og vel 3 Alne høi Finne paa Ryggen. Den kaldes Staur-Hynning af sin høie og smale Ryg-Finne, som lignes ved en Staur): en opreist Stage; men fordi den er Kobbens store Forfølgere, kalles den og af nogle Kobbe-Herre, skjønt den med samme Ret kunde bære Navn af Nise-Herre, da den undertiden jager Nisen op paa det tørre Land.

Af disse Hvale, fornemmelig af Sild-Qvalene, indfinder sig aarlig et utroligt Antal, strax efter Juul og nyelig før Vaar-Torskens Ankomst, da de jage Vaar-Silden herind igiennem Breesund i en ubeskrivelig Mængde, og give ei alene Anledning til en overflødig Silde-Fangst, men og til adskillige fornøielige Syner; thi snart sees de at stikke op af Søen for at faae Luft, og at puste Luften fra sig igiennem Luft-Hullene med en hæftig Lyd, snart at stikke ned i Dybet igjen og ved Nedfarten at Sporstøde (som det her kaldes) eller at støde ned med Hovedet og vende Sporen lige op i Veiret. Snart høres de at skraale og brøle over Vandet, snart at pibe og give en forunderlig Lyd fra sig under Vandet (*). Undertiden sees de at parre sig med sine Mager; undertiden løbe de Søløst, som man siger, det er, springe med sin hele Krop i Favn eller mere op over Søe-Brynen, og falde ned igjen med et hæftigt Knald. Men den rette Tragi-Comoedie spilles med den arme Sild, som næsten uophørlig forfølges, og det gemeenlig saaledes, at 3 eller 4 Hvale hielpe hinanden

* Dette Slags Lyd, som hos os egentlig kaldes Fiske-Liv, tilskrives i Almindelighed Hvalene og er meget fæl at anhøre, i sær for de uvante eller ukyndige, som derved ofte ere satte i Skræk.

i at giænne og indslutte den paa alle Sider, at den ei kan undløbe, da de støde til hinanden og med aabne Kæfte stikke alle paa een Gang lige op i Veiret, og det saa høit, at man tydelig nok kan see dem sluge Silden i sig. Paa saadan Maade bliver en utrolig Mængde Sild ei alene opsluget men og qvalt (°) af Hvalene, som i at forfølge den ere undertiden saa hidsige, at de løbe lige ind paa Land; og skjønt de vel som oftest komme løse igjen, saa hænde det sig dog for nogle Aar siden, at een af de saa kaldte Rør-Qvale blev staaende paa Grund, indtil man med Toug og Liner fik den fastgiort og fangen. For at faae den qvalt og dræbt, kastede man i dens Blæster eller Blæse-Huller en Deel Stene, hvilke den med et hæftigt Skraal pustede høit i Veiret, men maatte dog omsider opgive Aanden.

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° Saaledes blev for nogle Aar siden, ved den Gaard Alnæss i Borgunds Sogn, af Hvalene drebt saa stor en Mængde Sild, at, da samme sank ned paa Søe-Bunden, deraf i nogle Maaneder opsteeg en stærk Fedme, som dæmpede Bølgerne Kraft og foraarsagede et Havblik endog i stærk Blæst; saa at mange forbieseilende Fiskere, som ikke vedste Aarsagen dertil, bleve ei alene satte i Forundring, men og undertiden i Fare, saasom de fra Landet faldende Kaste-Vinde ofte laae i Seilet, førend de kunde mærkes paa Vandet.