

Short note | Nota breve

The last whale: rise and demise of shore-based whaling in the Cape Verde Islands

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For two centuries, the seas of the Cape Verde archipelago were a favorite whaling ground – known as the ‘San Antonio Ground’ among whalers – for an international fleet of whaling ships and especially for the ‘Yankee whalers’ from New England, USA. One of their main targets was the humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*, of which large numbers were caught (e.g. Clark 1887, Townsend 1935, Reeves *et al.* 2002, Smith & Reeves 2003, 2010).

Whaling in Cape Verde seas commenced during the mid 18th century, when American whalers began exploring these waters (Starbuck 1878). In 1732, the production of whale oil by foreign companies and its taxation was regulated by law for the islands of Boavista, São Nicolau and Santo Antão (Carreira 1983). Early 18th century documents already mention requests by English whalers for the right to anchor at the port of Tarrafal, São Nicolau. The Portuguese naturalist, João da Silva Feijó, who stayed in Cape Verde during the 1780s and 1790s, remarked on the abundance of whales and the large number of American, English and French whalers frequenting these waters, “who often visit our ports to prepare our, or rather their, whale oil” (J. da Silva Feijó *in* Carreira 1986: 33; translated from the Portuguese). From the late 18th century onwards, many male inhabitants of the islands, especially those from Brava, Fogo and São Nicolau, fled the droughts and epidemics that haunted their land and embarked on American whaling ships, over

the years becoming much sought after as expert harpooners, with some eventually becoming mates or captains (Warrin 2010). Many eventually moved to New England and settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island, places that still have considerable Capeverdean communities.

Despite these activities by foreign whalers, there was hardly any local attempt at catching whales and the Portuguese colonial power never built a whaling fleet, a fact ascribed to the lack of industries capable of profitably processing whale products in Portugal (Carreira 1983). Already in 1761, in a letter to the Portuguese crown, the *Ouvidor-Geral das ilhas de Cabo Verde*, Custódio José de Sousa e Matos, wrote that whales were numerous around the island of Santiago and that it was regrettable that their exploitation was left to foreigners, whereas the establishment of a local whaling industry could be achieved without great expenses (Carreira 1983). In his comprehensive work on the productions of the Portuguese colonies, Lima (1844) again emphasized the abundance of whales in Cape Verde and the continuous efforts by American and English whaling ships to catch as many of them as possible.

There are indications that at least some shore-based whaling took place on the islands of Sal and Boavista during the mid 19th century, but details are wanting and catches appear to have been limited (Smith & Reeves 2010). In 1874, an Azorean settled in Tarrafal, São Nicolau, with the purpose of dedicating

himself to whaling and to teach the natives whaling skills, thereby laying the foundation for the ensuing *Empresa da Pesca da Baleia do Carriçal e do Tarrafal* (Carreira 1983). The *Boletim Oficial de Cabo Verde* of the years 1874 to 1890 made regular mention of the presence of whalers at the ports of Carriçal, Garça and Tarrafal. In his *Roteiro*, which provided maritime information for all islands in the archipelago, Barcellos (1892: 54) wrote about São Nicolau that “many whales occur along this coast and many whalers therefore visit Carriçal” where “Sr. Arsenio Firmino owns a house where all the tools needed for these fisheries can be obtained” (translated from the Portuguese). This is the only mention of whaling in the *Roteiro*, underlining the importance of São Nicolau as a center of whaling activities in the archipelago during the last decades of the 19th century. It should be noted that what is usually referred to as the Carriçal station in fact consisted of two separate entities, i.e. one at Barreiras, to the east of Carriçal (Fig. 1), and the other at Garça, to the west of Carriçal. There were no whaling installations at the village of Carriçal itself.

In 1883, a similar but apparently less ambitious company was created on the island of Sal (Carreira 1983). All of this took place at a time when American and other foreign whalers began to abandon these waters due to the whales having become more and more scarce there, leaving what remained for the local shore-based industry. Friedlaender (1913), who stayed in the islands in 1912, mentioned the existence of a well-equipped whaling station on the island of Maio that was, however, no longer profitable at the time. In addition, Vasconcellos (1916) referred to a whaling station on the island of Brava. We do not have further details about the stations on Sal, Maio and Brava at present. Cardoso Junior (1896) described the techniques and practices employed by local whalers and a vivid account of a whale hunt off the island of São Vicente was given in an English weekly magazine (E.J.M. 1864).

It has proved difficult to obtain reliable figures on the production of most of the Cape Verde whaling stations. Statistical information on exports of small quantities of whale oil and blubber from the Cape Verde Islands is often



Fig. 1. Ruins of the whaling station at Barreiras, São Nicolau, 23 September 2006 (José J. Cabral).

difficult to interpret because much or most of the oil appears to have been imported (possibly from American whaling vessels working in the area) and then reexported (Smith & Reeves 2010). However, Lopes Filho (1996) gave data on the number of whales caught and the amount of whale oil produced on São Nicolau for the years 1874-1918 (see Appendix 1), while also indicating that three ‘small whales’ were taken in April 1810. From 1874 to 1918, the shore-based whaling industry on São Nicolau captured a minimum of 105 whales. Except for one whale caught in August and another in September, the hunting season extended from February to June.

In 1896, José Gaspar de Conceição was granted the right to store small boats and whaling equipment on the beach at Tarrafal (*Boletim Oficial* No. 48, 20 November 1896). From that year onwards, the whaling company on São Nicolau operated under the name of José Gaspar de Conceição, with ‘Herdeiras’ (Heirs) added after the first owner’s death. Between *ca.* 1912 and 1920, about 12 men were engaged (thus presumably two boat crews) at the Tarrafal whaling station (Smith & Reeves 2010). Friedlaender (1913) still saw large quantities of whale vertebra, ribs and mandibles on the beach at Tarrafal in 1912,

but remarked that whales had been all but extirpated in the area and the Tarrafal and Carrical stations would probably have to close down soon. After 1920, operations appear to have ceased and while the Tarrafal whaling company was still included in the *Anuário Estatístico, Colónia de Cabo Verde* (Statistical Yearbook of Cape Verde) during the 1930s, it was invariably stated that there had been no fishery or production in those years. From the 1940s onwards, no mention at all was made anymore of the company.

Whales caught at Tarrafal presumably mostly concerned humpbacks, not sperm whales *Physeter macrocephalus*, as it was said that the whales often entered the relatively shallow waters of Tarrafal Bay and were often accompanied by a calf (Joaquim Pinheiro pers. comm.). There was also a fishery for ‘black fish’, i.e. short-finned pilot whale *Globicephala macrorhynchus*.

Tarrafal’s present tuna factory was constructed at the site of the old whaling station, even partly using the same premises. Unfortunately, the archives pertaining to the former whaling station have been lost or destroyed (Joaquim Pinheiro pers. comm.). So, by the 1920s, some two centuries of whaling in Cape Verde seas had come to a conclusion. But had it?



Fig. 2. Humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*, Sinagoga inlet, near Tarrafal, São Nicolau, March-May 1977 (Pedro António dos Santos).

In the Spring of 1977, two years after the Republic of Cape Verde gained independence, a humpback cow and calf pair appeared in Tarrafal Bay, attracting much attention from local inhabitants and causing much excitement on their part. After ample discussions, it was decided to catch the whale and a whaler from the old days, Nhô António Bento, was brought to the scene to instruct the youngsters how to kill it. First, the calf was harpooned, as it was calculated that the mother would not abandon it, after which it was dragged to Sinagoga inlet, where the

adult whale was killed as well. The event was photographed by a Capeverdean emigrant (Fig. 2), one of the few persons in Tarrafal in the possession of a camera in those days. Although whales and other cetaceans were protected by law at the time, this did not bother the self-styled whalers and neither did the local authorities interfere. After the whale had been flensed and the stench of the remains became quite unbearable, the carcass was dragged to the open sea, where it was devoured by sharks. Thus ended whaling in Cape Verde.

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Appendix 1. Number of whales caught and quantities of whale oil produced on the island of São Nicolau, Cape Verde Islands, in the years 1810 and 1874-1918 (after Lopes Filho 1996).

Year	Month	Locality	Number of whales	Quantity of whale oil	Source	
					Boletim Oficial	Date
1810	April	Cariçal	3 (small)	1300 gallons	21	27.05.1810
1874	May	Cariçal	2 (large)	3000 gallons	18	02.05.1874
1874	June	Cariçal	1	ca. 1000 gallons	24	13.06.1874
1876	March	Ponta Leste	2	??	20	13-05-1876
1877	April	Coasts of island	2	400 gallons	17	28-04-1877
1878	Feb & March	Cariçal	1	1120 gallons	20	18-05-1878
1878	April & May	??	3	2700 gallons	28	13-07-1878
1879	April	Cariçal	2	1100 gallons	20	17-05-1879
1879	June	??	1	1000 gallons	29	19-07-1879
1880	March	Cariçal	2	1000 gallons	15	10-04-1880
1880	April	Cariçal	2	2300 gallons	20	25-05-1880
1881	April	Cariçal	1	1125 bottles	22	28-05-1881
1881	May	Santa Luzia	1	30 barrels ??	22	28-05-1881
1882	May	Cariçal	1	1400 gallons	27	08-07-1882
1883	May (03, 10, 14)	Cariçal	3 (large)	140 barrels	26	30-06-1883
1884	May	Cariçal	3	??	26	28-07-1884
1885	April	Cariçal	1	55 barrels ??	22	30-05-1885
1885	May (14, 29)	Cariçal	2	2000 gallons	31	01-08-1885
1886	May	Tarrafal & Cariçal	5	148 barrels ??	26	26-06-1886
1887	March	Cariçal	1 (small)	25 barrels (775) gallons	17	23-04-1887
1887	April (9, 22)	Cariçal	2	25 barrels ??	21	21-05-1887
1887	June (08)	??	1	20 barrels ??	30	23-07-1887
1887	June (11)	??	1	50 barrels ??	30	23-07-1887
1889	March	Cariçal	2	1020 gallons	18	04-05-1889
1889	April	??	4	2770 gallons	22	01-06-1889
1889	May	Cariçal	1	400 gallons	27	06-07-1889
1890	April	Cariçal	3	3000 gallons	21	24-05-1890
1890	May / June	Cariçal	3	3510 gallons	31	02-08-1890
1893	March	Cariçal	3	2510 gallons	16	22-04-1893
1893	May	Cariçal	2	2200 gallons	28	15-07-1893
1893	May	Garça	2	1980 gallons	28	15-07-1893
1896	March	??	??	??	17	25-04-1896
1896	April	??	??	??	21	22-05-1896
1897	April	??	??	??	21	23-05-1897
1898	April	??	1	??	22	28-05-1898
1899	February	??	1	1300 gallons	12	25-03-1899
1899	March (04, 19)	??	2	1500 gallons	13	09-05-1899
1899	June	Cariçal	1	1250 gallons	30	29-07-1899
1900	February	Cariçal	1	1300 gallons	12	24-03-1900
1900	March	??	1	1400 gallons	20	19-05-1900
1900	April (06, 17, 23)	Cariçal	3	5000 litres	22	02-06-1900
1900	September	Cariçal	1	1000 gallons	46	17-11-1900
1901	February	??	2	5300 litres	12	23-03-1901
1901	March	São Nicolau	3	9600 litres	16	20-04-1901
1901	April	Cariçal	1	2200 litres	22	01-06-1901
1901	May	Cariçal	1	8800 litres	25	22-06-1901
1901	June	Cariçal	1	4800 litres	29	20-07-1901
1901	June	Garça	1	4400 litres	29	20-07-1901
1902	February	??	??	??	13	29-03-1902
1902	March	Tarrafal	1	3200 litres	19	10-05-1902
1902	March	Garça	1	2800 litres	19	10-05-1902
1902	March	Cariçal	1	1320 litres	19	10-05-1902
1902	April (04)	Garça	1	1760 litres	25	21-06-1902
1902	April	Garça	1	2800 litres	25	21-06-1902

Appendix 1 (continued).

1902	April	Tarrafal	1	2480 litres	25	21-06-1902
1902	April	Barreiras ??	1	2400 litres	25	21-06-1902
1902	May (14)	Cariçal	1	400 litres	26	21-06-1902
1902	May (23)	Cariçal	1	2000 litres	26	28-06-1902
1903	March (06)	Tarrafal	1	2400 litres	17	25-04-1903
1903	March	Barreiras ??	1	2200 litres	17	25-04-1903
1903	March (28)	Cariçal	1	4480 litres	17	25-04-1903
1903	March	Barreiras ??	1	2980 litres	17	25-04-1903
1904	February (10)	Cariçal	1	1800 litres	16	16-04-1904
1904	March	Tarrafal	2	3940 litres	18	30-04-1904
1904	April (14, 24)	Tarrafal	2	10,400 litres	25	18-06-1904
1904	May (01)	Cariçal	1	1600 litres	27	02-07-1904
1905	March (15)	Tarrafal	1 + calf	7200 litres	17	29-04-1905
1905	April	Cariçal	1	??	21	27-05-1905
1906	May	Cariçal	1	2800 litres	25	23-06-1906
1908	March	Tarrafal	1	2400 litres	17	25-04-1908
1918	August	Tarrafal	1	2000 litres	41	12-10-1918