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Senseless Mass Murder

I remember reading a wartime naval fiction book about a situation where after the torpedoing of a cargo ship by a U-boat the captain of a destroyer arrives on the scene immediately afterwards and is faced with a horrifying dilemma: in a sea where surviving merchant seamen are swimming around waiting for rescue, but where the U-boat is still lurking below the surface: will he drop the depth-charges which may not sink the U-boat but will certainly bring a horrible death to the surviving merchant seamen?

Why is this death so certain and so horrible? Depth charges are simply massive underwater explosions. Their function is to rip ships' plates apart as the underwater sound waves pass the hull. If they can do this to a ship, imagine what they do to a living body. Actually you don't have to imagine it; for 100 years people have fished by throwing explosives into the ocean and harvesting the fish that turned belly-up and came to the surface. For every edible marine creature so harvested, numerous others perished pointlessly and senselessly.

The sound pressure generated by underwater explosions at close range is unbelievable. Scientists talk about 160 to 180 decibels, and it doesn't sound like much. But decibels are a logarithmic scale and there is a doubling of energy for every three decibels. The loudest noise a human can live with is around 120 decibels. After that, your ears suffer permanent damage. Incidentally, a similar scale is applied to earthquakes, which explains how a mild one is only a few Richter points away from the most destructive ever experienced. But I digress.

Every so often pods of whales in our waters go astray and get washed up on beaches. What is more, frequently, if you turn them back into the ocean, they stubbornly come back again. Ultimately they perish miserably on the sand. We cannot possibly accept the idea that over the millions of years whales have been on the planet evolution would not have corrected such a trait if it had been endemic to the species. Nor am I aware that in the days Captain Ahab and of large-scale whaling in southern oceans this type of whale suicide was ever commented on. It makes sense to assume that this phenomenon is human-caused and relatively recent..

There is one type of event that does not happen regularly in our oceans, and that is really large underwater explosions. If such major explosions happened close to whales, that is clearly a mechanism which could cause disorientation. Whales are mammals, and their balance and direction finding systems are likely to reside in their ears. Wherever it resides, it is more than likely that underwater explosions would affect them.

Now who would deliberately cause massive underwater explosions? Military scientists, that's who. Given that whales can communicate with others over thousands of kilometres by their relatively gentle songs, what on earth would you achieve in the way of human communications by letting off massive explosions? Goodness only knows. The unfortunate fact is that the military of so-called advanced countries have been polluting the seas with such noises with monotonous regularity in recent years.

Because it is the military who are doing this, we cannot even ask what the purpose of this vandalism is. On the face of it, it makes no sense at all. It cannot be a means of communication – for military communications you need secrecy, and certainly underwater bangs cannot be concealed from enemy or friend. What is more, these shock-waves can, in an open ocean, be traced with great precision to their source.

But then, it isn't necessary for us to speculate on the purpose of these underwater explosions. For the military, these may simply be a power-trip, as so many other experiments in tearing human beings limb from limb, burning them alive or gassing them, preferably slowly and with a maximum of pain. What is important is to try and prove that the beaching of whales and other marine disasters are actually the result of human (or inhuman) activities and to organise effective protests if the slaughter can be traced back to a particular activity. Surmise is not enough, unfortunately.

Of course, it should be enough in cases like these. As we are not told about these underwater tests, it should be our right to demand an explanation as to why they are carried out. That's where the destructive nature of capitalist so-called law comes in. If such destructive tests are carried out in waters attached to some national entity, the rulers of this entity can do what they like to the marine environment. If the tests take place in international waters and the affected creatures are therefore nobody's "property", it is open slather for all and sundry. In this world, the only thing that counts is property.

Coming back to the whale beachings, there is now a plausible explanation. Whales swim at depths of hundreds of metres where the water pressure is enormous. Expressed in the old terms, for every 10 metres of extra depth, you add about an atmosphere, or the same as a kilogram for every square centimetre. If human beings go for dives, they have to do so in stages to accommodate the body to the increased pressure, and conversely when coming out of deep dives they have to do so slowly. This has to do with the fact that water is not compressible but gases are; any gases or air is forced into the liquid blood at depth, and conversely has to be given time to get out of the bloodstream on coming back to the surface. If we don't take regard of this and subject our bodies to high pressure first and reduce this pressure suddenly, we get what has become known as the bends.

It is likely that whales are subject to the same problems, only more so. After all, they dive to depths which are almost inconceivable. Indeed, they are known to live down there for a large part of their lives. That's why we know so little about them; we cannot easily follow them down there to observe, but have to use clumsy pressure vessels which are actually miniature submarines.

What has this to do with underwater bangs? It is now thought that the shocks created by these explosions force whales to rise to the surface at rates which their system cannot cope with; in short, they get the bends. That would be one explanation as to why the entire pod is similarly affected. There may, of course, be other explanations.

As an atheist, I sometimes wonder whether there is not a viable argument for religion there. The utter arrogance of human beings who destroy creatures wantonly because they don't belong to anyone might perhaps be curbed were these creatures thought to belong to some vengeful god?