

# Want to save the whales? Put a price on them says ASU professor

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A humpback whale breaches in the ocean. Whales such as these could be bought and protected by conservationists if a conservation market was implemented.

Credit: Leah Gerber

(Phys.org) —Overharvest by commercial whaling has been a well-recognized world threat to stable whale populations since the

International Whaling Commission (IWC) issued a moratorium against commercial whaling in 1986. However, because of loopholes, whaling countries at odds with the ban continue to hunt under the guise of scientific whaling or in outright objection to the IWC.

The commission and its members, as well as whale conservationists, have offered few methods to enforce the ban or effectively curb whale harvests – and the lack of cooperation and constructive communication among whalers, the IWC and conservationists has posed a decade's-old roadblock to balancing whaling practices with stabilization of [whale populations](#).

One recently proposed solution is the creation of "whale shares," an approach developed by Arizona State University's Leah Gerber (a professor in the School of Life Sciences, within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences), and published in the January issue of *Ecological Applications*.

## **What is a whale share?**

"If you want to save a whale, buy a 'whale share' to save the whale from harvesting," Gerber said. First proposed by Gerber in 2012, this would allow governments or non-governmental organizations to trade the rights to individual whales, creating what's called a conservation market. Conservationists would then be able to reduce the amount of whales harvested by buying more shares from the whalers, and if whalers wanted to harvest more, they would have to spend more.

Gerber's article shows that the performance of a conservation market is assessed using data on whale biology and economic demand. "Given the fragile state of the International Whaling Commission, our approach offers a possible way forward in effective global management of whales," noted Gerber.

A conservation market operates on a few assumptions, based on data from the stocks of whaling companies and the amount of money anti-whaling organizations spend to advocate for conservation.

On one hand, the demand for whales decreases as the amount of harvested whales increases, since a greater supply results in less demand and financial gain for whalers. On the other, Gerber assumes that conservationists' desire to protect whales also decreases the more the whale population grows – lessening concerns about endangerment or extinction.

Ultimately, a balancing point is attained where demands overlap, and an equilibrium is reached that sets the number of whales to be hunted. Once that number is calculated, Gerber explained, a regulating organization can cap the number of whales available for harvest and set prices for shares.

Then, as with all markets, conservationists and whaling organizations buy, sell and trade according to their interests. The following year, the cap and share prices are reassessed by the regulators and the trade starts over again. Gerber anticipates that this process will keep the population stable without damaging the whalers' livelihoods.

According to Gerber's research, this proposed solution benefits whales, whalers and conservationists because under this system, a larger whale population offers the greatest gain for everyone. For whalers, a plentiful whale population drives the price of shares down, making it cheaper to harvest whales. And for conservationists and whales, the more [whales](#) there are, the less concerns exist linked to their extinction.

## **Potential drawbacks**

Some disagree with the idea, though. According to Gerber, those

opposed to a market approach feel that it's unethical to assign a dollar value to a sentient being. While Gerber admits that ethical arguments can be advocated alongside ideas like her own, she insists that they "should not hinder solutions to the immediate problem of unsuitable harvest."

"An alternative perspective is that we must develop approaches that recognize ethical values and allow for pragmatic decision-making," Gerber added. "Conservation markets provide a mechanism to reduce total whale harvest."

Another concern about markets involves one or another group cornering the market by buying all the whale shares. Gerber's forum article reports that such an occurrence would be problematic, but stresses that even a cornered market would be better than the present status quo.

After all, according to Gerber, a cornered market in favor of the whalers would still be limited by the harvest cap, and a cornered market in favor of conservationists would still put millions of dollars in the pockets of whaling companies. Eventually, Gerber points out, the costs to maintain shares would rise, and one side would likely have to relinquish their hold on the market.

The discussion also points out that creating a conservation market would make it easier to track and punish those conducting illegal whaling, lessen the amount of illegal whaling and promote more positive communication between [whalers](#) and [conservationists](#).

Despite the potential drawbacks and remaining questions, Gerber insists that a conservation market is better than leaving the current, ineffective system in place. As for when such a market might be established, Gerber is unsure.

"I don't anticipate any dramatic change in policy in the immediate

future," said Gerber, who hopes to present further ideas at next year's IWC meeting. "These things take time. First we need to discuss this approach with various stakeholders to solicit input. Then we need to find the right time to introduce a policy change."

Provided by Arizona State University

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