

# Tradable harvest quotas may save whales: study

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Every year, a group of anti-whaling nonprofit organizations that includes Greenpeace, Sea Shepherd, and the World Wildlife Fund spend, by conservative estimates, some \$25 million on a variety of activities intended to end commercial whaling.

And every year, [commercial whaling](#) not only continues, but grows.

Under the current, largely unregulated system, the number of [whales](#) harvested annually has doubled since the early 1990s, to about two thousand per year. Further, many populations of large whales have been severely depleted and continue to be threatened by commercial whaling.

While protests, education, lobbying and dangerous confrontations on the high seas have saved some whales, the whaling industry shows no sign of shutting down - or slowing down.

Now, an economist and two marine scientists writing in the January 12 issue of the journal *Nature* suggest a new strategy that they believe could save whales by putting a price on them.

In the article, "A market approach to saving the whales," Christopher Costello and Steve Gaines, professors of economics and marine science, respectively, at the Bren School of Environmental Science & Management at the University of California, Santa Barbara, join Leah Gerber, a population ecologist and marine conservation biologist at Arizona State University, to propose a market-based solution to saving whales.

"We propose an alternative path forward that could break the deadlock: quotas that can be bought and sold, creating a market that would be economically, ecologically, and socially viable for whalers and whales alike," the authors write.

"The authors have put forth some bold, fresh

thinking aimed at a barbaric practice that has become an intractable problem," said The Nature Conservancy California Executive Director Mike Sweeney.

The idea has its roots in trading markets for such air pollutants as sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides, which have reduced pollutants more and at a lower cost in the U.S. than resulted from traditional regulatory policy; conservation and wetland management programs, which have resulted in more than 200,000 acres of land being set aside; and individual transferable quotas, which have been successful in sustaining fisheries and fishermen in New Zealand, Iceland, and Canada.

The authors explain that the concept of auctioning off annual whale-catch quotas was suggested as early as 1982 but was never implemented, perhaps, they suggest, because whalers would have had to purchase something they had always received for free. They add that a "whale-conservation market," would be different, with "whale shares" being allocated in sustainable numbers to all members of the International Whaling Commission. Recipients could then exercise them (by harvesting their quota), hold onto them for a year, or permanently retire them. The shares would be tradable in a carefully controlled global market.

In the two most extreme scenarios, whalers could end up purchasing all the shares and harvesting whales at the established sustainable level, or conservationists might purchase all the shares, so that no whales would be harvested.

"Because conservationists could bid for quotas, whalers could profit from them even without harvesting the animals," the professors say. And while they concede that "there are multiple challenges in getting such a scheme to work, including agreeing on sustainable quotas and on how shares should be allocated," they do not see

those obstacles as insurmountable.

But would whalers settle for quotas? In fact, the authors say, whaling nations have previously proposed quotas, which would legitimize their harvest. Many anti-whaling groups, on the other hand, have had a fundamental problem with setting quotas for the same reason, feeling that quotas would appear to legitimize commercial whaling.

"If quotas are set properly," the authors suggest, "transactions would reduce the number of whales harvested, quite possibly to zero, unlike existing protocols, which seem to be increasing the catches."

They conclude: "The fervent anti-whaler will be quick to argue you cannot and should not put a price on the life of a whale; a species should be protected irrespective of its economic value. But unless all nations can be convinced or forced to adopt this view, whaling will continue. It is precisely because of the lack of a real price tag in the face of different values that anti-whaling operations have had such limited success". By placing an appropriate price tag on the life of a whale, a whale conservation market provides an immediate and tangible way to save them."

Provided by University of California - Santa Barbara

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