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Jonathan Clapperton

Whales and Whaling in Puget Sound Coast Salish History and Culture

Sometime in the 1920s, Joe Young of the Puyallup Indian Tribe told anthropologist Arthur Ballard a story of two seal- and porpoise-hunting brothers. They gave their sister food to share with her family, but she hid it, thinking her husband—a powerful canoe builder “far stronger than any shaman”—too proud to accept the meat; instead, he felt slighted. In retaliation, he carved a wooden seal and released it in the water. When the two brothers speared the seal, it animated and towed them far away from their village on Puget Sound. One brother died, while the other encountered an old man “as big as a tree” who claimed he was their grandfather and subsequently lured a hundred-foot-long whale to the beach. Young narrated: “The old man drew [the whale] in to land and when on the bank it stayed there. It was not dead but under the spell of the old man.”¹ This ability to direct a whale to shore was a spiritual power only the most skilled whalers possessed. The old man led the lost hunter to the whale, wherein he stored a large supply of dried salmon, entered the whale, and returned the surviving brother to his village on the Sound where the whale beached itself. The story ends with the community learning how to butcher and use the whale.²

Young’s story sheds light on the presence, importance, and history of whales (including porpoise and orca) and whaling to the Puget Sound Coast Salish (or Puget Salish). It is commonly accepted that whales and whaling were integral to only select few Indigenous communities in present-day British Columbia, Washington State, Oregon, and California—notably the Makah, the Nuu-chah-nulth, and the Quileute.³ However, as this essay highlights, using evidence from oral traditions, archaeological findings, contemporary (i.e., historic) accounts, and anthropological observations, whales and whaling were important in Puget Salish history and culture too.

1 Arthur Ballard, “Some Tales of the Southern Puget Sound Salish,” *University of Washington publications in Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (December, 1927): 77–80.

2 Ballard, “Some Tales,” 80.

3 For some examples of those who created and perpetuated this discourse see: George Gibbs, *Indian Tribes of Washington Territory* (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1967); Leo Frachtenberg, “Abnormal Types of Speech in Quileute,” *International Journal of American Linguistics* 1, no. 4 (December, 1920): 296; Leo J. Frachtenberg, “Eschthology of the Quileute Indians,” *American Anthropologist* 22, no. 4 (October–December 1920): 330–40; Leo J. Frachtenberg, “The Ceremonial Societies of the Quileute Indians,” *American Anthropologist* 23, no. 3 (July–September, 1921): 320–52; Erna Gunther, “The Indian Background of Washington History,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (July, 1950): 192; and Michael Harkin, “Whales, Chiefs, and Giants: An Exploration into Nuu-Chah-Nulth Political Thought,” *Ethnology* 37, no. 4 (Autumn, 1998): 317.

Indicators of a Whaling Culture

Young's rendition of "The Two Brothers' Journey to the North" is one of many oral traditions that record the presence of whales and the practice of whaling in Puget Sound; cultural outsiders have long recorded these. Perhaps amateur ethnographer George Gibbs, who was told a story by Alm-cot-ti (of the Nisqually) in the mid-1850s, penned the earliest. In this story, four seal-hunter S'Homamish brothers harpooned a wooden decoy that towed them far away from home. Eventually, while riding a whale home, they were thrown off and became orcas. Thereafter, the transformed brothers assisted their brethren by abstaining from wrecking their canoes and by driving seals ashore. It ends with their grieving mother transforming into a rock on the eastern end of Vashon Island, where she can "still be seen in proof of the tale," thus showing the importance of the story as having ongoing relevance and as firmly rooted in a specific place.⁴ A different oral tradition within Puget Sound tells of Mink's indignation at those who doubt his whaling ability. The story revolves around Mink's demonstration of that ability and his bringing it to the village to share. Numerous similar accounts exist.⁵ Collectively, they represent a diverse repository of stories (often characterized as myths or legends) which show an intimate connection between the Puget Salish and whales: whales assisted people, people turned into whales and vice versa, whales were a regular presence in Puget Sound, and people possessed the knowledge and proper protocols for capturing and butchering whales.

Place names appear in these stories and reflect the importance of whales and whaling in Puget Sound, including inland bodies of water and terrestrial space. For example, *Stex* (the Stuck River) means "to plow through" or "to push through." Its naming recalls a story wherein whales once lived in an inland lake at the present-day town of Sumner, which extended down the Duwamish Valley to the Renton junction. One day the whales became frantic, swam ashore, plowed their way through the land and escaped into Puget Sound, leaving in their wake a channel that created the Stuck

4 Ella E. Clark, "George Gibbs' Account of Indian Mythology in Oregon and Washington Territories," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (December, 1955): 160–61.

5 See for examples: Ballard, "Some Tales of the Southern Puget Sound Salish," 77–80; Francy Calhoun, "Four Puget Sound Folktales," *The American Journal of Folklore* 59, no. 231 (January–March, 1946): 42–43; "The Seal-Hunting Brothers," told at Tulalip in 1966, in Vi Hilbert, ed., *Haboo: Native America Stories from Puget Sound* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), 75–86; and Hermann Haerberlin, "Mythology of Puget Sound," *The Journal of American Folklore* 37, no. 145/6 (July–December, 1924): 420.

River and drained the lake.⁶ Another place, *Tso'4kobed*, is a creek at Redondo. In mythic times *Tso'4kobed* connected Puget Sound with Steel's Lake (*Gishwa'dis*, which means, "where there are whales"). Whales would swim this passage to the lake but stopped after a young man blocked the channel using a sunken raft laden with stones.⁷

Though much archaeological work remains to be done in the Puget Sound area, and many sites have been disturbed or destroyed by American settlements, physical evidence from artifacts suggests the Puget Salish utilized whales or at least valued and possessed whale products. For instance, archaeologists found two harpoon blades that could be used to hunt seal and whale at the *Qwu?gwes* site on Mud Bay; one of these was a large, green, slate blade unlike anything found to date elsewhere on the Pacific Northwest Coast.⁸ Through bone analysis, false killer whale remains were found to have been processed at *Qwu?gwes*.⁹ A D-adze made of whalebone, cherry bark, and stone was found elsewhere in Puget Sound.¹⁰

Firsthand, settler-colonial observations of Puget Salish capturing and processing whales, though rare—no doubt a result of the relative paucity of newcomer records for Puget Sound prior to the mid-nineteenth century—also exist. For example, an American settler to the Olympia area remembered a large whale arriving in the southern Sound in the early 1850s, and the local Indigenous people killing it:

What was called a sulphur-bottom whale, probably ninety feet in length, floundered up the bay [at Olympia] one morning in the early '50s, and on reaching the shallow water was unable to swim out to sea again and was stranded as the tide went out. This was a rich find for the Indians. They cut off great chunks of the meat from the sides of the whale, and when this part was cut into portions the Indians climbed right into the location made famous by Jonah, the insides of the immense fish being considered a special delicacy.¹¹

6 J. P. Harrington, Field Notes, University of Washington, Microfilm A6952, Reel 30, "Notes and Writings Collected from Others," 368–69.

7 Harrington, "Notes and Writings," 264.

8 Dale Croes and Scott Williams, "Bifacially Flaked 'Harpoon' Blade," in Dale R. Croes, Rhonda Foster, Larry Ross et. al., *Qwu?gwes: The Qwu?gwes Archaeological Site and Fish Trap (45TN240), and Tested Homestead (45TN396)*, MMS Eleven-Year South Puget Sound Community College Summer Field School Investigations with the Squaxin Island Tribe, Final Report (Unpublished mss., 2013), 519; and Dale Croes, "Ground Slate 'Harpoon' Blade," in Croes, Foster, Ross et. al., *Qwu?gwes*, 519–20.

9 Rebecca Wigen, "Vertebrate Fauna," in Croes, Foster, Ross et. al., *Qwu?gwes*, 127.

10 D-adze, Burke Museum Inventory, Object #4747.

11 Mrs. George E. Blankenship, ed., *Early History of Thurston County, Washington, Together with Biographies and Reminiscences of those Identified with Pioneer Days* (Olympia, WA: 1914), 113.

In another instance, an entry in the journal of the Hudson's Bay Company fur trade post at Fort Nisqually records that on 7 April 1849, a large party of "Soquamish" (Suquamish) killed a whale "down the beach."¹²

Finally, observations made by anthropologists based upon their work with Indigenous informants indicate the Puget Salish possessed the knowledge, tools, and motivation to catch whales. T. T. Waterman left the most complete record in this regard, though even this is not particularly extensive. He was shown tools for fishing on Puget Sound that were also used for "hunting otter and porpoise." He described these as an "ordinary" two-pronged spear, with a long line attaching a wooden float carved in the form of a duck (hence, the multiple stories recounted above of the brothers spearing a wooden decoy). When a porpoise was struck, the duck was thrown overboard and the hunter "let the porpoise run away with it."¹³ A spear, which was heavier than that used for salmon, called a *ca'sab-1d*, or "porpoise implement," was also utilized. Finally, Waterman noted that the Puget Salish possessed specialized language and protocols for dividing up the product of a successful cetacean catch, one that is remarkably like that of other Pacific-Northwest whaling cultures.¹⁴

Anthropologist William Elmendorf also recorded numerous instances of whaling in the oral tradition of the Twana peoples. He wrote that the Klallam kept a vigilant watch for whales, with canoes prepared for launch upon sighting one, in Hood Canal, a fjord that forms one of the four main basins of Puget Sound. Elmendorf's informants recounted whaling occurring within living memory. Some recalled a party of "stout women" involved in the whale hunt, one of whom was pulled overboard, resulting in their canoe being towed a considerable distance; once the whale was caught, it was butchered, the meat divided, and much of it sold.¹⁵ Elmendorf also learned about the existence of a whaling-affiliated secret-society initiation that occurred at Kallam Bay circa 1870.

Catching a small number of whales was a boon for Indigenous communities. Elmendorf wrote that while whaling may have been a rare occurrence among the Twana, it

12 Victor J. Farrar, "The Nisqually Journal," *The Washington Historical Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (July, 1919): 210.

13 T. T. Waterman, *Notes on the Ethnology of the Indians of Puget Sound* (New York: Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation, 1973), 58–59.

14 Waterman., *Ethnology*, 60–61.

15 W. W. Elmendorf, *Twana Narratives: Native Historical Accounts of a Coast Salish Culture* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1993), 42–43.

was nonetheless valued; people expressed that they were “crazy” about eating it.¹⁶ Quantitative studies have found that even those peoples typically regarded as “whaling cultures” took a relatively small number of whales, yet whaling still constituted an economically and socially rewarding activity. Thus, while tribes reputed as “whalers” may have made more extensive use of whales than tribes in Puget Sound, the former required neither large numbers nor an annual catch to justify their importance.

Rethinking Indigenous Whaling Histories

Despite his evidence suggesting otherwise, Elmendorf confidently asserted that the Skokomish did not hunt whales except for a single historical instance.¹⁷ Similarly, Marian Smith, whose work on the southern Puget Salish in the 1940s remains foundational, inaccurately claimed: “Whales have not entered Puget Sound waters for a long time.” She based her opinion upon one story an Indigenous informant recounted to her of whales and sharks battling in Puget Sound in the distant past, after which whales left.¹⁸ Elmendorf and Smith are certainly not alone in rejecting the idea that whales or whaling were significant to the Coast Salish. Yet the brief foray into the subject presented here reveals quite the opposite: whales and whaling formed an important component of the Puget Salish’s history and culture. Ultimately, “new whaling histories” need to critically assess past accounts bifurcating Indigenous peoples who lived adjacent to saltwater frequented by whales—whether in the Pacific Northwest or elsewhere—into either “whalers” or “non-whalers.”¹⁹

16 Elmendorf, *Twana Narratives*, 44.

17 W. W. Elmendorf, *The Structure of Twana Culture, with Comparative Notes on the Structure of Yurok Culture* by A. L. Kroeber (Pullman: Washington State University, 1960), 107–8.

18 Marian Smith, *The Puyallup-Nisqually* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 267.

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