

WHALE-WATCHING AND THE COMPROMISE OF TONGAN INTERESTS THROUGH TOURISM

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Introduction

Recent developments in whale-watching tourism in the Pacific and elsewhere have been widely touted as effective mechanisms for economic growth and replacements for the resumption of the consumptive use of whales in the region (Duffus, 1988; Hoyt, 1995, 2000; Orams, 1999, 2002). Indeed, whale-watching tourism is frequently presented as the economic and moral antithesis of whaling, and thus whale-watching advocates systematically preclude development options that include the consumptive use of whales. An anti-whaling, pro-whale-watching stance is also official policy of both Australian and New Zealand governments, the major aid donors in the region. The result is the suppression of discussions about the resumption of whaling in spite of regional food insecurity, balance of payment problems, and nutrition deficits that might be addressed via the resumption of whale consumption. While there is insufficient data to determine if a sustainable harvest of any whale stock is supportable, there is little or no interest among anti-whaling proponents in collecting such data because for many, whaling is a moral, not economic or ecological issue. In this paper I outline the argument for the evaluation of the resumption of whaling as a development option, and suggest that the suppression of any serious debate of this issue is a product of western ethnocentrism and a contemporary form of cultural imperialism.

The Context of Current Conditions

The context of the whaling v whale-watching debate is a history of over-exploitation of the resource. By the time that Kingdom of Tonga joined the moratorium on whaling through a royal decree in the 1970s, the humpback stocks that indigenous whalers relied on were so dangerously depleted this was the only responsible resource management alternative. Indigenous Tongan whaling was not, however, a significant contributor to the catastrophic collapse of the resource. Large international commercial fleets were more directly responsible (Ruhen, 1966). Nonetheless, and regardless of who was responsible, the loss of the whale meat produced for internal consumption by indigenous whalers has had significant consequences for the health of the Tongan economy and the health of

individual Tongans. Over the last four decades there has been a steady and consistent erosion of Tongan food security, which has in turn contributed to balance of trade problems (Evans et. al., 2001) and an alarming rise in rates of non-communicable disease - especially diet related disease like obesity and adult onset diabetes (Collins et al., 1990; Hodge et. al., 1996; Scragg, 1997). Though not exclusively the result of the end of whaling, there is no question that the loss of whale resources have contributed to these problems, and significantly limited the range of viable responses to these problems that are available to Tongan authorities. In the following section of this paper I provide background data to give a sense of the scope of the situation facing Tongans today.

The Scope of Current Challenges

The contemporary Tongan economy is consistent with a model proposed by Bertram and Watters (1985). In this model the significantly monetised aspects of the economy are derived from labour migration and associated remittances from migrants to their remaining kin, overseas aid donors, and the internal government bureaucracy supported, largely, through these donors. This economic structure is typical of most of the central Pacific region, although Tonga is a particularly extreme example (Evans, 2001). Migration from Tonga into Australia, New Zealand, and the United States of America has occurred at such a rate that population levels in Tonga have not changed significantly in the last 20 years. These migrants have shown a remarkable willingness to maintain long-term linkages to friends and family in Tonga as demonstrated through their remittance behaviour (see Evans, 1999; Brown, 1998). This flow of resources back in to Tonga has allowed consumption levels of imported foods to increase without an accompanying level of change in the productivity of the domestic economy. Remittances and aid (but in particular remittances) are underwriting the situation.

Trade in health compromising high-fat imported meats is a significant part of this trade imbalance (just over 10 million pa'anga^[1] or 10% of the total value). In 1989 almost 3400 metric tonnes of sausage, mutton flaps, chicken parts, and corned beef were imported and consumed in Tonga. By 1999 this number increased to just under 5600 metric tonnes, amounting to some 56 kilos per person (Evans et. al., 2001). The health consequences of this increase, and a corresponding increase in consumption of simple carbohydrates like refined sugar and flour, have been profound.

The linkage between the cessation of whaling and these developments is not definitive, and certainly the absence of whale meat as a viable alternative source of food is not exclusively responsible for the deteriorating health and economic situation, but it is a contributing factor. This becomes clear when the individual decision-making processes responsible for the macro-level consumption patterns are analyzed. A brief synopsis of a series of papers (Evans et al, 2001, 2002, 2003) produced from a large survey of Tongan consumers will elucidate.

In 1999 over 400 Tongans between the ages of 15 and 80 were surveyed about their attitudes to 35 foods (some traditional and some imported) along 4 axes: preference, perception on nutritional value, frequency of consumption, and perception of availability were measured on 5 point likert scales for each food^[2]. Subsequent analyses of this data showed that in spite of the fact that people generally preferred traditional (and healthier) foods and correctly assessed most imported foods as of low nutritional value, they consumed the health compromising foods at relatively high rates. Indigenous foods like fish, taro, and chicken (whole local chicken) were consumed relatively infrequently (about once a week), had a very high preference rating, and a very high (and correct) rating for perception of nutritional value. On the other hand, imported foods like mutton flaps, chicken parts, and bread had half the preference rating and half the perception of nutritional value rating, but were consumed more frequently than their traditional counterparts (see Evans et al, 2001: Fig.2). This pattern held both for these individual foods, and for clusters of traditional and imported foods more generally – indeed, the evidence for this general pattern is definitive. The underlying reason for these dietary practices was availability, both in the sense of having the ability to buy the imported foods at local stores, and in the sense of having the money to do so. Indeed, further analyses of the data showed that people of high socio-economic status tended to consume imported foods more frequently than people of low socio-economic status, and that this was unrelated to preference or perception of nutrition value (Evans et al, 2002).

Possible Policy Responses

Given that people are well aware of the choices they are making in regards to the nutritional values of the foods they are consuming, further nutrition education is not likely to have a significant impact on the situation. It seems likely that the only effective interventions are those that impact availability and price. Following the lead of Fiji, the Tongan authorities have imposed an outright ban on the importation of mutton flaps. While this intervention may run counter to the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) managed through the World Trade Organization, it has yet to attract a challenge. The ban only applied to mutton flaps however, and a flood of chicken parts has occurred. Again, a wider ban or tariff might have an effect, but these solutions are contrary to GATT. An alternative solution is to encourage the production of indigenous alternatives. In Tonga, as in most of the small island states of the Pacific, the best sustainable source of high-quality protein is the sea. Marine proteins in the form of fish and marine mammals have the added benefit of being rich in Omega 3 fatty acids, which have well established beneficial effects (see O’Keefe et. al., 2000).

Given Tonga’s history of whaling, the resumption of indigenous whaling seems a logical alternative, but this option has been rejected by Australia and New Zealand, the region’s most important aid donors. The anti-whaling stance of these governments is well known, and reflected in their support of whale-watching as a mutually exclusive alternative economic activity. This position is logically flawed. It has been demonstrated elsewhere

(Moyle and Evans, 2001) that even though whale-watching might, for the purposes of ensuring the sighting of a whale on any given trip, require a larger number of whales than the number required to ensure the health of the stock, there is nonetheless as point at which additional whales have no impact on the chances of a successful whale-watching trip. Leaving aside some of the questionable calculations used by some analysts assessing the value of whale-watching (see Moyle and Evans, 2001), the idea that whale-watching tourism is sustainable and without its own problems in terms of an economic development strategy is also somewhat problematic – or at least there are some challenges. First, as a draw for tourists, whale-watching may be susceptible to competition from operations closer to the source of whale-watching tourism. For example, New Zealand is developing its own whale-watching industry and, as it does so, the draw of whale-watching tourism in small island states like Tonga is diminished. The cost of travel to Tonga relative to whale-watching sites closer to the Australians, New Zealanders, and Americans who form a significant part of the market is problematic.

As a development option for the small island Pacific any form of tourism also suffers from two additional problems. First, tourism generally has a high degree of economic leakage. Money spent by tourists is often for items and services that in turn require imported materials. Secondly, and perhaps more urgently, tourism is an industry highly prone to economic shocks arising from geopolitical disruptions. A coup in Fiji, the attack on the World Trade towers, instability in the airline industry (for example the collapse of Royal Tongan Air in 2004), and a host of other factors and events can seriously impact tourism based economic activity. These are not reasons to cease tourism related development, but they do suggest that a more balanced and diversified strategy is a more sustainable one. If whaling is not allowable on moral grounds, then it is removed from the development mix regardless of ecological conditions. Is this defensible?

Assuming a sufficiently large whale population (which is contentious)³¹ there is no particular reason that whaling and whale-watching should be exclusive of one another. Positions around whaling are highly charged and culturally bound as one might well expect. In New Zealand and Australia, whaling and whale-watching are perhaps mutual exclusive, but they are so because of the arguments and campaigns of protectionist minded conservationists have been successful. There is nothing whatever wrong with this position, except when it is applied to or imposed on other peoples. If, as is suggested by continuing efforts to have a South Pacific Whale Sanctuary declared at the International Whaling Commission, an absolute anti-whaling stance is to be adopted in the Pacific (New Zealand, 2001), the question must then be asked – who will bear the lost opportunity costs, and who will bear the continuing burden of diet related disease?

Conclusion

Nature tourism is sometimes proposed as non-destructive/non-consumptive alternative form of development. While this may sometimes be the case, the promotion of whale-

watching in Tonga has been accompanied the vilification of whaling (an activity which has a long and productive history in Tonga). The current epidemic of non-communicable disease among Tongans is directly attributable to transformations in diet, which are themselves related to globalisation and the substitution of traditional Tongan foods for low-cost, high-fat, low-quality, health compromising foods. The import of these foods is a major contributor to a number of adverse population health trends, and some significant national economic ills as well. Whaling, an activity that has been made almost unthinkable by whale-watching tourism development and NGO and Australian and New Zealand government opposition, could contribute to solutions to the health and economic ailments of contemporary Tonga. As economically valuable as whale-watching may be, the calculation of the costs of *not* whaling should be added to the discussion if western regional powers like Australia and New Zealand insist on imposing their own moral values on Tongan economic development options.

Endnotes:

[1] One Tongan pa'anaga is currently (April 8 2005) worth \$.52 US - it has been falling steadily for the past decade. April 8 1996 it was worth \$.81 US.

[2] Further detail is available in Evans et al 2001, 2002, 2003.

[3] In the sense that there is no evidence to suggest that the current humpback whale stocks are sufficient to allow a sustainable harvest of any size. There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence that the population is recovering, but an adequate population assessment is yet to be done.

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