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From The Sunday Times

May 10, 2009

## How we are emptying our seas

**Human exploitation of the seas has changed them forever, writes Callum Roberts, professor of marine conservation at York University**

Imagine sitting on the cliffs of Dover contemplating the sea on a crisp spring day. Today your eye would be drawn by the crawling shapes of cargo vessels, ferries and fishing boats.

Wind back the clock to the seventh century, however, and the scene would be very different. Instead of shipping, you would watch the passage of great whales on their northward migration from African wintering grounds to Arctic feeding areas. At the season's peak, over a thousand whales might pass in a day.

Today few whales are sighted in the English Channel, because we have decimated their numbers by hunting.

The slaughter began in the Bay of Biscay and English Channel around the ninth century and, by the early Middle Ages these abundant animals sustained a vigorous whale fishery that was conducted from coastal bays and inlets along their migration routes. Records suggest that numbers were declining as long ago as the 12th and 14th centuries.

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The depletion of those stocks offers a good explanation for why Basques whalers were so quick to exploit newly-discovered Arctic and Canadian whale populations in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

Over the following centuries – in Scotland right up until after the second world war – whales were pursued relentlessly. Those left are a small fraction of former numbers.

By the 18th century, for example, the Atlantic grey whale had been driven to extinction. Nowadays, despite being protected, the northern right whale is down to the last few hundred animals and faces the same fate.

How do we know how big whale populations once were? Whaling records, historians and others all describe the abundance of these beautiful creatures. One 16th century writer reported how whales were “ever present, familiar guests” around the coasts of Scandinavia.

Nowadays we also have DNA studies, showing a level of genetic diversity that could only have been achieved by huge numbers of animals.

How different the seas must have been then, in both spectacle and ecology, but it is not just whales that have dwindled over the centuries.

Our propensity to pursue marine wildlife extended beyond whales to porpoises, dolphins, basking sharks, angel sharks, tunny, skate and halibut and a host of other ocean megafauna.

Bone remains from medieval times tell of a Humber Estuary population of bottlenose dolphins that disappeared for good over a hundred years ago.

In the 18th century, porpoises were described as so common they sometimes darkened the sea as they rose to draw breath.

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