

Karen Oslund

Survival and Adaptation: Modern and Traditional Whaling in the Arctic, 1850–1920

This project is a transnational history of whaling. Its chief aim will be to uncover what has been a little recognized part of the history of whaling—the connections between traditional and modern whaling. Traditional whaling has been practiced by Arctic natives since ancient times, but in the middle of the nineteenth century these hunters came into sustained and continuous contact with industrial whalers from the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, and other western nations. Beginning in 1851, some of these whaling captains tried to extend their catch by spending an entire year in the Arctic—“wintering over”—rather than heading back to port at the end of the season in September. In order to do so, the captains hired crews of Arctic inhabitants and depended upon them for their knowledge of the climate, the territory, and for sustenance throughout the winter. These newly-formed Arctic whaling crews used a combination of both modern and traditional tools, including harpoon guns, rifles, sledges, and skin boats, and negotiated the cultural differences of language and customs in order to hunt together.

The goal of my project will be to examine how traditional and modern whaling developed into a “hybrid” culture of whaling—a hunt which combined both modern and traditional whaling practices—and what the environmental impact of this practice was for the bowhead and right whale populations in the Arctic. This hunt took place in both the Western (Bering, - Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas) and Eastern (Canadian Arctic, Davis Strait, and Greenland Sea) Arctic. Overall, the bowhead whale population was roughly halved during the period of time under study, and the northern right whale was hunted to the brink of extinction. Despite much debate about the environmental impact of industrial and indigenous hunting, it is unclear what impact these hybrid crews had on the whales, and how they might also have affected populations of walrus, seals, caribou, and musk-ox during their hunts.

This period of about seventy years of hybrid Arctic whaling produced important changes for all the actors involved. By writing an environmental history of Arctic whaling, I conceptualize this period as not just a meeting point of two but of three (with the possibility of more) cultures: that of the bowhead whale, of the indigenous hunters, and of the Western whaling crews. While the most dramatic changes took place for the whales, for the Inuit and Siberian hunters the hybrid whaling culture meant the acquisition of new knowledge (including language) and new tools, but also brought changes in their ways of existing in their own nature and landscape. Finally, although it is often assumed that travelers from Western countries came into new territories only in an imperialist mode—as the agents of change and not as adopters of new ways, the growing literature in environmental history on the Arctic presents an important challenge to this notion. The Arctic, with its transnational and multi-ethnic history of whaling practices, is the place where we can best find the international and global history of whaling. Studying whaling, one of the major forms of resource use of the Arctic, can also help us understand the Arctic as a region for environmental history.