

Report on filming of a Norwegian whale hunt, 23rd May 2010

SUMMARY

On 23rd May 2010, between 21.17 and 23.30 and in low light conditions, a Norwegian whaling vessel was filmed firing two harpoon shots, both of which hit a minke whale. Following the first harpoon strike, the whaling vessel failed to secure the whale, in order to ensure it was dead, for period of at least 22 minutes. It is possible that this whale was struck and lost or, alternatively, that it was ultimately killed by second harpoon shot more than two hours later. Both scenarios have significant welfare implications.

There is an urgent need for the Norwegian government to resume the collection of welfare data by inspectors, in order to observe and address the hunt welfare problems that this investigation shows are clearly occurring. The suffering inherent to Norwegian whaling is inconsistent with the country's new Animal Welfare Act and does not meet international guidelines for humane slaughter.

Furthermore, we urge contracting governments to the IWC to reject proposals which would legitimise the cruel and unnecessary practice of commercial whaling and we urge the Norwegian Government to formally review and re-evaluate its whaling policy.

INVESTIGATION BACKGROUND AND AIMS

In 2003 the Norwegian government lifted the requirement for inspectors to be present on whaling vessels. Since this time, therefore, no relevant welfare data (e.g. time to death, instantaneous death rate) has been recorded or reported by Norway to the International Whaling Commission (IWC). Numerous IWC member nations have repeatedly stated their concern about the lack of welfare data provided by whaling nations, including Norway. Similarly, many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are extremely concerned by the lack of transparency with respect to whale welfare. For this reason, the above named animal protection groups undertook a trip to film a whale hunt.

METHODOLOGY

The trip took place from 17 -26th May 2010 in the Lofoten islands in northern Norway (Figure 1). Eight whaling vessels were identified in four different ports (Svolvær, Reine, Sennesvik and Steine). During the investigation period, five of the eight vessels were observed and filmed hunting for whales (at ranges of approximately 200 – 4000m from the shore) from various vantage points along the South-East coastline in the Lofoten region of Norway, from the village of Å in the far south and heading North along the coast to Stamsund (approx 50km of coastline). Filming and observation was necessarily limited to areas un-obscured by rocks, small islands and headlands.

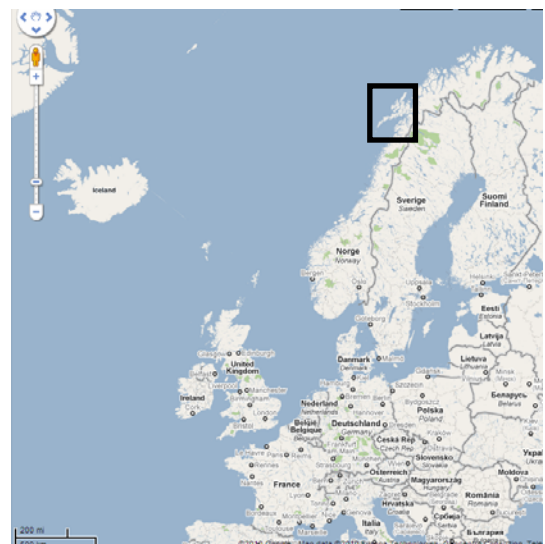


Figure 1: Location of Lofoten Islands, Norway. © Google maps

The film crew used a Canon 7D camera which shot in full 1080p HD video at 25fps (frames per second). A Nikon 300-800mm zoom lens was used on this camera to capture the hunts in full HD up to 3km off shore. A Sony EX1 HD Camera was also used (for continuous shots), shooting in full 1080p HD at 25fps.

RESULTS – KEY FINDINGS

During the investigation period only two vessels were observed and filmed catching or flensing whales. These two vessels were: Rowenta (registration number: N-133-MS) and Uregutt (N-22-VV). The hunt conducted and filmed on 23rd May, by vessel Rowenta was the only hunt for which harpooning was observed and filmed.

Due to the topography of this stretch of coastline and the considerable distance covered by the whaling vessel following the initial harpoon strike, it was not possible to film this hunt continuously to ascertain a definitive time to death (see appendix 1 for full narrative description of hunt). However, the footage captured reveals the following key findings:

- A whale was struck by a harpoon fired from the vessel. It was not successfully secured by the harpoon or landed for at least 22 minutes (49 minutes according to eyewitness accounts).
- The same vessel was filmed firing a lethal shot at a whale 2 hours and 13 minutes after the first harpoon strike. The vessel had been out of sight for 58 minutes prior to this but there was no sign of a captured whale aboard the vessel and it is extremely unlikely that there was sufficient time for the first whale to have been captured and flensed during this period. One of two likely scenarios is therefore assumed:

i) The first whale was struck and lost and the second harpoon strike successfully struck and killed a different whale

> welfare implication: a whale injured by an inaccurate harpoon strike but not killed or secured by the harpoon and subsequently lost. Consequently it suffered unknown injuries for an unknown period of time, with potential to have been mortally wounded;

ii) The whale was struck, escaped and then pursued by the whaling vessel for a further 2 hours and 13 minutes before finally being killed by a second harpoon strike

> welfare implication: a whale was injured by the first harpoon strike but not killed or secured by the harpoon. It then suffered unknown injuries for 2 hours and 13 minutes before being killed by a strike from a second harpoon.

In addition to these key findings the investigation revealed that the hunting activities of whaling vessels are not limited to daylight hours. Vessels were frequently observed to be out hunting from the evening until very late into the night, in twilight conditions. The filmed hunt did not commence until after 21:00, when light conditions were already fading. At 23.30, when the second harpoon was fired, the sun was below the horizon. Although at this time of year in Lofoten it is never completely dark, the light conditions fade significantly at this time of day.

Footage of flensing by the whaling vessel Uregutt highlights the significant wastage involved in Norwegian whaling activities, as large amounts of the whale carcass are thrown overboard after prime cuts of meat have been removed.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the documented hunt, despite calm sea conditions, a minke whale is shot with an exploding harpoon but the whaling vessel then fails to secure it and ensure it is dead for period of at least 22 minutes. It is possible that this same whale was ultimately killed by the second harpoon shot – meaning that it suffered for over 2 hours.

The task of accurately aiming at a moving animal, which appears at the surface for only a few seconds, from a moving vessel makes it impossible for even the most experienced of whalers to guarantee a lethal shot. It is likely that this task would be made more difficult if the hunt is conducted in poor light conditions.

The Norwegian Government's own data states that some 20% of whales are not killed instantly.¹ However, since the removal of welfare inspectors from whaling vessels in 2003, this assertion is now based on seven-year old data. There is a clear and urgent need for the Norwegian government to resume the collection of welfare data by inspectors, in order to have oversight of the hunt welfare problems that this investigation demonstrates can occur.

A combination of the weaponry, environmental hunting conditions and the sheer size of the animals mean that commercial whaling has inherent and significant error margins which routinely lead to intense and prolonged animal suffering.² Such suffering is out of step with the Norwegian government's new (2010) progressive animal welfare act, which promotes respect for animals and seeks to safeguard their welfare.³ Furthermore, such a crude and unreliable slaughter method is wholly retrograde to efforts by the international community to improve the treatment of animals and introduce minimum welfare standards for humane handling and slaughter.⁴

If the current Chairs' proposal under consideration by the IWC is adopted, Norway will be sanctioned to legitimately kill 6,000 more whales using this same inhumane methodology over the next ten years. We therefore urge all contracting governments with a mandate to protect whales to reject proposals which would legitimise the cruel and unnecessary practice of commercial whaling. (e.g. IWC62/7Rev).

We further urge the Norwegian Government to formally review and re-evaluate its whaling policy, particularly with regard to its incompatibility with the New Animal Welfare Act. As a matter of urgency – this season - we urge the Norwegian government to reinstate the requirement for inspectors recording welfare data on board all whaling vessels.

¹ Norwegian Minke Whaling 2008: IWC/61/WKM&AWI 8

² e.g. Lonsdale, et al., 2006. A review of a Norwegian whale hunt. IWC/58/WKM&AWI 12; Gales N, et al. 2007 Is Japan's whaling humane? Marine Policy doi:10.1016/j.marpol.2007.08.004

³ <http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/lmd/whats-new/news/2009/mai-09/new-animal-welfare-act-.html?id=562543>

⁴ World Organisation for Animal Health 2009 Terrestrial Animal Health code – Chapter 8: Animal Welfare. http://www.oie.int/eng/normes/mcode/en_sommaire.htm

APPENDIX 1: DETAILED NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION OF MINKE WHALE HUNT BY WHALING VESSEL 'ROWENTA', 23RD MAY 2010

On the morning of 23rd May the team observed whaling vessel Rowenta actively searching for whales some 3-4km south-west of its registered port of Reine (Figure 2). The vessel continued searching for some ten hours until, at 21.00, a minke whale was sighted by the crew and pursued in a south-easterly direction along the coastline. The film accompanying this report provides documentary evidence of the hunt.

At 21:17 the whale surfaced at a distance of approximately 60m from the whaling vessel (see Figure 2 for position). The sea state was calm and there was little wind, light conditions were fading. The gunner on the vessel immediately fired the harpoon. The impact of the harpoon hitting the whale can clearly be seen in the video footage obtained. In the seconds following the harpoon shot, parts of the whale can be clearly seen breaking the surface. The vessel was stationary for just under 2 minutes following this harpoon shot. In this time the gunner can be seen apparently operating a winch (potentially the harpoon line) and one man who had previously been on the mast also attended the harpoon area. This man then climbed back up the mast and two men re-positioned themselves by the harpoon. The vessel then began moving again in a south easterly direction. At this time a second man climbed the mast, leaving another crew member at the harpoon, indicating that they were searching for the whale.

As documented by continuous footage, 22 minutes after the initial harpoon strike, Rowenta had not captured the struck whale and the crew did not appear to know its whereabouts. At this point the vessel disappeared from view of the filming team behind a rocky outcrop. At the time of the vessel going out of view crew members on the boat remained on the lookout mast and at the harpoon, indicating that they were still searching for the whale. The team relocated to a new vantage point just south of the small village of Å (Figure 2), where two other members of the investigation team had been observing the hunt since the moment of harpoon impact.

Filming was resumed from the new vantage point but at 22:06 the vessel again disappeared out of view behind a headland. At this point 49 minutes had passed since the initial harpoon strike - the vessel still appeared to be searching for the whale that had been struck and there was no whale visible on the vessel.

At 23:04, having been out of sight from the film crew for 58 minutes, the vessel reappeared close to the position where it had disappeared from sight, this time heading north-west. By this time the sun was below the horizon and light conditions were poor. A member of the crew could be seen on the mast indicating that they were searching for a whale. The vessel started and stopped several times and a gunner could be seen at the harpoon. At 23:30 a whale appeared at the surface around 5m off the port side of the vessel. The harpoon was fired, resulting in a large vertical splash, clearly visible in the footage. No signs of life could be seen following this harpoon strike and it is presumed that the whale was killed by the strike. (see Figure 2 for position of boat at this point). 1 minute and 45 seconds later the whale was seen on the starboard side of the vessel being winched by the crew towards the vessel. The crew appeared to be making preparations to bring the whale aboard. Due to the angle of the vessel relative to the film crew, it was not possible to see what was happening to the whale at this point.

The vessel was observed for a further hour at this location until it moved in a northerly direction along the coast. Additional footage was obtained of post hunt flensing activities by the vessel Uregutt (N-22-VV) on 24th and 25th May.

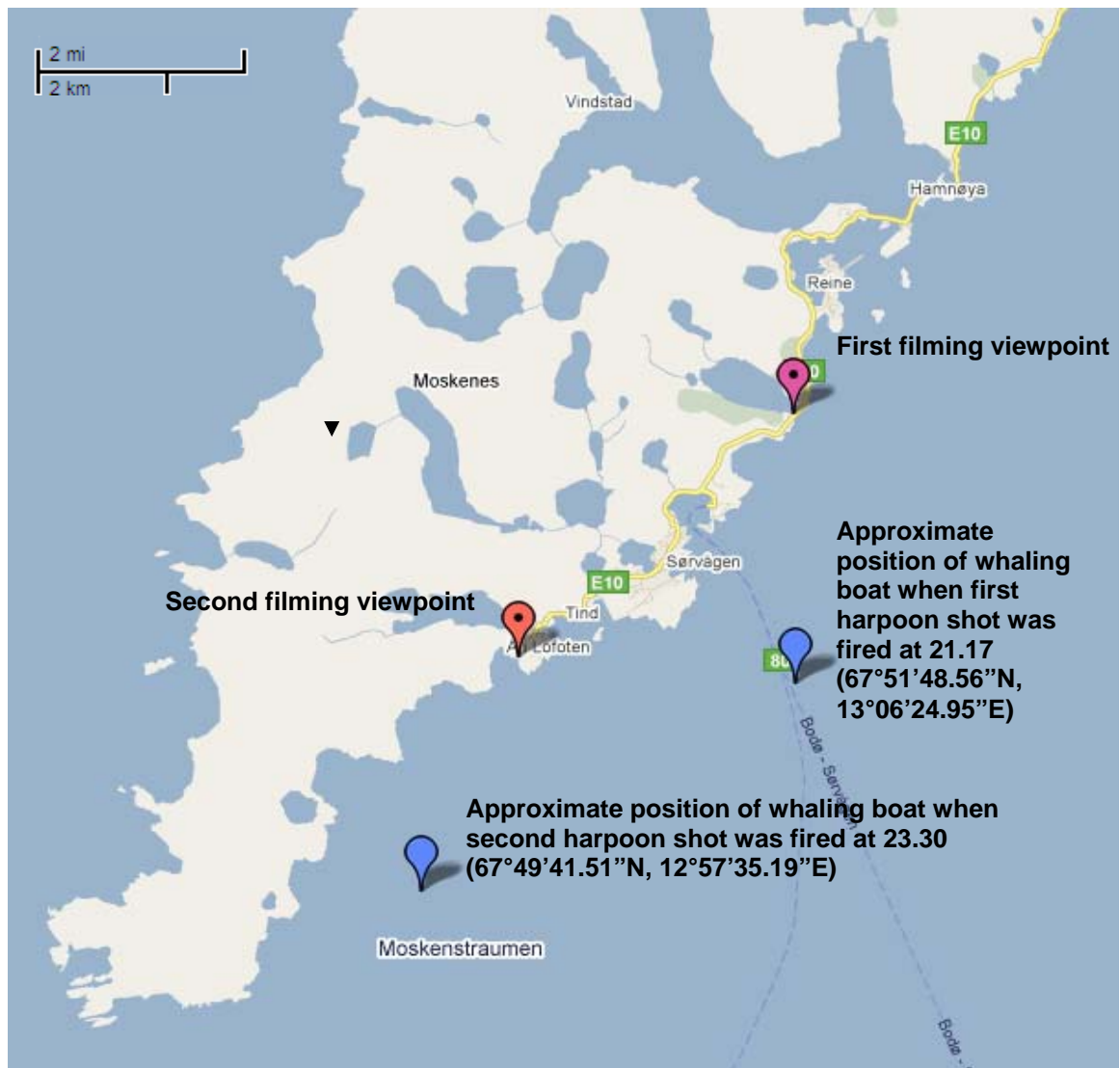


Figure 2: Map showing location of documented whale hunt and filming viewpoints. © Google maps