

Jacobina K. Arch, *Bringing Whales Ashore: Oceans and the Environment of Early Modern Japan*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018, xxii, 247 pp.

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Whales have not loomed large in the pre-modern history of Japan, environmentally or otherwise, until Jacobina K. Arch's book, *Bringing Whales Ashore*. As she makes clear, however, what is most surprising about the existing literature is that "so little attention has been paid to the influence of the sea in Japanese history" in general (12). This is substantially because a more precise distinction between Japan as an archipelago dynamically connected to both land and sea and Japan as merely an island (i.e., a sequestered terrestrial system of small land masses) has yet to be fully developed in the literature. *Bringing Whales Ashore* proceeds to work out the early modern historical significance of Japan as an archipelago via human interactions with whales.

The book is one of the latest articulations of a recent trend in Pacific history that is becoming increasingly "attuned to the specificities of discrete locations in the ocean, both across the horizontal space and through the water column."¹ The work of Matt Masuda in particular has outlined an "oceanic history" of the Pacific centered on "horizontal" connections across a range of environments on water and land. Arch applies this approach to the north Pacific within analytical horizons that encompass environmental, socio-economic and cultural formations. In the process, she brings the early modern Tokugawa period into a Pacific view that previously focused primarily on the effects of European imperialist incursion from the onset of the nineteenth century. Thus, she offers an environmental revision of the period of Tokugawa Japan's 'closed country' (*sakoku* 鎖国) policy – long effectively questioned by political historians – that supposedly restricted overseas commercial and social contacts beyond the Shogunate's shoreline to keep Japan substantially isolated until the mid-nineteenth century Euro-American 'opening' of the country. The integration of a less anthropocen-

¹ Jones (2013), p. 352. Jones' article also contextualizes comparative work in both Pacific and Atlantic historiographies.

tric environmental narrative with existing political and socio-economic narratives, which tend to be centered on humans exclusively, is especially important for north Pacific history because ocean resource potential has been generally far greater than that of the land, especially in terms of nutrients. One need only briefly consider the biomass of whales as opposed to that of brown bears—Japan's largest mammal—to understand just how great a disparity exists between the bounties of ocean and island.

Bringing Whales Ashore indeed keeps such disparities in mind throughout its analysis, but in a way that integrates these two primary biomes of land and water that constitute the book's narrative terrain. Five main chapters—nicely illustrated throughout—are devoted to considering the archipelagic relations between people and whales, environmentally, socio-economically and culturally, during the Tokugawa Period (1603-1868). Paul S. Sutter's "Foreword" is a concise summary of the book's arguments and their connection to Conrad Totman's 1989 pioneering work of Japanese environmental history, *The Green Archipelago: Forestry in Pre-industrial Japan*. In some fundamental respects, as Sutter points out, *Bringing Whales Ashore* is a book-length elaboration of a brief observation by Totman near the end of his book. Totman observed that Japan was able to ease the burden of its burgeoning population on the archipelago's limited forests by tapping into to the comparatively lavish bounty of its surrounding maritime environment to acquire food and fertilizer. The prosperity and concurrent population increase in the wake of the Tokugawa peace was stably managed in significant measure through an intensified use of marine products. This was achieved not only through direct consumption of oceanic products as food, but also through an indirect consumption of them to maximize production of Japan's available arable land using ocean-based fertilizers. The emergence of Japanese whaling was in many respects a response to unprecedented demographic pressure on arable land in the wake of the Tokugawa peace. In more general environmental terms, this transition moved from an agrarian "island mentality" to an "archipelagic" one that had more affinities with foraging. Although Arch's analysis does not really develop very far along these lines, *Bringing Whales Ashore* can certainly be read in more general environmental terms as an extended Tokugawa example of how intensive agriculture and large-scale foraging, which are often hard to reconcile in proximities as close as those in Japan, were productively pursued in tandem—and even mutually beneficial.

Chapter 1 opens with a survey of the limited information, much of it devoted to migration patterns, currently available on pertinent whale biology and ecology. Japan is positioned near the Pacific Ocean's equivalent of the Atlantic Gulf stream—the strong and warm Kuroshio and Tsushima currents flowing along Japan's west coast—the main arteries of

offshore whaling. These currents, along with a colder Oyashio Current that forks off from the Tushima Current along Japan's east coast, brought tens of thousands of whales unusually close to Japan as they followed these food-rich paths back and forth between their summer breeding and winter feeding grounds. These whales were generally baleen species, including the Gray, Humpback and North Pacific Right Whales and constituted the majority of those taken in Japanese waters, with the slow-moving Right Whales as the preferred prey. Toothed whales, including sperm whales and generally much smaller beaked whales, were infrequently pursued off the west coast, which was marginal for whaling.

Chapter 2 takes up the mechanics of Tokugawa whaling, which unlike its early-industrialized and pelagic western whaler successors was pursued just offshore from small, open rowboats with crews organized by village and collectively armed with harpoons or nets. Chapter 3 relates how the whale catch archipelagically connected shore to inland as it circulated mainly as whale oil for lighting, but also as an insecticide and fertilizer for cropland. The geographic links between land and sea forged in this chapter persuasively support one of the book's core points: "whales are a uniquely useful lens on early modern Japan's extensive reliance on the maritime environment to support their economy and society" (108). Chapters 4 and 5 focus on whales as cultural constructs in Tokugawa scholarship on natural history, medicine, popular culture and Buddhist and Shinto religious tradition. Amidst these accounts of whales as opportunities to study anatomy, sideshow oddities and objects of individual and collective reflection (as inscribed on memorial markers and as interned at gravesites), the author stresses that the Tokugawa cultural reception of whales must always be understood within the larger context of commercial whaling: "popular understandings of whales' place in the natural order were inextricably tied to the industry that killed them and turned them into products for human use" (148).

Consideration of some version of this fundamentally exploitative orientation to whales is never far from Arch's keyboard, even regarding the most resonant modern theme of *Bringing Whales Ashore*. Arch tracks organized Japanese whaling no farther back than the late sixteenth century. Consequently, she concludes that current justifications for whaling based on its supposedly primordial nature, which is popularly assumed to be traceable back nine thousand years into Japan's prehistoric foraging period, are just so many fishermen's tales. In more practical terms, before industrial canning, Tokugawa whale meat—even when salted—would not long remain unspoiled during transport very far from shore. Indeed, the putatively trans-historical taste of Japan for whale meat dates back only to the post World War I depression era and the following years of military exigency during World War II when cheap meat was at a premium.

Demand burgeoned during the equally lean years of the post-war US occupation, and whaling is currently state-subsidized as meat stockpiles mount, despite futile efforts to auction 75% of it off. In this respect, Arch's book historicizes Japanese whaling to starkly unsustainable effect, demonstrating the 'post-industrial' value of pre-industrial history.

Arch also considers the concept of sustainability in early modern terms, concluding that Tokugawa whaling probably cleared Japan's shores of whales before 1800—although it likely persisted somewhat longer in isolated locales—and the onset of relatively industrialized whaling, primarily by Westerners. In some sense, Arch's environmental account here may be read politically. The definitive offshore mode of Tokugawa whaling was a kind of natural *sakoku* practice that may have been unsustainably exposed to wider Pacific consequences beyond the Japanese coast by the nineteenth century 'ecological imperialist' intrusion of Euro-American whalers. Western whaling, especially by the United States, employed more efficient mass predation that extended into northern summer feeding grounds of keystone migratory Japanese species like Right Whales. These feeding grounds lay far beyond the reach of Japan's seaside hunters. Within about fifteen years, pelagic whaling by western vessels had brought about a crash in the targeted whale populations throughout the region by mid-century. Although the contributions of Japan's coastal whaling to this crash remain debatable, those of western whaling—powered by nascent capitalist-imperialist drives moving rapidly beyond an early modern pace—are indisputable. A disparity in scale between Japanese domestic and western 'imperialist' Pacific whaling in terms of early modern and modern modes appears here in fairly stark contrast, despite other ambiguities.

There are certainly problems with the author's argument concerning the inherent unsustainability of Tokugawa whaling—acknowledged by Arch. It is impossible, for example, to determine whether the migrating whales that passed through Japan's waters began to avoid offshore hunting grounds or whether these populations were hunted out, which seems more likely to Arch. It is here that the all too brief discussion of whale biology and ecology in Chapter 1 might have been augmented with a more thorough discussion of existing whale migration data and behavior, which admittedly might not be available for Japan's populations or, even if available, might not be historically relevant.

One recent study (probably too recent for the author to consult), for example, refers to some evidence that hunting may cause a range of migratory marine species—whales included—to alter their migration behavior in a more diffused pattern. "Hunting, particularly in the early pre-industrial era, targeted coastal wintering grounds used by aggregations of Southern [Pacific] Right Whales as calving, socialising and breeding

areas ... that could have prompted dispersal events.”² Another 2015 study by some of the same authors concluded that “when whales that show fidelity to a particular migratory destination are extirpated, the ‘memory’ of that migratory destination is also lost. The effect is exacerbated when there is depletion across the migratory network, as was the case with whaling.”³ Consequently, Tokugawa foragers would not have necessarily needed to wipe out the entire population of whales seasonally moving through their coastal waters. They could have effectively altered whale migration routes away from the coast waters by steadily killing off the individual whales able to remember their pods’ migration route via Japan.

Of course, this conceptualization of hunting effects on migration is by no means definitive—as Arch would certainly assert. It does, however, demonstrate the potential effects of animal behavior beyond conscious human control on socio-economic institutions that shows how humans on land and animals in water could be mutually conditioning in historically significant ways. Such a dynamic seems to exemplify a core principle of the latest version of Pacific history. Arch’s unavoidably inconclusive discussion of the issue, nevertheless, does lay a foundation for historicizing the concept of sustainability in early modern terms that may expand its connections to other historical periods.

This is arguably the most significant comparative “catch” obtainable from reading *Bringing Whales Ashore*. The book makes a further contribution to the disenchantment of the notion that early modern resource extractions were somehow ultimately more sustainable than their modern successors. This links the book to existing work such as that of Johan Elverskog’s deconstruction of ‘green’ or ‘eco-’ Buddhism.⁴ Arch—even if all too often only implicitly or inadvertently—boils this important project down to a more elemental existential issue of whether or not human society is a sustainable proposition in the long run. Whales may have other fish to fry, but there is no more pressing issue for humans in their current modern predicament—a predicament that books like *Bringing Whales Ashore* suggest is actually an early modern legacy or, perhaps in terms more appropriate to Melville, a portent: “Future things swim before me, as in empty outlines and skeletons; all the past is somehow grown dim.”⁵

² Carroll *et al.* (2019), p. 62.

³ Carroll *et al.* (2015), p. 11.

⁴ Elverskog (2020).

⁵ Melville (1981), p. 514.

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