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Author challenges fisherman on whale and seal hunting

Marine biologist and author C. George Muller has hit back at comments made by fishing identity Peter Talley supporting hunting whales and seals. Calling the comments made during a speech to local school children “ill-considered and inaccurate”, Muller says Talley has no evidence to support any of his statements.

Talley’s claim Japan should be allowed to hunt whales because they were doing it sustainably is sadly misinformed. There is no evidence for the alleged “sustainability” of Japanese whaling. In fact, despite Japan’s insistence that there are plenty of whales given the Southern Hemisphere minke whale population numbers over 760,000 animals, these figures have been discredited by scientists and withdrawn by the International Whaling Commission’s Scientific Committee. Research has shown that minke numbers are closer to 250,000 – less than a third of those claimed – and the IWC has repeatedly called for Japan to end its hunt. Furthermore, scientific research has shown that the minke whale population is further subdivided into three separate species, and then into local and regional populations with little inter-migration between them. This means even a very small kill could result in localised extinction in a particular area. Japan’s plans to expand its kill to include species classified as endangered and vulnerable makes a mockery of any claims of sustainability. Past commercial whaling was characterised by a serial depletion of one whale stock after another, and massive illegal and unreported kills of over 90,000 whales which drove many of the larger species to the verge of extinction. Despite over forty years of protection, Southern Hemisphere Blue whales still number as few as 400 animals, and may never recover. As Muller points out, “We have only to consider the lessons of history to see whaling is not sustainable – particularly when “managed” by the industry responsible for exploiting it.”

Muller also takes issue with Talley’s suggestion that seals should not be protected because they catch more fish than fishermen (in particular hoki and cod), along with his regular calls for a cull to reduce numbers.

Muller points out that New Zealand fur seals were hunted almost to extinction in past centuries and since attaining protected status over 100 years ago have managed to recover to just 10-15% of their estimated pre-exploitation population in that time. Talley’s frequent claims of fur seal population explosion are wildly over exaggerated and are not based on any sound science or accurate survey methods, as are his claims they catch more fish than fishermen.

While ashore in the breeding season fur seals fast for weeks and even months at a time, and in many areas fur seals don’t even eat commercial fish stocks, preferring species such as 10-15cm long Myctophids (lanternfish) and octopus. Hoki is not normally a major component in fur seal diet since the deep-water fish live further down than most individuals can dive. It is only when the hoki are brought up in nets that they come within reach of most fur seals.

Talley’s allegations that seals eat too many fish are not only false, but disingenuous. As Muller points out, these ecosystems functioned perfectly well when there were ten times as many fur seals present in New Zealand. The difference now is obvious – and Mr Talley and other fishermen need look no further than their own mirrors to see the cause of declining fisheries.

Due to its extractive nature the fishing industry is inherently unsustainable. Many fisheries around the world are in trouble due to overexploitation, and New Zealand is no exception. Talley's comments are nothing more than the latest chapter in a long line of self-serving propaganda attempting to point the blame elsewhere. He appears to like stirring up controversy in a bid to gain support for his position by implying he is the innocent victim of a conspiracy by radical "greenies". This ignores the fact that concern for the environment and the future we leave for our children is not a radical belief, but a sensible and responsible attitude shared by a majority of New Zealanders from all walks of life.

Muller says Talley's attempts to attach a monetary value to the Omega-3 oil content in fur seals clearly shows where his priorities lie – and completely ignores the value of live whales and seals to the tourism economy of New Zealand, an industry worth far more than fishing.

While stopping short of calling for a public boycott of Talley's products, Muller says "People should make up their own mind about whether they want to support the lifestyle of a fisheries magnate who lives in a private mansion and likes to pass ill-considered judgement condemning anything he perceives as a threat to his revenue stream."

(C. George Muller is a New Zealand wildlife biologist with experience in scientific research on whales, dolphins and seals in New Zealand, including a masters degree in marine biology, plus numerous marine mammal publishing credits in scientific journals. He has advised government DoC staff on seal handling and survey techniques, and has also written *Echoes in the Blue*, a recently-published book on whaling in the Southern Ocean).

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