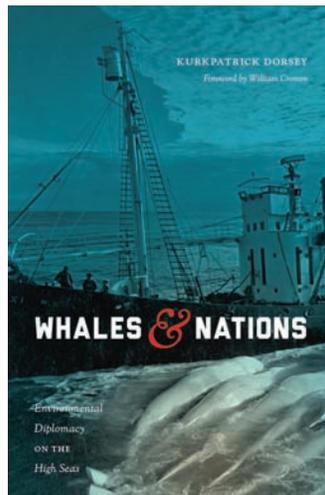


## REVIEW ESSAY

### **Whales and Nations: Environmental Diplomacy on the High Seas.**

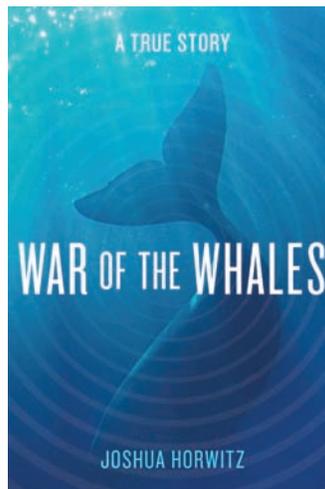
Kurkpatrick Dorsey. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2016. xxii and 380 pp., appendix, notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper (ISBN 9780-2959-9559-5); \$34.95 cloth (ISBN 9780-2959-9311-9).



The first, *Whales and Nations*, by environmental historian Kurkpatrick Dorsey, is a traditional academic monograph, written by an academic in academic prose, dense with citations, and published through an academic press. Dorsey traces the history of the international regulation of whaling from the first efforts by European countries to coordinate their activities for the purpose of maximizing and sustaining profits to today's standard of an international moratorium on commercial whaling. According to its preface, Dorsey's book is "about international efforts to make whaling sustainable in the twentieth century" (p. xix), efforts that the author concludes—probably correctly—have failed, and approaches the subject through three alliterative lenses: "sustainability, sovereignty, and science" (p. xx). The book rightly calls into question certain obvious shortcomings of the regulation of international whaling, from the uncertainty of scientific knowledge regarding whale populations and biology to the policy-weakening "objection system" built into the framework of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), but also points out the unique requirements presented by the geographic scale of the whaling industry. Because "whaling was an international industry beyond the control of national governments working alone" (p. 40), international coordination and accountability were necessary for the conservation of whale populations, even if the first efforts to restrict catches were motivated by a desire to ensure that catches could continue. This necessity was by no means universally agreed on at the time. For example, in an argument that echoes today's debate in U.S. society over gun control, one early twentieth-century British whaling company owner argued against the implementation of whaling regulations, on the grounds that "honest whalers would not strip their industry of its supplies,

### **War of the Whales: A True Story.**

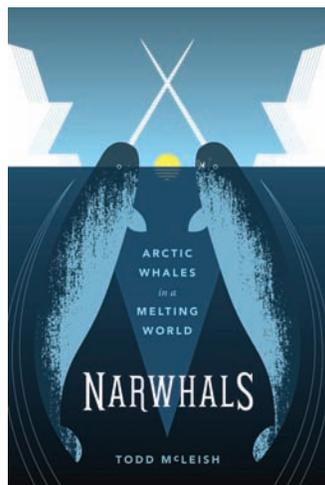
Joshua Horwitz. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014. xviii and 428 pp., maps, illustrations, notes, index. \$16.99 paper (ISBN 9781-4516-4516-4).



### **Narwhals: Arctic Whales in a Melting World.**

Todd McLeish. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2013. x and 216 pp., maps, illustrations, index, bibliography. \$22.95 paper (ISBN 9780-2959-9416-1), \$90.00 cloth (ISBN 9780-2959-9735-3).

*Reviewed by Russell Fielding, Department of Environmental Studies, The University of the South, Sewanee, TN.*



Three books published in recent years approach various aspects of the complicated relationship between humans and cetaceans and the complexity of human–environment interactions more generally. Taken together, these three volumes also challenge our conceptualization of academic writing and academic writers by presenting a spectrum of the styles, publishers, and author credentials that exist throughout the landscape of erudite—if not always scholarly—literature.

and the dishonest ones would not abide by the rules anyway” (p. 11). Despite concerns over rule-breaking and—more reasonably—outright departures from the IWC by nations that disagreed with its aims, whaling quotas began to appear and grew increasingly strict, culminating in the IWC’s 1986 zero-quota, or moratorium, still in effect today.

Dorsey’s history can be engaging—most of all in the post-World War II era as he traces the cultural history of what would become the “save the whales” movement—but occasionally comes across as an onslaught of facts. This reviewer views the task of the historian as scouring the archives, digesting the primary sources, and delivering a synthesized narrative to the readers. Dorsey’s recitation of the happenings at each year’s international whaling meeting can come across as too raw, too unprocessed, and too open for interpretation. The book’s readers might feel as though they are in the dusty archives of Washington, London, or Oslo, paging through the brittle, yellowed pages right alongside Dorsey. This virtual research experience might have been what the author intended, but it could also be tedious for readers who want to learn about whale conservation without feeling as though they have just sat through decades of IWC meetings. These annual “readings of the minutes,” essentially, do build toward the book’s thesis but do so, perhaps, at an achingly slow pace. That said, maybe this book’s greatest strength lies in the overly thorough support it lends to its conclusions. *Whales and Nations* includes several pithy statements—some Dorsey’s own and some quoted from the primary literature—that can only be read as truisms. Statements such as, “the only real remedy to overhunting is to hunt less” (p. 100) seem self-evident but are supported nonetheless by mountains of historical data. The author’s main point, as this reviewer reads it, is summed up in a quote from a former U.S. Department of the Interior official, that the conservation of whales is “an appropriate field for international cooperation” (p. 116). The geographic scale of the cooperation required to “save the whales” can be hard to fathom. Kurpatrick Dorsey understands it experientially through his exhaustive archival work; his book gives its reader the opportunity to experience it, too.

The second book, *War of the Whales*, fits better in the genre of literary nonfiction and evokes the work of other storytellers familiar to geographers such as McPhee, Kurlansky, or Winchester. Although not held to the same standard of rigor as academic writers, Horwitz has clearly been thorough in his research as the extensive endnotes, source list, and index indicate. The narrative here is about a multispecies, mass stranding of cetaceans that

took place in the Bahamas in 2000 and the subsequent investigation that ultimately linked the event to secret underwater acoustics testing by the U.S. Navy. Horwitz’s investigation of the incident benefits from fourteen years of hindsight and follows all the leads—no matter how tangential—in teasing out the story. Long sections on the use of sonar—for biological, military, and scientific purposes—together with expansive biographies of most of the major characters break up the plot into sections that all tend to end with small cliffhangers. The effect is something like that of a serial novel, which ends each installment at a carefully chosen point in the plot so as to buoy interest until the story picks up again. Reading about the intricacies of Cold War-era antisubmarine technology or the history of international whaling regulation (essentially *Whales and Nations* greatly abbreviated and summarized in a few pages) might strike some geographers—or most general readers—as tedious, but Horwitz makes it seem necessary, not just to the understanding of his subject matter, but as a break from the gripping narrative of his main storyline. The jaunts into science, policy, and history take advantage of the intense interest engendered by the plot-rich chapters. The result? Horwitz’s readers might end up learning more than they realize as they read through the background sections, anxious to get back to the story. The overall message of *War of the Whales* is clear: Humans have developed the power to disrupt cetacean lives in ways that we previously could hardly imagine.

The final book that figures into this essay, *Narwhals*, is an interesting hybrid of academic and popular writing: published by a university press yet written with seemingly less rigor than the Simon & Schuster offering just described. The author states early on, “I’m not a scientist, though sometimes I wish I were” (p. 5). This book follows McLeish on his journeys to observe and better understand one of the more mysterious cetaceans, the book’s title character. The author pursues narwhals to learn about their behavior, threats they face, and of course, their iconic tusks. He deftly presents contemporary and speculative research on the physiology of the tusk without fully committing to any one hypothesis. With regard to threats, climate change is a major concern, as the book’s subtitle implies. Narwhals need sea ice to create a niche for their feeding; as it diminishes, so does the range previously inaccessible to their competitors. Direct hunting is another issue for narwhals and another example of McLeish’s measured approach to a nuanced topic. Rather than come down fully for or against narwhal hunting, he recognizes the inherent difference in economic motivation between the subsistence hunts for food in Greenland and the profit-driven

hunts in Canada that supply the narwhal tusk trade. In fact, McLeish was able to observe a narwhal hunt in Greenland, and provides a fascinating and introspective commentary, not only on the events themselves, but on his own emotional reaction to the hunt as it happened. A final threat—marine noise pollution—is discussed in passing, but provides a link from this book to *War of the Whales*, despite the differences in geographical setting and species of interest. Underpinning both is the message hammered home by *Whales and Nations*: The conservation of wide-ranging and diverse marine species is a task that requires work at the international scale.

Despite the popular style of writing, *Narwhals* gets at something nostalgic to many of us academic geographers: the sense of adventure that drives the wonder, research design and execution, and scholarship integral to our field. McLeish wanted to know more about narwhals so he packed up and went to Greenland and Arctic Canada. He evidently felt the same allure that drew our intellectual predecessors—Humboldt, Marsh, and Sauer, among others—to strike out into the field and learn firsthand from the lives and landscapes they would encounter. Through time spent with Western scientists, Inuit hunters, and narwhals themselves, McLeish discovers more than he expected about the object of his fascination. Sharing the journey with his readers, McLeish shows us the process as it unfolds, not as a finished and polished body of knowledge. In this way *Narwhals* is reminiscent of many geographers' first field experiences: journeys of discovery, both about the subject matter and about ourselves.

Of course, non- or less scholarly books like *War of the Whales* and *Narwhals* require some grace on the part of the academic reader. Some conventions or oversights might take getting used to. McLeish, for example, annoyingly shifts between miles and kilometers throughout the book, defines *nunataks* merely as “remote mountain peaks” (p. 130), refers to the Canadian territory of Nunavut as a province, and—not technically an error but a statement that might irk the scientists among his readers—remarks that an aerial marine mammal survey is “very scientific and technical, and frankly, not very fun” (p. 26). For his part, Horwitz's text contains fewer of the glaring mistakes that are infrequent, but present, in McLeish's. *War of the Whales* trends more toward the hard-to-believe and harder-to-verify anecdotes that, if whales weren't mammals, might be called “fish tales.” In his “Author's Notes on Sources and Interviews” section at the end of the book, Horwitz lists the myriad interviews

with the book's principal characters, many of whom, judging from some sections of the book's content, must have included some embellishment. Evoking further suspicion is the self-conscious, validation-seeking phrase, “A True Story,” stamped near the top of the book's cover like an oversized label on a fake designer handbag.

These quibbles are not meant to be pedantic; rather, they worry this reviewer—a layman when it comes to both narwhals and naval sonar—that other statements might contain inaccuracies but are harder to detect. These errors are the proverbial brown M&Ms in the bowl backstage—indicators of the fact that everything must be checked thoroughly before being accepted. At the same time, these authors from outside the academy provide a fresh perspective that we geographers would do well to embrace. McLeish, for example, likens the layers of compacted snow brought up by an ice core to “Life Savers in a roll” (p. 89), an analogy that this reviewer plans to use in future classroom lectures. Horwitz's front and back inside covers are each entirely taken up by full-color, informative, and beautiful maps—marine charts more accurately—that show the archipelagic setting of his story, along with the locations of important events mentioned in the text. This cartographic feature exceeds the equivalent resource included with many a volume published within academic geography, but serves to instantly remind the geographically inclined reader of the simple allure of a well-drawn map.

These three books need not be read together, but doing so would allow for their natural complementary nature to be fully realized. This reviewer suggests starting with *Whales and Nations* to lay the foundation of international whaling and whale conservation at its proper historical and geographical scale. Pick up *War of the Whales* next to discover ways that human action affects cetaceans beyond our predictions—and more important, beyond the scope of our efforts in the forum of international conservation. Finally, conclude your three-course foray into the world of human-whale interactions with *Narwhals*, a lighter, more feel-good book about the joy, wonder, and Type II fun of a true research-based adventure. Although each of the books is something of a jeremiad against human impacts on whales—and, by extension, the broader marine environment—reading them in the order prescribed here will guide the reader on a journey from frustration over international politics toward hope in the promises of science and human curiosity.