Makah Whaling Rights: A Moral Debate of Cultural Preservation

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What drew me to my topic was its clear connection to this year’s theme. The debate surrounding Makah whaling has served as an interface between significant conservation challenges and the need to honor and maintain treaty sovereignty, as well as historical and cultural traditions of Native Americans. The failed diplomatic action between the national government and the Makah adds another layer of complexity to the conflict, reflecting strongly polarized perspectives, aspects of which made me question my own stance. As a person who has always been interested in issues regarding human and animal rights, I thought Makah whaling would be a fitting and engaging topic for my project.

I relied on a variety of sources, including news articles, videos, documents, and papers for my presentation. Online resources provided direct insightful accounts. I made sure to focus my research on usage of primary sources first and foremost so I could form my own opinions and gain historical context. While I found it difficult to find news coverage about Makah whaling before the recent legal developments on the matter, sources that I did find were very useful.

I first created a script telling the story of the tribe and the debate from multiple perspectives. I created a digital timeline of events, highlighting key points from both sides, making sure to note connections to the theme and the historical importance of my topic. When I had a fully developed script, I added visuals that best highlighted and told the story to graphically present my topic in a compelling way. Upon making it to the Washington State NHD competition, I sought to incorporate an interview into my documentary. I contacted Jonathan Scordino with Makah Fisheries Management, who passed my interest on to the Tribal Council as well as Makah Chairman Timothy Greene. I was able to organize a Zoom interview with Chairman Greene to add to my project.
It is my belief that the Makah tribe should be able to whale within a set limit as instituted by the IWC. A diplomatic foundation for the tribe’s legal rights, the Treaty of Neah Bay from 1855, affirms the tribal right to whale, which has been questioned multiple times by animal rights groups and associated activists on the basis of environmental ethics. The only successful hunt from the 1920s through present-day (executed in 1999) had a lasting positive impact on the Makah community, enforcing cultural traditions and spiritual wellbeing. This act had nationwide implications for all sovereign nations and the rights of tribal citizens guaranteed in treaties.

Whales are a resource to the Makah beyond a simple food source. They have been utilized as tools, artwork, handicrafts, spiritual resources, and hold deep cultural significance. Whales have sustained the tribe for thousands of years and kept them connected to their historical values and roots. This issue not only has crucial implications for the Makah tribe itself but implications in every fundamental level of activism, in regards to conservation as well as the respect of indigenous culture nationwide.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


This article revealed the hatred and racism that was directed at the Makah tribe from whaling opponents. It accented how racism and discrimination drove some of the opposition in the issue. To portray the weight of this, I used the article headline as an image for my project.


This source provided me with first-hand details about the community’s reaction to the successful 1999 hunt. It included details about the tribe’s celebration of the hunt, as well as the protests of animal rights activists following the event and the racist backlash from organizations and media.


This image depicted an artifact from the historic Makah whale hunts. I used it to show the contrast between whaling tools used hundreds of years ago and those used in the 1999 hunt.


This article included a succinct summary of the tensions and the resulting backlash from the Makah’s proposed whale hunt. It helped me understand the intensity and magnitude of the opposing perspectives.

My interview with Chairman Greene from the Makah Tribe provided me with significant insight into the impact of the successful 1999 hunt to members of the Tribe. The interview was a fantastic opportunity to gain a better understanding of this issue from a first-hand perspective.


This source offered news coverage and a graphic video record of the successful 1999 hunt. I used the visuals to give the viewer a first-hand look at the hunt. It helped me convey the emotional aspects on all sides of the event.


This source provided me with a photocopy of a section from the Treaty of Neah Bay that I used in my documentary. I included it for visual impact.


This primary source included the legal specifics in the unsuccessful diplomacies of the early 2000s with NOAA and the Makah. I used a section of this document in my project to highlight the significance of it to my topic.


This document marked the final rule to remove the Eastern North Pacific Gray Whale from the Endangered Species List, a crucial milestone in my project. I included a section from this document in my documentary to add variety and context into my presentation.

This source offered a video record of the successful 1999 hunt, depicting the tribe’s celebration and providing excellent visuals for my project. The raw footage itself proves the positive effect that this event had on the Makah.


This article summarizes the status of the legal challenges against the Makah’s whaling request. It also includes reasoning for their opposition to the hunt.


This article provided a summary of the Makah whaling debate in the eyes of Sea Shepherd, a key player in the fight against the tribe’s whaling rights. It reflected their perspectives and positions on the matter.


This a copy of the original 1855 Treaty of Neah Bay, which provided me with the specifics of the Makah’s whaling rights. I cited several segments of the treaty in my presentation.


This site was a very vital resource for my project, as it provided me with many quality first-hand images. Many of the images that I used depicted members of the Makah tribe while whaling or partaking in whaling-adjacent activities.

This article described with much detail, the jubilant celebration of the tribe immediately following the successful whale hunt. It also depicted the conflicts with protesters that occurred at the same time. This source helped me grasp the importance of whaling to the tribe in the short term and long term.


This source provided me with Sea Shepherd’s perspective about the Makah’s whaling autonomy, as well as their justifications for opposing the hunt. It helped me to better grasp the lack of understanding between many animal rights activist groups and the Makah tribe in regards to what has motivated the hunt.


This site offered a map of the current Makah reservation. It helped me in my project by illustrating the land size of the tribe.

Secondary Sources


This source offers a conservationist’s perspective on whaling, and calls for the consideration of the intrinsic rights of whales. Including a polarized perspective of the issue, it helped me understand the contrasting positions involved in this debate.


This article provided me with more current context regarding the Makah’s right to whale, going into detail about the legal proceedings involved. It also included several quality, related images which I used in my documentary.

This article offered information on the history of the whaling debate. It also summarized the legal history relating to NOAA fisheries authorizations and associated legal proceedings involving the hunt.


I used this source about Japanese commercial whaling for images of whaling protests. The images helped depict the effort of activists against commercial whaling in my project.


This article included insight about Japan’s history with commercial whaling. I used an image from this source (Japanese whaling harpoon) to depict the differences between tribal and commercial whaling.


This source provided me with an appropriate image representation of the legal system and legal decisions. I thought that the teetering scales of justice would suit the matter of my topic, as the legal proceedings involving the Makah’s whaling rights are still underway currently.


I used this image in my presentation to represent a candlelight vigil. There was no footage or documentation of the candlelight vigil at the Seattle Federal Building, so I felt this was a proper replacement.

This article was helpful because it provided context about the diplomatic actions involved in the authorization of the Makah whale hunt. I also made use of several images from this site that provided appropriate impact for my project.


This article provided information on legal agreements between the International Whaling Commission and the Makah tribe. It outlined specific regulations and measures that came into play when the legality of the hunt was brought into question multiple times in the 2000s.


This article offered insight into the perspective of both the Makah tribe and conservation organizations, providing historical context on the issue. It also provided information on how treaty rights weighed into the debate.


I used this source for a compelling photo depicting large-scale commercial whaling. The image causes a strong visual impact, as it shows multiple dead whales on the deck of a boat. The article helped me learn about the history of commercial whaling worldwide.


This journal provided a good summary of the Makah whale hunt and the legal challenges surrounding it. It helped me understand how the dispute led to racist actions and words against the tribe, and a questioning of the legitimacy of the hunt. I also used multiple photos from this source.

https://www.animalspot.net/gray-whale.html.
This website provided me with multiple images of gray whales for my project. On top of this, it offered information about gray whales as a species and their biology.


This source provided me with a great background video for the text portions in my project. The imagery is relevant to my topic and seemed like a great fit.


This site included an image of a gray whale that I made use of in my documentary. It also offered information about gray whales and their historical population decline.


This article provided information on the cultural significance of whaling to the Makah, as well as helpful images I used in my documentary. It also offered direct tribal perspectives on animal rights groups.


This source touched on the historical legal battles that Indigenous peoples have had to fight in order to maintain their land and culture. It helped me better understand the concept of cultural assimilation and the genocidal erasure of Native communities that has taken place all through history.


This article offered context of the current legal battle for whaling rights in Japan, a starkly different issue to the tribe’s. It helped me understand the differences of the whaling industry in different cultures. I also used an image from this source, one that I
thought would capture the differences between Japanese whaling and Makah whaling without words.


This article helped me view the pending issue of Makah whaling rights through the perspective of a member of the tribe. It also provided me with a scenic image of an attempted hunt in 1998 that I used in my documentary.


This article described both the conservationist and tribal perspectives of the Makah whaling conflict. I used several photos from this article to document the 1999 hunt. It also included information about the legal process with NOAA fisheries for authorization to conduct a whale hunt.


This source offered high-quality images that I made use of. On account of technology errors, I was unable to include my screen recording of the interview I conducted with Makah Chairman TJ Greene. So, I used an image of Chairman Greene from this article as a replacement.


This website included multiple general images of gray whales that were useful to me in my project. The images helped when I needed a broad-relation graphic to include in bits of my documentary.

Grier 11

This source catalogs all aspects and impacts of the Makah whaling debate. It lays out potential alternatives and solutions to the legal challenges as well as outcomes for various scenarios. This was an extremely comprehensive and helpful information source for my project.


This article provided me with details surrounding the current legal battles involving the Makah’s whaling rights. I also made use of a helpful image of the 1999 hunt in this site for my project.


This source accented the central importance of whaling to the Makah tribe, including its spiritual implications. It provided me with an understanding of the historical relationship between the gray whale and the Makah tribe.


I used this source to gather information about the process involved in the Makah’s attempted reclamation of whaling rights in recent months. I wanted to include commentary about their current legal battle in my project, so this article was helpful.


This article helped me better recognize the societal impact of whaling as an industry, both in America and internationally. It included information about various cultures that have a history with whaling and a connection to it spiritually or as a food resource.

Marrs, David. “The ‘Save the Whales’ protest group has been roundly chastised for not wanting to save all of the animals.” Daily Squat, June 4, 2020.
The broad message of the image included in this source gave me multiple options for when I could include it in my documentary. More generalized images helped me out in areas where there was no coverage of a given event.


This source included a helpful image depicting commercial whaling in Japan that I used in my documentary. I thought that the image properly expressed the magnitude of the whaling dilemma.

https://www.npaihb.org/member-tribes/makah-tribe/.

This source describes many aspects of the Makah tribe. This includes its organizational structure, services/programs, functions, and a general description of the tribe and its culture in general.


This source included information about the tribe’s whaling history, their decision to resume the hunt, and an in-depth description of the 1999 hunt. It gave me a full look into the eyes of the Makah hunters and the significance of the whale as a resource and cultural icon.


This source provided me with background about the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and its tactics to combat whaling. I also used an image from this site, Sea Shepherd’s logo, for my documentary.

This source brings up the suggested reintroduction of Makah whaling in accordance with a judge’s recommendation. It informed me of the current legal processes involved in this issue. It also included a graphic of the 1999 hunt that I used in my project.


This site offered an impactful image depicting commercial whaling that I used in my documentary. It also included a lot of useful insight about the Japanese whaling industry, providing me with a reference for what whaling is like in other countries.


This source offered an analysis of the relationship between the Makah tribe and their historical marine traditions. It broadened my understanding of the tribe’s justifications. I also utilized several of the historical images from this article.


This article provided information on the treaty rights of the Makah, as well as the ecology and conservation aspect of this issue. It also explored the moral implications of tribal whaling.


This article included numerous excerpts from interviews with people from all sides of the Makah whaling controversy. It analyzed both sides of the issue, acknowledging both the
cultural significance of the hunt to the Makah and the sensitive position that gray whales are in as a species.


This article provided a thorough overview of multiple facets of the Makah whaling debate. It covered both perspectives and portrayed how racism came into play. It also touched on the legal process of this issue and the broader implications for other indigenous tribes.


This journal addressed the multi-faceted aspect of whaling all around the globe. It offered me a look into the bigger picture of cultural evolution and the effects on the world that cultures hold in regards to tradition and development.


This source offered an image of a gavel. I included the image in my documentary to represent the legal processes involved in the Makah whaling debate.


This source is a comprehensive analysis of the reinstatement of Makah whaling from the tribal perspective. It helped me understand the Makah’s legal basis for sustaining their whaling rights. I also used a graphic of a segment from the Treaty of Neah Bay in this source for my project.

This source offered several images of the tribe’s land that were helpful to my project. I thought that including the ‘welcome’ sign for the Makah Nation that I found in this source would be a good touch of variety for the images included in my documentary.


This brief analysis of the Makah’s ongoing battle for whaling rights offered a great summary of several issues that I wanted to point on in my project. It included a great image of the successful 1999 hunt that I made use of in my documentary.


This article offered an update from 2008 regarding the Makah’s legal battle to regain their treaty right to whale. I used an image from the site that depicts Makah whalers in a whaling canoe.


This source provided me with an image of the Seattle Federal Building for my documentary. It was helpful because it depicted where the candlelight vigil protest against the 1999 Makah hunt took place.


This article describes comparable situations to the Makah whaling conflict, where northwest treaty tribe rights are put in risk. I also used an image provided in this source.


This website offered a lot of information about the ongoing debate of Makah whaling rights. It included details about the legal process of the ratification of whaling rights and the key players involved.

This was a helpful timeline that included multiple major events in the Makah whaling conflict. It helped me with the structure of my documentary by providing a timeframe for topics I wanted to cover.

Witting, Lars. “Reconstructing the population dynamics of eastern Pacific gray whales over the past 150 to 400 years.” ResearchGate, January 2003.

This source offered a diagram of the Eastern Pacific Gray Whale population from 1840 onward, including estimates of gray whale populations in future years. It helped me depict the positive result of decades of effort from activists in the rebirth of the species.