

The Ethical Dilemmas of Whaling – Contemporary Arguments and Positions

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To understand the debate about the ethical aspects of whaling it is important to discern between two approaches to the topic. We can describe this as discerning between a whale as type or as token. As a type the whale's importance (or primary importance) in an ethical sense is as part of a certain group/species. The normative primacy in type-arguments is given to the group and the arguments are usually framed within environmental ethics and focus on the sustainability of hunting. As a token the whale's importance, (or primary importance) is in and of itself as an individual conscious being. Thus, token-arguments take on characteristics roughly similar to those of ethical arguments about human actions towards other humans. The focus here becomes different versions of welfare and/or rights.

Both type- and token premises and arguments are in play when discussing the perhaps most divisive area of the ethics of whaling: the differences between commercial and (indigenous) subsistence whale hunting. We must become much clearer on the meaning of such concepts as 'commercial', 'indigenous' and 'subsistence' if we are to understand our relationship to the whales and try to answer what kinds of ethical implications this relationship includes.