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Facing Changes, Changing Targets: Sperm-Whale Hunting in Late Eighteenth-Century Brazil

by Patrick Hayes, Al Matthews, and Nina Vieira | Arcadia, Autumn 2019, no. 44

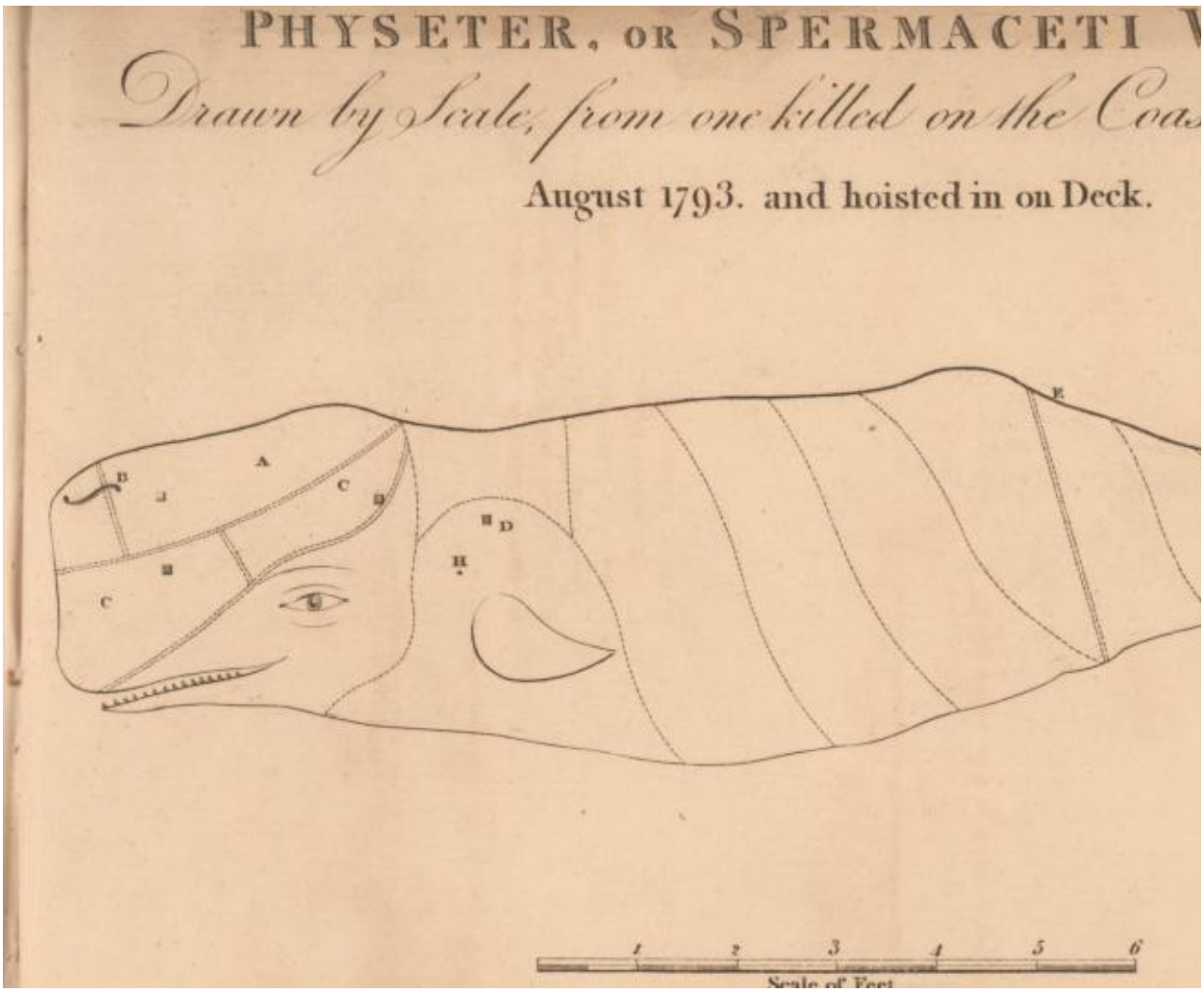
On 22 September 1773, the Leviathan, a whaling vessel from Newport, Rhode Island, entered the port of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. The *Leviathan* was captained by Thomas Lothrop and had been chasing sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) in the Atlantic since January that year. By September the ship had lost one of its whaling boats and was short on provisions, so was forced to land in Rio to resupply. This accidental landing would give rise to a whole new whaling industry in Brazil.

ety.org/sites/default/files/styles/popup/public/thumbnails/image/object2.sperm_whaling_scene.jpg?

Gould from the journal that he kept while sailing onboard the ship Columbia of Nantucket (1841–1845).

Brazil was a Portuguese colony where a coastal Basque whaling style had developed over two centuries as a crown monopoly (1614–1801). Whales were captured at sea under contract from Portuguese administrators, while most of the hard labor was performed by African slaves. The main targets were the southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*) and the humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). In the mid-eighteenth century there was much talk amongst the whalers of another species, one that provided two extremely valuable substances: spermaceti and ambergris.

Unknown to the Portuguese whalers, the source of these substances was the sperm whale, a species of cosmopolitan distribution inhabiting the open sea. It is the largest species of toothed whale (order Odontoceti) in the world, with males weighing up to 57 tonnes and females 24 tonnes. They can dive to a depth of up to three thousand meters while hunting squid and other deep-water prey. The spermaceti, found in their distinctively shaped head, is thought to aid buoyancy while deep diving and enhances the echolocation they use to hunt in the absolute darkness of the ocean depths. Ambergris is a hard substance produced in the stomach and is thought to ease irritation caused by the mandibles of the cephalopods they feed on. Spermaceti was mainly used in the production of candles and as lamp fuel. Ambergris was used to make fine perfumes and was a component of medicines prescribed to treat headaches and cardiac issues, among other ailments.



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Depiction of a sperm whale caught on Mexico in 1792, showing the way it should be butchered. Items in the in
Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library.

In 1765 Portuguese whaling contractors sent two French whaling experts to discover if spermaceti and ambergris could be sourced from Brazilian whales. They visited one whaling station after another over the course of three years, inspecting dead whales, but they did not find the fated substances. There is evidence that local whalers in Brazil were aware of the sperm whale, but this empirical knowledge was ignored by the administrators, who believed that "God is not served that in our seas of America appear more than three types of whales, without any being those that provide the drugs." ("Drugs" is a reference to the medical uses of spermaceti and ambergris.) After a great deal of time and expense, the Portuguese administrators were no closer to finding the species they were looking for. The accidental landing of the Leviathan in Rio changed that, as the locals quickly realized the ship was engaged in a new type of whaling, one that demanded novel methods and expertise, and had a different target species, the sperm whale.

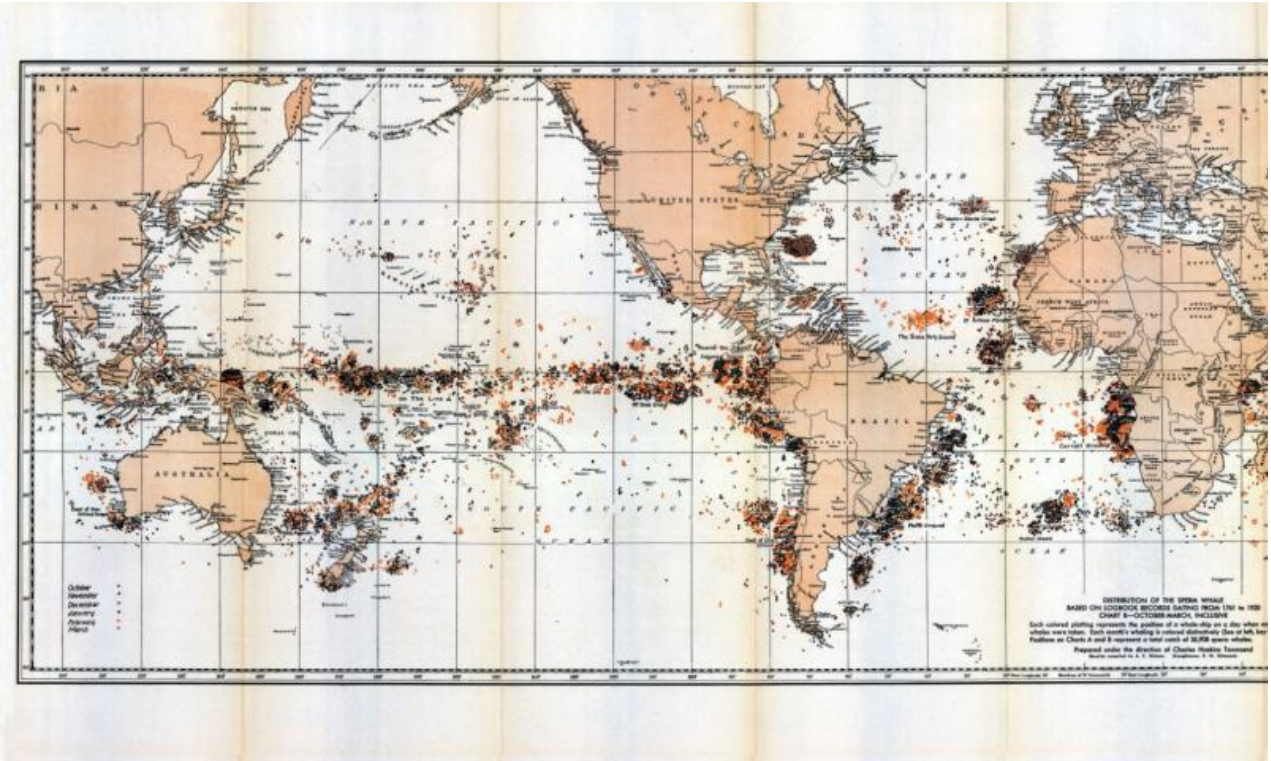

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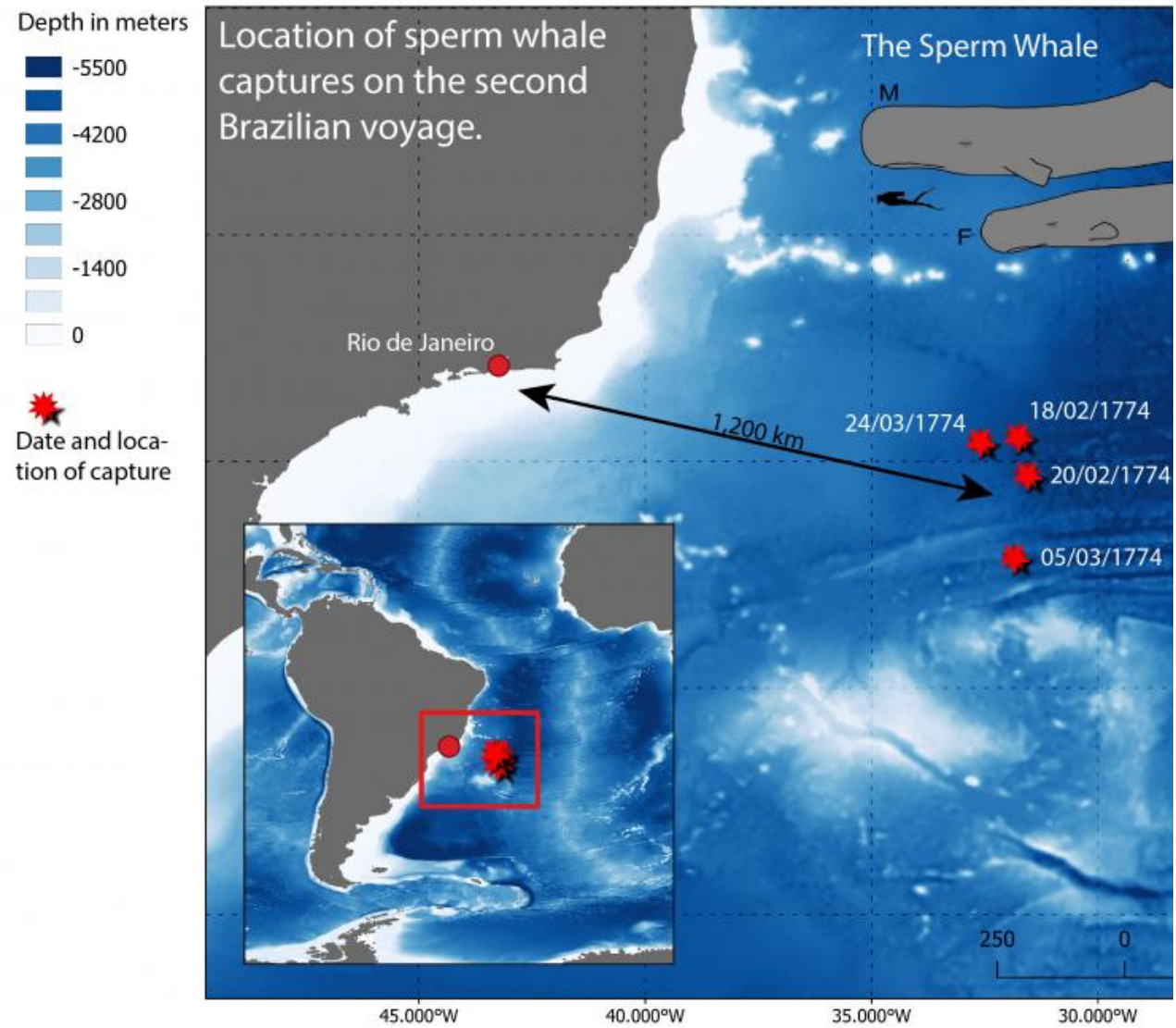
Chart B of The Townsend Whaling Charts. Sperm Whale, October to March, 1761–1920.

Soon the foreign crew joined the local whalers; a ship was ordered to be equipped identically to the *Leviathan*, with borrowed spears, harpoons, and hooks so the Portuguese could copy the North American whaling methods. The new ship departed in October 1773 and returned three months later, having caught six sperm whales. Due to the success of this voyage, Lothrop and his crew were employed to teach the Portuguese everything they knew about hunting and processing sperm whales; in exchange they were paid a share of the proceeds from each whale caught. During a

second voyage that took place from February to March 1774, nine sperm whales were caught around 1,200 km off the coast of Rio. We know this because detailed records of the voyage were kept, including the number of animals caught, and the amount of oil and spermaceti harvested—another innovation borrowed from the Rhode Island whalers.



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Location of sperm whale captures from the second voyage (February 5 to April 1, 1774). Nine whales were cau an average depth of 5,100 meters.

Facing economic and environmental changes, and by sheer chance, the Portuguese crown and whaling administrators changed target species and adopted a new whaling method. From October 1773 to June 1777, 30 whaling voyages were conducted and a total of 186 sperm whales were captured by the Portuguese off the coast of Brazil. At the same time, the presence of North American and British whalers in the South Atlantic increased, and whaling grounds were explored

further offshore, along the entire Atlantic coast of South America and beyond. Portuguese involvement in sperm-whale hunting ended in 1777 because the whaling contractors amassed unsustainable debts and the industry was taken over by larger vessels from other nations.

The accidental arrival of the *Leviathan* in Rio de Janeiro in 1773 sparked a new industry in Brazil and contributed to the inexorable decline of the other leviathans in this story, the sperm whales. The exploitation of whales in Brazil was facilitated by the transfer of knowledge first from the Basque country, then from North America, and finally in the early twentieth century when Norwegian whaling methods were introduced. Sperm whales are now listed as "vulnerable" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, due to centuries of commercial exploitation. Today, discussions are taking place about the creation of a South Atlantic whale sanctuary, and conversely there are calls to resume commercial whaling. The present story reminds us about the power of knowledge and the importance of spreading positive and helpful information about conservation and the impact people can have on other animals and ecosystems.

Acknowledgments

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- The Oceans Past Initiative (http://oceanspast.org/)
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