

Lost and alone: first whales face extinction

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Environment Editor

ONE of nature's gentlest giants may become extinct. Scientists have warned that the north Pacific right whale is likely to be the first of the great whales to be wiped out by humans.

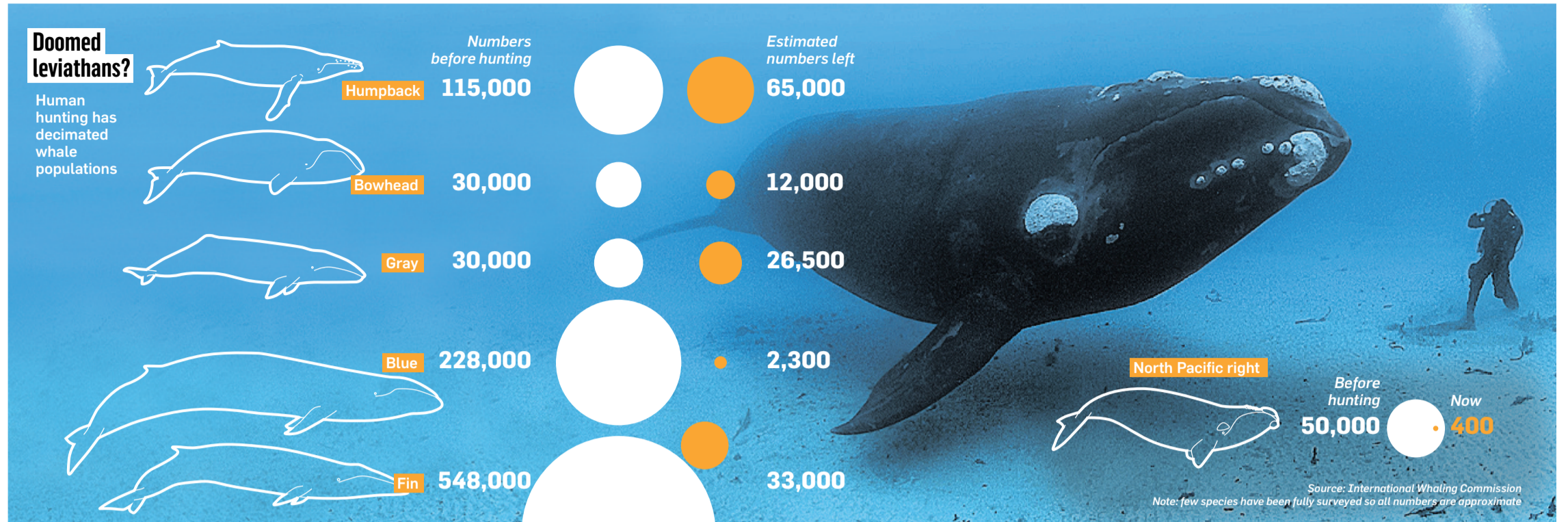
Population surveys show the species, which once numbered many tens of thousands, has declined to just a few hundred.

Those survivors are scattered across millions of square miles of ocean, potentially too far apart to find each other and breed.

The eastern Pacific is worst affected with just 30 animals left, of which only about eight are fertile females.

That population seems to have separated from a larger one in the west but even this comprises only 300-400, with fewer than half being females of breeding age.

"The north Pacific right whale is arguably the most endangered large whale in the world," said Phillip Clapham, a senior researcher at the



National Marine Mammal Laboratory, part of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, who was part of the team behind the surveys.

The warning, which was published in the journal Marine Mammal Science, coincided with last week's annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission in Panama. There, South Korea announced its intention to em-

bark on a "scientific" whaling programme in the Pacific, targeting minke whales.

Richard Benyon, the British fisheries minister, said: "There is nothing we need to know about whales that involves killing them. It is commercial whaling in a thin disguise."

The north Pacific right whale, which eats by sieving plankton, is one of the largest marine mammals ever to have

lived, reaching about 80ft and weighing up to 80 tons. The blue whale, the largest mammal, typically reaches 100ft.

For 19th-century whalers, however, the north Pacific right whale was by far the more prized catch because of its high oil content and the way it floats even when dead, reducing the risk of losing the prey.

"Estimates suggest that from

1840-49 up to 30,000 animals were killed," said Mark Baumgartner, a marine ecologist at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts, who has studied the North Pacific right whale. "This was the decade which destroyed the population."

The decline was so severe that, in 1909, the animals became one of the first great whales to be given protection

from hunting. Over the next 50 years their population began to rise slightly.

However, in the early 1960s the Russian whaling fleet was told it could harvest North Pacific right whales, despite international agreements to the contrary, and almost wiped them out.

In a research paper due for publication shortly Yulia Ivashchenko, who works with

Clapham, will describe how she searched through the records left by the Russian whalers to work out that they had killed 661 animals.

This was such a huge proportion of the remaining populations that it did not just halt the recovery, it put the species in what could be terminal decline.

In the latest survey, scientists flew back and forth across the northeast Pacific dropping

sonar buoys tuned to detect the calls made by north Pacific right whales. Once the whales were located they were tracked visually from planes and each was photographed.

The species faces further threats with plans to exploit parts of their Pacific range for oil and the likelihood that shipping will increase as the melting Arctic ice cap opens up new shipping lanes.

Government fund backs trawler firm caught fishing illegally

Jon Ungoes-Thomas

AN INVESTMENT fund owned by the Department for International Development has been financing a trawler company involved in illegal fishing off the west African coast.

The Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) has invested about \$1.7m (£1.13m)

in the Sierra Fishing Company in Sierra Leone through a private equity firm.

One of the company's ships, Marampa 803, was captured by the Sierra Leone military in January illegally fishing in waters meant for local fishermen.

CDC is among a number of international funds investing in the worldwide fishing

industry, which benefits from billions of pounds of subsidies a year despite a United Nations estimate that more than 80% of fish stocks are fully exploited, overexploited or depleted.

Among them is Carlyle Group, the global equity firm, which has employed George Bush Sr and Sir John Major as advisers. In June 2010 it bought

a \$190m stake in the China Fishery Group, which owns a 50,000-ton factory ship, the Lafayette. The ship can process 1,500 tons of fish a day, and scientists have warned that it is stripping out mackerel stocks in the northeast Atlantic and south Pacific.

The Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), a charity that

highlights "environmental abuses", monitored Marampa 803 illegally fishing in October 2011 and January 2012. The vessel was captured by a Sierra Leone armed patrol in January and fined.

Two months after it was caught illegally fishing, the Sierra Fishing Company wrote to the president of Sierra Leone

urging that a ban on pair trawling — in which one vast net is pulled through the sea by two trawlers — be lifted, claiming it could have a "positive impact" on the environment. The EJF says the method is unsustainable in waters that are not tightly regulated.

CDC said it invested in the Sierra Fishing Company and

other small businesses in Sierra Leone via Manocap, a private equity fund. It added that the Marampa 803 was working for the Sierra Fishing Company as a contractor.

A CDC spokesman described the illegal fishing incident as "a serious error on the part of the company" but added: "We know that Manocap are taking

it extremely seriously and have undertaken a review of policies and procedures to ensure that there is no repeat."

Patrick Siewert, a managing director at Carlyle Group, said the China Fishery Group targeted plentiful species such as jack mackerel and worked closely with fishery officials to protect stocks.

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