



The Massacre of Seals and Whales in Malvinas and Adjacent Areas

Sovereignty or colonial enclave: 1760-1860

In 18th century Patagonia, large massacres of sea lions and whales began in the Malvinas and South Atlantic Islands, leading to their near extinction by the 19th century. At this time, whaling also increased, almost completely exterminating the animals by the beginning of the 20th century. In this study, we will analyze the correlation between these industries and the hunting restrictions they faced during the Malvinas Command of 1820-1833 and the later usurpation of the Malvinas Islands.

• Malvinas and the South Atlantic in the - 18th and 19th Centuries

The first usurpation of the Islands happened in February 1764 when Frenchman Louis Antoine de Bougainville founded the Port Louis colony. The French control was short-lived, ending when Spain subsequently claimed the island's domain and historical rights. The British came to the Islands shortly after and fought the Spanish crown. On the 10 of June 1770, the British were expelled after they surrendered to the Madariaga fleet. After this, Spain exercised uninterrupted control over the Islands from Port Soledad until the 25 of May 1810, when the United Provinces took over. (FIGURA 1).

The Spanish flag was the only one to claim territorial sovereignty in Malvinas from 1767 to 1810. Its governors depended primarily on Virrey del Río de La Plata, and later on the Commanders of the Governor of Buenos Aires. Faced with the presence of fishing vessels – mostly North American and British whalers and seal-hunters – vicereine authorities began to patrol the coasts of the Patagonian waters with clear strategic objectives to control the territory. As a result, by the end of the 18th century, various establishments were founded on the Patagonian coast: Real Compañía Marítima de Pesca in Port Deseado, the colony of Floridablanca in San Julián, and Nuestra Señora del Carmen and La Candelaria (or San José).

In 1810, the Argentine government began acting to demonstrate its sovereignty over the Malvinas Islands. They designated governors, created legislation restricting fishing resources, and granted territorial concessions. On the 10 of June 1829, the government issued a decree declaring that “the Malvinas and adjacent Cape Horne Islands in the Atlantic Ocean will be governed by a Political and Military Commander.” While in this position, Luis Vernet initiated the commercial development of the islands. Additionally, he announced the profits that the colony could produce and improved the Port Soledad settlement, which he named Port Luis. He also arranged a command post over Magellan through a rapprochement with the Aóniken'k groups of the Strait of Magellan.

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*Figure 1: Port Soledad in full activity (1794).
Drawn by Fernando Brambilla, the artist on the
Malaspina expedition.*



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*Figure 2: Seal of the Command of Malvinas and Adjacent Islands.
Malvinas and the South Atlantic Islands Museum*

The commercial importance and dispute over marine and coastal resources

During the 15th–17th centuries, explorers utilized marine and coastal resources to sustain their crews during their long journeys. However, in the 18th–19th centuries, new developments brought the commercial exploitation of these resources by whaling and seal-hunting boats. The Malvinas Islands were very important, not only as hunting grounds, but also for their supply of cattle, pigs, fish, birds, eggs, and vegetables without scurvy. The protected ports also allowed visiting boats to winter there and make repairs when returning to their place of origin was not possible. At the end of the 18th century, foreign whalers and seal-hunters began a strong trade with China. Between 1797 and 1798, the boat named Neptune from New Haven obtained 30,000 seal skins from the Malvinas Islands, Cape Matas, and Port Deseado alone. This boat went on to travel to Canton, China, to sell its goods at a price 10 times that which was offered in New York.

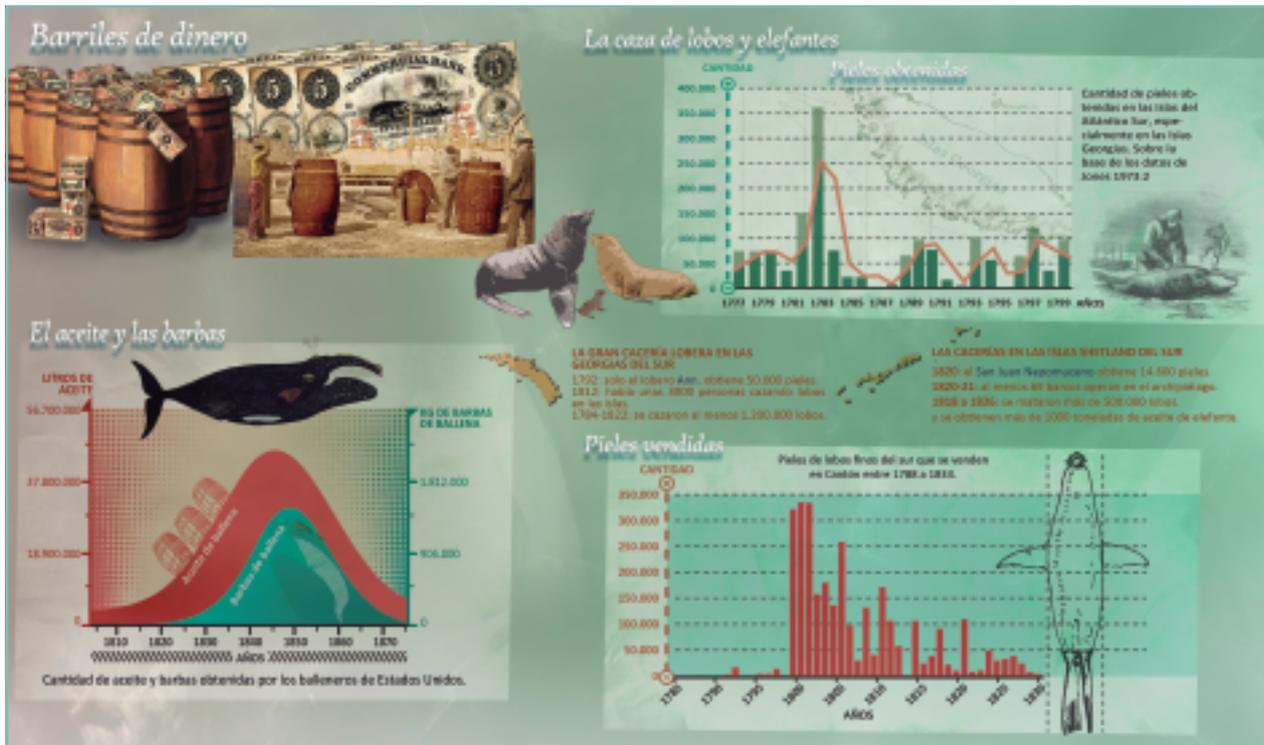


Figure 4: Barrels of money. The great slaughter of seals and whales, from “Caviglia, 2015, pgs. 130-131”

They bought tea, luxury fabrics, and porcelain, which they then resold in the United States for six times their purchase value. (Figure 3).

The periods of slaughter had peaked and were beginning to decline just as the seals and elephant seals were at the point of extinction. In some cases, penguin oil was also extracted: their hides were dried and used as fuel for the extraction of elephant seal oil. By 1840, they added guano, principally in continental Patagonia. At this time, the whaling business was also prevalent, especially in the extraction of fine sperm-whale oil, which was widely used in the textile machines of the Industrial Revolution. The oils were also used in street lamps and in lamps to light homesthey were essentially the petroleum of the 19th century. It is estimated that between 1821 and 1822, 320,000 seals were killed in the Shetland Islands alone. By 1822, 1,200,000 seals had been killed in South Georgia. (FIGURA 4).

In FIGURE 5 we see the direct correlation between the restrictions on foreign whaling and seal-hunting during the Malvinas Command (1820-1833) and the usurpation of the islands. This moment coincides with the global increase in demand, as well as price, for whale oil and baleens.

The Usurpation of the Malvinas Islands

At the end of the 18th century, the British crown started to debate the necessity of annexing the Islands. In 1820, David Jewett became Commissioner for the Superior Government of the United Provinces of South America and reaffirmed the sovereignty of the Malvinas and adjacent Islands. That year, there were some 50 foreign boats in the Islands and at least 91 operating in the South Shetland Islands. In 1821, the government in Buenos Aires passed a law regulating hunting on the Patagonian coast.

In 1831, the capture of three North American seal-hunting boats by Luis Vernet triggered a pirate attack by the United States. The Lexington vessel, after attacking the Malvinas, declared it free of all government rule. Thus, the destruction of the Malvinas colony and the transfer of most of its inhabitants to Montevideo was outsourced to commercial interest. From there, the door was opened for certain annexation.



Figura 5. Quantity of whaling/seal-hunting boats per year in the South Atlantic and their relation with political events, from “Caviglia, 2015, pg. 122”

Later, in January 1833, captain John Onslow, by order of the British Admiralty, demanded that then-acting governor of the Malvinas Islands, José María Pinedo, lower the Argentine flag. Pinedo, without resistance, boarded a ship with his men and returned to Buenos Aires. Antonio Rivero, along with his gauchos and Charruas – according to the contentious British version of the story – were the only ones who resisted the occupation for several months.

In the excerpt from the Mexican newspaper *El Fénix de la Libertad* (FIGURE 6), from the 6th of February 1834, it is possible to understand the public opinion at the time of the Malvinas Islands’ usurpation. The journalist saw with remarkable clarity the interests that were at stake and how they culminated: the United States left with its hides and oils – from the exploitation of whales and seals – and Great Britain seized the land. Not only does this excellent synthesis and political analysis emphasize the Anglo-American collusion that occurred, but it also reflects the relevance of marine and coastal resources in the conflict.

The settlement in the Islands was the first permanent Argentine colonization in the South Atlantic. It was interrupted only by the forceful displacement of its residents at the hands of the United States,

who in 1832 destroyed and plundered the colony, and then by Great Britain, who annexed the Islands in January 1833 in an act of colonial aggression. From then on, an illegitimate government was established to oversee the continuity of an annexed territory that was seized by force in times of peace, bringing and implanting a foreign population. Unlike these new inhabitants, the expelled residents of the Malvinas Islands could not manifest their right to self-determination.

GLOSARIO



SCURVY: an illness produced by a lack of Vitamin C, characterized by ulcerations in the gums and bleeding. It was common in sailors who made long voyages and did not have access to fruits or vegetables in those times, and it could cause death.

GUANO: Guano, from the Quechua “wanu” or “huanú estiércol”, is the substrate resulting from the accumulation of excrements from marine birds or seals. It is an exceptional fertilizer containing three of the principal components for the growth of plants: nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium.

EL FENIX DE LA LIBERTAD.

TOM. IV.

SENIOR, Jueves 6 de Febrero de 1834.

NUM. 27.

BUENOS-AIRES.

La cuestión de las islas Malvinas es muy reciente... Tan luego como el nuevo gobierno independiente [Argentina] se consolidó, determinó colonizar esas islas, puso allí un gobernador, y formó algunos establecimientos. La ley de colonización, a los extranjeros,... les impedía la pesca de ballenas y caza del lobo marino sobre las costas de las Malvinas. Sin embargo... los anglo-americanos continuaron pescando y cazando sobre las costas: se les reclamó repetidas veces por el gobernador de la colonia; no hicieron caso: por último, fue necesario en cumplimiento de las leyes hacerles varias presas. [captura de tres barcos loberos] El gobierno de Buenos-Aires contestó con energía que los ciudadanos anglo-americanos habían infringido las leyes de la república argentina, y que por eso se les había confiscado sus buques. No fue menester más para que a los pocos días se presentase una fragata de guerra [Lexington] anglo-americana en las Malvinas, y con una refinada perfidia destruyese los establecimientos argentinos y apresase al gobernador y demás gentes que habitaban allí, llevándose igualmente las propiedades de aquellos infelices colonos y matando todo el ganado de su pertenencia. Esto se verificó en plena paz. ... mientras iban y venían notas de Washington, el filantrópico gobierno de S. M. B. [su majestad británica], sin duda para evitar motivos de disgusto entre dos amigos, tomó el partido medio de apoderarse de las Malvinas.

La cosa, pues, ha venido a parar en que los Estados-Unidos de América han tomándose los aceites y pieles de la colonia de las dichas islas, destruyendo además las pequeñas fortalezas y casas, y los ingleses se han tomado las tierras. ¿Podrá jamás el gobierno de Buenos-Aires por sí solo obtener una satisfacción de esos atentados escandalosos?



Figure 6.

Daily Newspaper, *El Fenix de la Libertad*, Mexico, 6 of February 1834

• Indiscriminate hunting and indigenous groups

For the indigenous people of Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia, coastal animals were a fundamental part of the diet and worldview. For the Yámana, Kawésqar, Selk'nam, and Haush, the slaughter of seals and whales generated a notable change in their diets and habits, leaving them impoverished in some cases. For the Aóniken'k, the diminished abundance of seals, birds, and eggs along the coasts was a consequence of the 18th-century coastal settlements.

We must learn from this history, as well as from the care of our South Atlantic ecosystems and the sustainability of our territories, making sure to differentiate colonial interests from those associated with a Sovereign Territory. 🔍

• Caviglia SE. (2012). *Malvinas: Soberanía, Memoria y Justicia: 10 de Junio de 1829*. Min. Educación Prov. Chubut, Chubut. 206 p.

Caviglia SE. (2015). *Malvinas: Soberanía, Memoria y Justicia. Vol. II: Balleneros-Loberos-Misioneros s. XVIII-XIX*. Min. Educación Prov. Chubut, Chubut. 300 p.



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