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Ethics codes of the Society for Marine Mammalogy and its journal should be coordinated and revised

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1 ETHICS CODES OF THE SOCIETY FOR MARINE MAMMALOLOGY AND ITS
2 JOURNAL SHOULD BE COORDINATED AND REVISED

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20 The Society for Marine Mammalogy (SMM) has formally adopted a code of professional ethics
21 comprising a list of 17 guiding principles¹, two of which deal explicitly with animal welfare.
22 One guiding principle states that researchers should “Adhere to the highest standards for
23 treatment of animals used in research in a way that contributes positively to sustaining natural
24 populations and ecosystems”. Additionally, there is a more detailed set of guidelines, supported
25 by the Society for Marine Mammalogy (Gales et al., 2009).

26 Yasunaga et al. (2022) present research on Antarctic minke whales (*Balaenoptera bonaerensis*)
27 which does not comply with this animal welfare standard. The work described was part of a
28 whaling program by the Government of Japan in an area of the Southern Ocean designated as
29 a whale sanctuary by the International Whaling Commission. This program, called NEWREP-

¹ <https://marinemammalscience.org/about-us/ethics/professional-ethics-code/> (Accessed 5 October 2022)

30 A, was permitted by the Government of Japan, despite a ruling by the International Court of
31 Justice which shut down the very similar whaling program that preceded it (JARPA II;
32 Clapham 2015), and despite extensive international criticism of the methods and scientific
33 relevance of NEWREP-A (Brierley & Clapham, 2016, De La Mare et al., 2014).

34 Yasunaga et al. (2022) indicate that animals were killed with penthrite harpoon grenades, as
35 used in JARPA II (evaluated by Gales et al., 2008). The killing methods used result in
36 extremely low instantaneous death rates compared with other methods of killing large
37 mammals (Gales et al., 2008). Time to death measurements commonly exceeded 10 minutes
38 with the routine use of asphyxiation as a secondary killing technique (Gales et al., 2008).

39 Thus, the Yasunaga et al. (2022) study falls short of “adherence to the highest standards for the
40 treatment of animals used in research” that the SMM expects. In addition to the SMM code,
41 the journal, *Marine Mammal Science* provides (in its guidelines to authors) ethics guidelines
42 specific to lethally obtained samples². These state, *inter alia*, “Animals should be killed in the
43 most humane and rapid method available.” In the case of Yasunaga et al. (2022), it is hard to
44 argue that the killing of minke whales by penthrite grenade harpoons to be of the “highest
45 standards for the treatment of animals used in research”, even if the killing methods were the
46 “most humane and rapid available”. However, while in this case there is no evidence provided
47 that the killing methods even satisfy the weaker requirement to be the most humane and rapid
48 available, there is clearly a conflict between the SMM ethics code and that of its journal.

49 The current contradictory and outdated ethical guidelines of the Society and its journal place
50 reviewers and the journal editor in an impossible position of not knowing on what basis to
51 evaluate a paper in this regard. Guidelines must be sufficiently clear so that different reviewers

² <https://marinemammalscience.org/about-us/ethics/marine-mammal-treatment-guidelines/> Downloaded 7 October 2022. Section 4.8 refers to lethal studies

52 are likely to reach the same conclusions, and that these conclusions are defensible. Ryan et al.
53 (2021) highlighted additional problems regarding whaling science in Iceland and called for a
54 new ethical framework that would include the approaches adopted decades ago in the
55 biomedical sciences. As in biomedical research³, such a framework would require manuscripts
56 to include an ethical statement. To avoid the ambiguity and confusion caused by these
57 contradictory ethical guidelines, the SMM needs to immediately adopt a revised ethical
58 framework for both the Society and its journal that is more in keeping with the highest ethical
59 standards adopted by other disciplines.

60 CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

61

62 The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

63 LITERATURE CITED

64

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