

II. *On the Production of Ambergris. A Communication from the Committee of Council appointed for the Consideration of all Matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations; with a prefatory Letter from William Fawkener, Esq. to Sir Joseph Banks, Bart. P. R. S.*

Read January 20, 1791.

TO SIR JOSEPH BANKS. BART.

Office of Committee of Privy Council for
Trade, Whitehall, 15th January, 1791.

SIR,

LORD HAWKESBURY, President of the Committee of Privy Council appointed for the Consideration of all Matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations, having received a Letter from Mr. CHAMPION, a principal Merchant concerned in the Southern Whale Fishery, informing him, that a ship belonging to him had lately arrived from the said fishery, which had brought home 362 ounces of ambergris, found by Mr. COFFIN, captain of the said ship, in the body of a female spermaceti whale, taken on the Coast of Guinea; his Lordship thought fit to desire Captain COFFIN, as well as Mr. CHAMPION, to attend the Lords of the Committee, that they might be examined concerning all the circumstances of the fact before mentioned; and I am directed by their Lordships to transmit

to you a copy of the examination of these two gentlemen, that you may communicate the same to the Royal Society, if you should think that any of the circumstances, stated in this examination, will contribute to remove the doubts hitherto entertained concerning the natural history and production of this valuable drug. I send you also a piece of the ambergris so taken out of the whale, and some of the bills of the fish called Squids (which are supposed to be the food of spermaceti whales), and which were found partly in the ambergris taken from this female whale, and partly on the outside of it, and adhering to it.

I have the honour to be, &c.

W. FAWKENER.

At the Council Chamber, Whitehall, the 12th January, 1791.

By the right honourable the Lords of the Committee of Council appointed for the Consideration of all Matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations.

READ—Letter from Mr. ALEXANDER CHAMPION, a principal merchant concerned in the Southern Whale Fishery, to Lord HAWKESBURY, dated the 2d instant, acquainting his Lordship, that Captain JOSHUA COFFIN, of the ship The Lord Hawkesbury, is lately arrived from the Southern Whale Fishery; and that the said ship, besides a cargo of 76 tons of spermaceti oil and head-matter, has brought home about 360 ounces

ounces of ambergris, which the said captain took out of the body of a female spermaceti whale on the Coast of Guinea.

Mess. CHAMPION and COFFIN attending, were then called in, and the following questions were put to Mr. COFFIN, *viz.*

Q. Have any of the whales, taken before by ships sailing from Great-Britain, to your knowledge, contained any ambergris?

A. None, that ever I heard of. The American ships have, at times, found some.

Q. Was the ambergris, found by you, in a bull or cow fish?

A. It was found in a cow fish.

Q. Is it usual to look for ambergris in whales that are killed?

A. It has not hitherto been much the practice to do so.

Q. How happened it that you discovered this?

A. We saw it come out of the fundament of the whale; as we were cutting the blubber, a piece of it swam upon the surface of the sea.

Q. In what part of the whale did you find the remainder?

A. Some more was in the same passage, and the rest was contained in a bag a little below the passage, and communicating with it.

Q. Did the whale appear to be in health?

A. No; she did not. She seemed sickly, had no flesh upon her bones, and was very old, as appears by the teeth, two of which I have. Though she was about thirty-five feet long, she did not produce above one ton and a half of oil. A fish of the same size, in good health, would have produced two tons and a half.

Q. Have you observed the food that whales generally feed upon?

A. The spermaceti whale feeds, as I believe, almost wholly upon a fish called Squids. I have often seen a whale, when dying, bring up a quantity of squid, sometimes whole, and sometimes pieces of it. The bills of the squid (some of which MR. COFFIN produced) were found, some in the inside, and some on the outside of the ambergris, sticking to it.

Q. Did you ever find any ambergris floating on the sea?

A. I never did, but others frequently have.

Q. How long have you been engaged in the whale fishery?

A. It is about sixteen years since I first entered into it.

Q. What is the general proportion of bull and cow whales you have met with?

A. I believe the proportion to be nearly equal. In my last voyage, however, I found only four bulls out of thirty-five whales. I fished upon the Coast of Africa between five North and seven South degrees of Latitude. I am inclined to think, that the cow whale goes to calve in the low latitudes, which accounts for more cows being found in those latitudes.

Q. Is there any particular season when the cow whales calve?

A. I do not know that there is.

Q. Does the bull or cow whale, in proportion to their size, produce most oil?

A. The cow whale, when big with calf, produces more oil than a bull whale of the same size; when suckling, she produces less.

Q. Are the whales usually found singly, or in pairs? or in larger numbers?

A. Usually in large numbers, which we call Scools, and particularly in the low latitudes. I have seen from fifteen to perhaps a thousand together.

Q. Have you any further information on this subject to give the Committee?

A. We have generally observed, that the spermaceti whale, when struck, voids her excrement; if she does not, we conjecture that she has ambergris in her. I think ambergris most likely to be found in a sickly fish; for I consider it to be the cause or the effect of some disorder.

Questions put to Mr. CHAMPION.

Q. At what price does ambergris usually sell; and at what price did that, taken by your ship, sell?

A. A small quantity had lately sold at 25*s.* per ounce; but it was then very scarce. Mine sold for 19*s.* 9*d.* per ounce. The whole quantity, found in this whale, was 362 ounces Troy. The people who bought it told me, this was a larger quantity than was ever before brought at once to market. It has been generally sold at about 4 or 5 pounds at a time.

Q. For the use of what country was this ambergris bought?

A. I do not exactly know. It was bought by a broker, who told me, that his principal, who purchased about one half, bought it for exportation to Turkey, Germany, and France. The other half was purchased by the druggists in town.

