

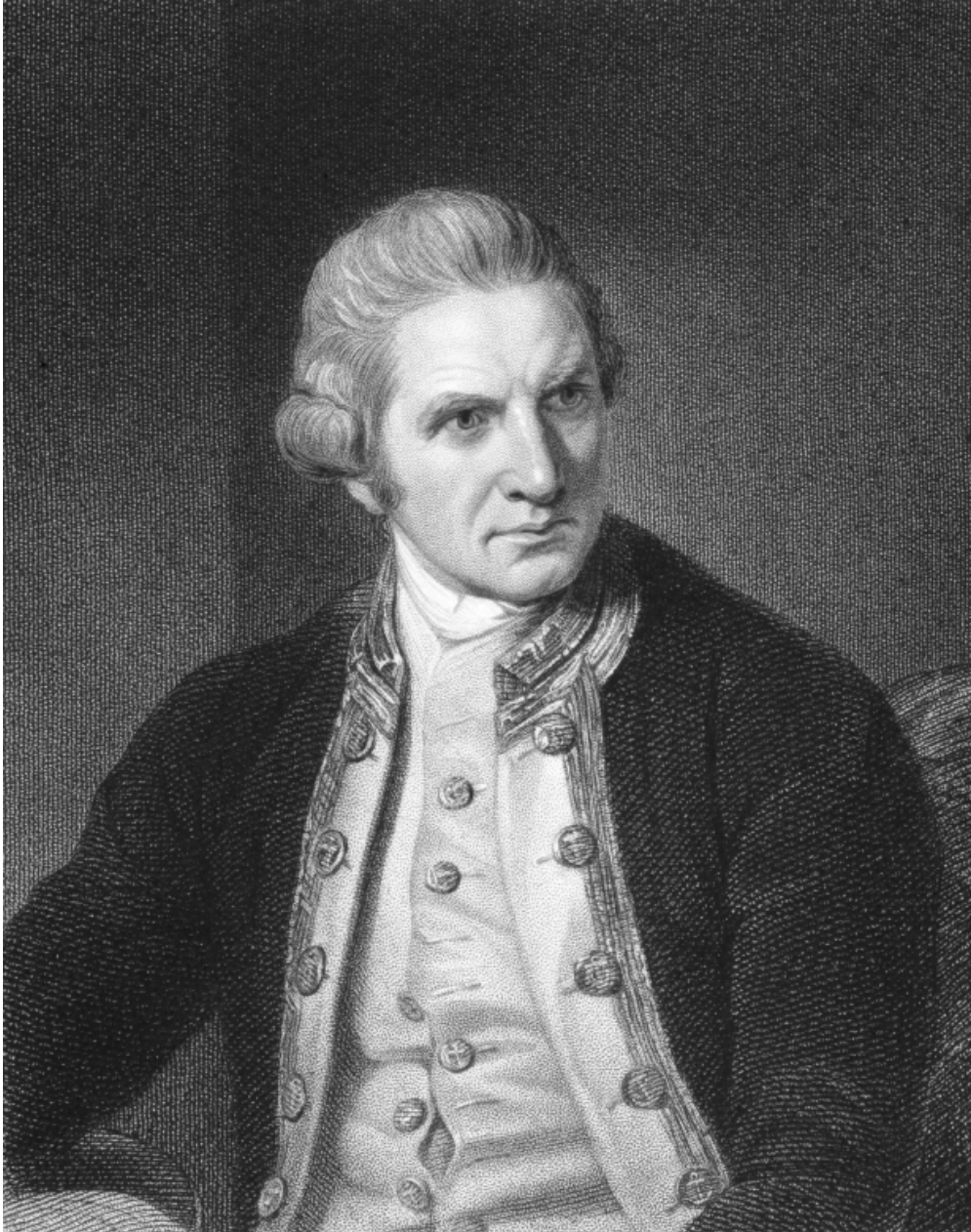
Antarctica: Discovery and History

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Who was the first person to see Antarctica?
- 2) How many people attempted to explore Antarctica?
- 3) Why did explorers want to get to the South Pole?
- 4) How did people use Antarctica's resources?
- 5) What effects did industry have on the environment?

Captain James Cook

Voyages of Discovery



Europeans had talked of a great expanse of land in the southern hemisphere since the early days of sea exploration. Many countries had been inspired to find this land and make a claim for ownership.

The British explorer, Captain James Cook was the first person to lead an expedition to find and claim land in the previously uncharted Southern Ocean.

During his first voyage to the southern hemisphere between 1768 and 1771 he found New Zealand and the eastern coast of Australia and claimed these lands for Britain.

The British Admiralty was keen to discover whether a Great Southern Continent existed in the Southern Ocean. They sent Captain Cook on a second voyage (between 1772 and 1775) with orders to find, claim and circumnavigate the land if possible.

Cook's ships crossed the Antarctic Circle for the first time on the 17th of January 1773. They had travelled further south than anyone else had travelled! After exploring and charting the islands in the Pacific Ocean during the winter months, Cook returned to the Antarctic region and made a second crossing of the Antarctic Circle on 20th December 1773.

By the end of his voyage Cook was able to dispel the notion of a Great Southern Continent. On his return to Britain he was made a member of The Royal Society for his great achievements.

Many explorers from many parts of the world came to the Antarctic region during the 1800s. Many of them came for the sealing or whaling industries. Others came for scientific and geographical discovery.



Sealing Industry

Antarctica was first explored in 1790 by sailors looking for new territory for the sealing industry.

Seals were hunted for their pelts (fur, hides) and their blubber.

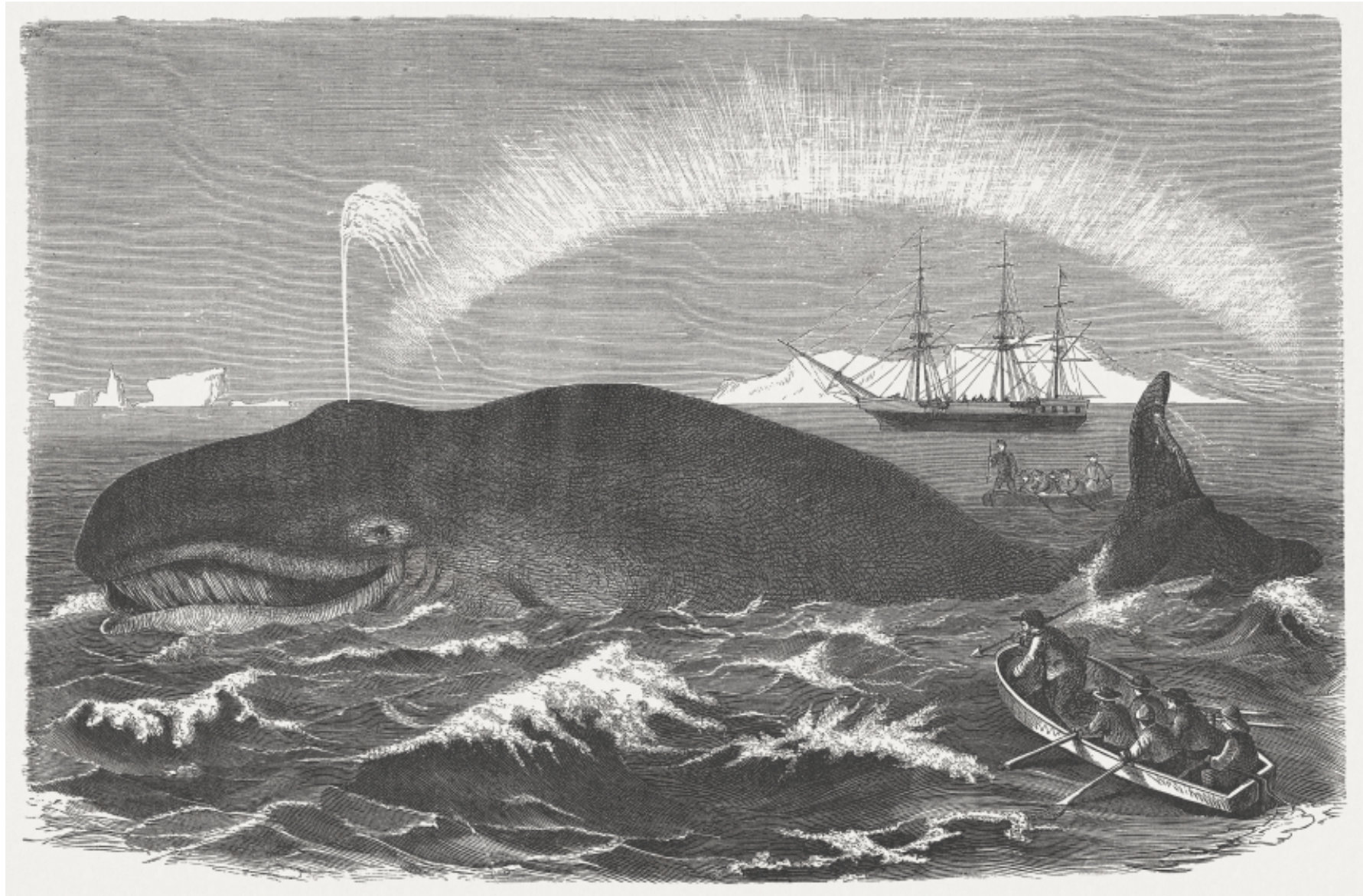
Their blubber was melted down into an oil which was used for lubrication in machinery, for use in cooking and for use in lamps. The oil was also used in the manufacture of soap and paint.

The pelts of the Antarctic fur seal were valuable for making fur clothing.

By the 1830s the population of Antarctic fur seals had dropped dramatically, almost to the point of extinction. Focus then switched to the whaling industry.



Antarctica was first exploited by the whaling industry in the 1830s. They were hunted for their blubber which could be boiled down into oil. This highly sought after oil was used for cooking, in lamps, for lubrication of machinery and in the manufacture of soap, cosmetics, paint and margarine. Whale bone was used in the manufacture of items such as corsets and umbrellas. Whales were also hunted for their meat.



History of Whaling

Early whalers hunted whales with hand thrown harpoons from small row boats, working together in teams to bring the large beasts to shore or to the side of their ships where their carcasses were stripped of their blubber.

This blubber was boiled down into oil and stored in barrels. Whale carcasses were often set adrift in the ocean once the whalers were finished with them.

Whalers generally targeted humpback whales in the early days of whaling because they were easier to catch. When faster boats and improved harpooning technology became available larger whales became the target because they yielded the most oil.

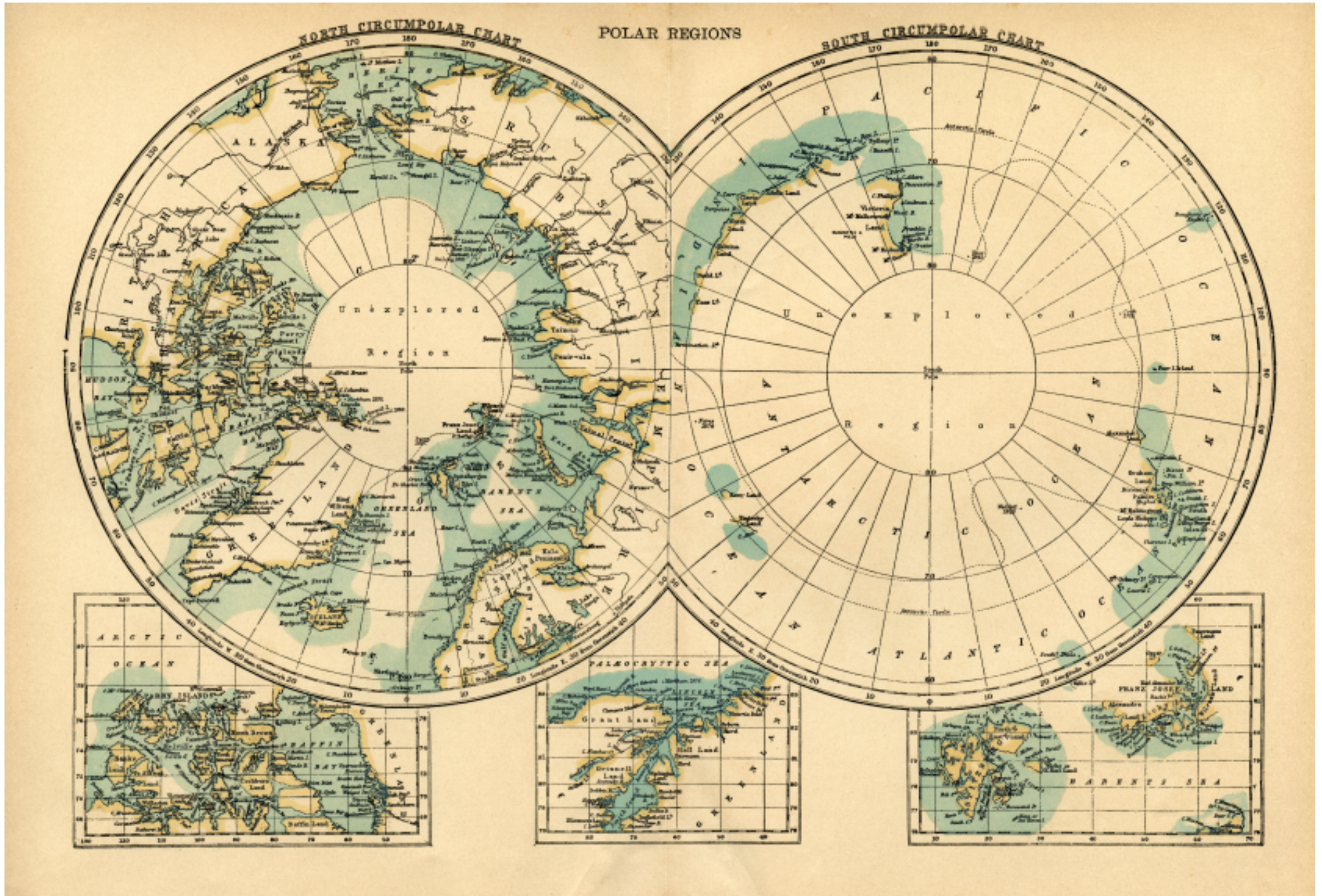
Blue whales were first to be hunted to near extinction. When stocks of Blue whales became hard to find whalers hunted Fin whales. When stocks of Fin whales became depleted whalers turned their attention to Sei whales and then Minke whales.



Whales continued to be hunted for their oil and meat until the International Whaling Commission (formed in 1946) put a ban on commercial whaling in 1986. Norway and Iceland continued to hunt for whales after objecting to the ban and Japan continued to participate in the whaling industry under the loophole of hunting for 'scientific purposes'.

Today, whale stocks are slowly regenerating. Restrictions have remained in place to ensure that threatened species are protected. However, Norway, Iceland and Japan continue to kill a restricted number of whales each season.

This is an old map that shows the extent of polar exploration prior to 1889. Note that the full coastlines of Antarctica in the south and Greenland in the north had not been completely charted by this time.



Exploring The Antarctic

The Antarctic was thought of as 'the final frontier' of exploration. It was the last chance for explorers to achieve notoriety.

Three of the most famous Antarctic explorers of the early 1900s were Ernest Shackleton, Robert Falcon Scott and Roald Amundsen. Each attempted various expeditions to the South Pole.

In 1911, two independent treks to the South Pole were taking place. One was led by the British explorer Scott and the other was led by the Norwegian explorer Amundsen.

Amundsen's crew were successful in their race to the Pole, leaving a Norwegian flag and a note for Scott's team. Scott's crew, arriving 35 days later were disappointed to have been beaten. Unfortunately all of Scott's team died on their return trip from the Pole.

In 1915, Ernest Shackleton's planned overland sea to sea expedition was foiled before it began when his ship was frozen in pack ice for nine months before being crushed by the ice. Shackleton's group then camped on the drifting ice floe for a further five months before setting out in lifeboats for help. Amazingly, all of the crew survived the ordeal.

The coastline of Antarctica was finally charted by the Australian explorer, Douglas Mawson during his 1911 - 1914 voyage. It was later extensively mapped after being photographed from the air in the 1940s.

