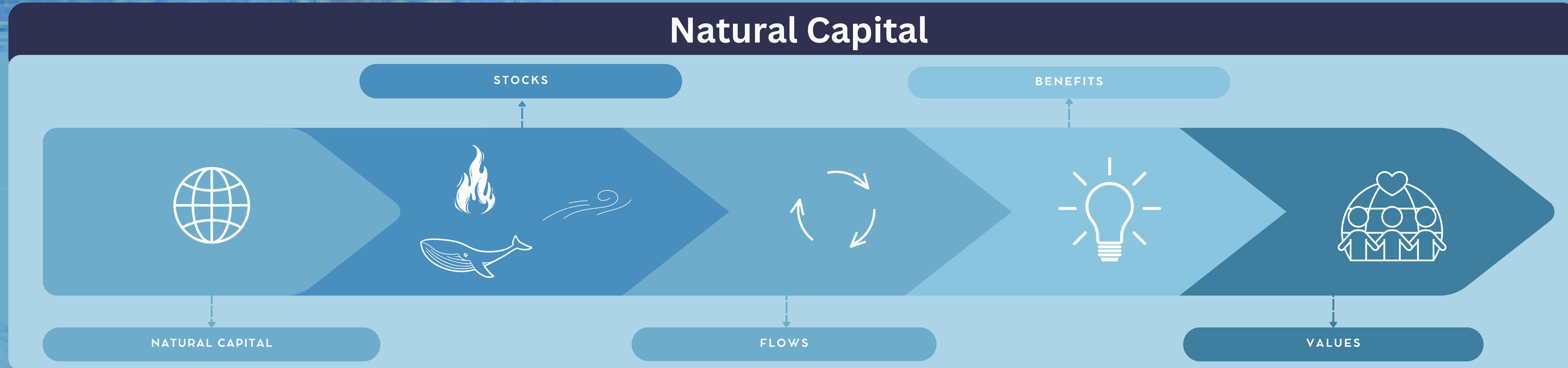


Marine Energy Transitions & Natural Capital

The project 'Transitions in Energy for Coastal Communities over Time and Space' (TRANSECTS) takes a natural capital approach to examining the valuation of marine energies, including whales during the whale oil period. The whaling industry shaped UK coastal communities in profound ways, yet its socio-cultural impacts remain largely overlooked. This study addresses that gap by examining how onshore infrastructures associated with whale processing affected everyday life in Hull, Aberdeen, Dundee, and the Orkney Islands, drawing on archival sources to analyse the trade-offs between industrial prosperity and community wellbeing.

In the infographic below, you can see a simplified logic chain of how natural capital stocks (e.g., whales) produce flows (e.g., whale blubber) that generate benefits (e.g., energy) and ultimately, economic and socio-cultural values (e.g., well-being) for communities.



Methodology

Our project takes a qualitative, multi-case study approach using three field sites focused on the period c. 1750–1910. Through catalogue review and archival visits to physical and online collections, we have compiled a corpus of ~420 archival sources, including court records, medical reports, personal correspondence, parliamentary papers, and newspapers, reflecting a balance between institutional records and personal perspectives.

Using the Template Analysis Method and NVivo, items are coded and analysed to answer the following research questions:

1. How did UK coastal communities “see” the offshore whaling industry through different forms of (in)visible infrastructures?
2. How did UK coastal communities experience socio-cultural dimensions of impacts associated with the whaling industry?

Following preliminary historical analysis from the whaling marine energy period, data collection and analysis on the same research questions are currently being undertaken for an oil & gas energy period (c. 1960–1991) and an offshore wind energy period (c. 1991–present) to form the basis for a natural capital assessment of the socio-cultural impacts on coastal communities across marine energy transitions.

UK Whaling Communities & Marine Energy Impacts



When the Whales Came Ashore: Voices from the Archives

‘While I write I am almost sickened with the smell caused by boiling the whale oil, and am forcibly impressed with the belief that boiling blubber was unknown to the Hebrews, else it would certainly have secured an early place in the catalogue of plagues with which the Egyptians were visited.’

Your correspondent (...) showed incontestably that disease will and does originate by this means, from the very nature of the substance (putrid animal matter), and it is simply intolerable that the whole eastern and centre population of the town should be not only disgusted with, but subjected to the positive danger inhaling this disgusting effluvia. The Nuisance Removal Act should be brought immediately to bear on this flagrant infringement of it.’

–Dundee Advertiser, 29 June 1865
 (“Find My Past” via the British Library)

‘The Whale Blubber which the Respondent has collected at the House of Quoybanks is not a small, but a large quantity, being by his own account, [two?] cart loads, which has been lying for more than two days in the open air in a heap, undergoing the process of putrefication, within a few yards of inhabited houses, and of the public road and occasioning such a stench that several houses took freight [sic.] and could not be got to pass the spot without great difficulty. – This led to much well grounded alarm on the part of various individuals, and the matter having been thought most properly and legitimately under the cognisance of the Board of Health, the present proceedings were instituted, and your Lordship cannot for a moment doubt that they were necessary.’

–Sheriff Court Records. 1832. Pursuer Details: Procurator Fiscal, Nature of Action: Petition, to prevent the landing of whale blubber. Defender Details: John Kelday, mariner & traficker, Kirkwall (Orkney Library & Archives, SC11/5/1832/054)

‘This nuisance has been so often brought before the Board with no effect that we almost despair of anything being now done. (...) This whale oil nuisance has been so long complained of that something ought really to be done for the protection of the public. Nor is it a question of health alone. The Police Commission should consider the comfort of the ratepayers, and when nearly 1500 of them pronounce this oil boiling to be a nuisance, we think they might be safely believed and taken at their word.’

–Dundee Advertiser, 02 March 1866
 (“Find My Past” via the British Library)

Summary of Findings: Marine Energy Across Time & Space

- Whaling relied on coordinated infrastructures—ships, crews, ports, boiling yards, and transport routes—that linked Arctic hunting to onshore blubber processing.
- Local ports and boiling yards embedded whale-oil production into everyday coastal life, generating lighting fuel, employment, and income for local trades.
- Blubber boiling created the “whale blubber nuisance,” with odours causing nausea, headaches, and wider health complaints among residents.
- Smell and smoke disrupted social life and mobility, discouraging outdoor gatherings and causing workers to avoid certain streets during boiling periods.
- The dangers of whaling and long-running governance disputes over community harms versus industry interests formed persistent sources of conflict.

Project QR

