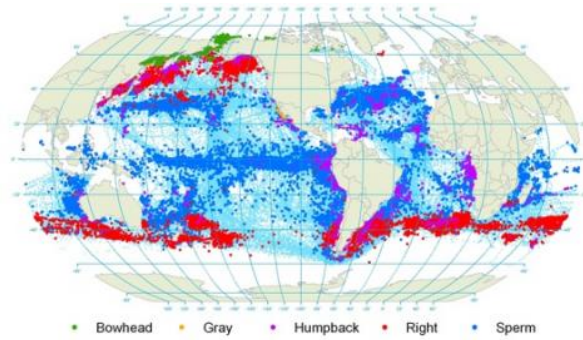




0. ESSEX and the OFFSHORE GROUNDS - Story Preface

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This map, from PBS' "American Experience," depicts the areas where whales were captured between 1790 and 1924. Data for the map was retrieved from a sampling of whalers' logbooks. [Map credits:](#) Tim D. Smith; Judith N. Lund; Elizabeth A. Josephson; Randall R. Reeves.

It took the *Essex* more than a month to round [Cape Horn](#). Then—after being at sea about five months—a lookout sighted a gathering place for whalers off the coast of Chile. The ship stopped at an island called St. Mary's.

Many of the ships in port had bad news. Most were without whales and without oil.

After replenishing their supplies, whalers aboard the *Essex* finally had some whaling success off the coast of Peru. The men were able to boil-down about 450 barrels of oil in two months (roughly the yield from eleven whales).

Capturing eleven whales, in about two months, means the men were killing a whale roughly every five days. That would have been exhausting work.

Believing there were more whales to be had in the Offshore Grounds, Captain Pollard ordered the crew to head for an area around 1,000 miles further off the Peruvian coast. En route, they stopped at a beautiful Ecuadoran village called Atacames. It was there that Henry DeWitt, one of the African-Americans, deserted.

DeWitt's loss was significant since he was a boatkeeper who stayed with the *Essex* when the whaleboats were out. Because Captain Pollard wanted to be at the Offshore Grounds by November, however, he did not have time to replace DeWitt.

The Galapagos Islands, another important stopping place for whalers (and later made famous by Charles Darwin and his discoveries), was a great place for the *Essex* men to [find tortoises](#).

Turtles were a great source of nourishment for whalers. What made them especially good, for sailors on long sea voyages, is that tortoises can live for a year without food and water. Since scurvy was always a serious risk for men making long sea voyages, the *Essex* crew must have been relieved that they had hundreds of turtles aboard as they headed toward the Offshore Grounds.

By the 16th of November, 1820, the *Essex* had been away from Nantucket for slightly more than 15 months. Sailing in light winds near the equator—and more than 1,500 nautical miles west of the Galapagos—the men saw a pod of sperm whales.

Quickly lowering their three whaleboats, the men began their hunt. As so-often happened to other whalers, however, a whale damaged Owen Chase's boat. He, and his crew, had to return to the *Essex*.

Working on his damaged whaleboat, Chase had to make some quick repairs. The sound of his pounding would have likely echoed underwater.

As Chase continued his repair work, Thomas Nickerson—the cabin boy—was at the helm of the *Essex*. Suddenly he saw something highly unusual and potentially dangerous off the port side of the vessel.



A gigantic sperm whale was swimming directly toward the ship.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/ESSEX-and-the-OFFSHORE-GROUNDS-In-the-Heart-of-the-Sea-The-Tragedy-of-the-Whaleship-Essex>

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Media Stream



In the Heart of the Sea - The First Attack

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