

Is the era of whaling in Iceland coming to an end?

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Iceland is one of three countries in the world that still practice whaling, or the hunting of whales for meat, oil, blubber. Although whaling was widespread in the 19th century, when oil made from whale blubber was used in lamps, margarine, and soap, demand for whale parts fell as electric lights replaced oil lamps and vegetable oil replaced ingredients in food and toiletries.

Overhunting caused the stocks in many species of whales to fall to unsustainable levels, so in 1948 the whaling nations of the world came together to form the International Whaling Commission, whose purpose was to manage development of the industry. By the 1970s, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature had listed many species of whales as endangered. This along with disagreements about how to set catch limits and whether whaling is acceptable led the IWC to declare a global moratorium on hunting whales in 1982.

Despite the moratorium, Iceland, along with Norway and Japan, still practices commercial whale hunting – and Iceland is alone in hunting the endangered fin whale, the second-largest animal in the world second in size only to the endangered blue whale. As a result, Iceland faces continuous, substantial, and pervasive international pressure to stop whaling.

Why then is Iceland so insistent on defying the world community to continue killing whales? Has the whaling industry in Iceland changed from the time it began to the present? And what are the prospects for Icelandic whaling moving forward?

History

One reason whaling is such a major part of Iceland's national identity is that it has been practiced there for centuries. Whaling in Iceland dates back to the 12th century, when fishermen practiced drift spear whaling. Crews would spear a whale manually, then wait for the animal to die and its body to wash up on shore so they could claim it.

Sometimes people would stumble across the carcass of a dead whale and take whatever could be used or sold. This happened so often that it has found its way into the Icelandic language. The word “hvalreki,” which literally means “beached whale,” is commonly used to refer to something good that has been encountered unexpectedly.



Icelanders flensing a whale from a 16th-century manuscript.

The modern era of whaling was launched in Iceland when Americans Thomas Welcome Roys and C.A. Lilliendahl brought the rocket-propelled harpoon in 1865. Unlike previous cannon-propelled harpoons, this harpoon had a shell at the tip that would explode on contact inside the whale, generating enough gas to keep the carcass afloat. The rocket-propelled harpoon not only allowed whaling crews to kill more whales but also to recover the bodies faster.

During the late 19th century, the Icelandic whaling industry flourished. From 1883 to 1915, 10 whaling companies operated 14 whaling stations across the country. Most of these companies expanded from Norway, which had depleted its own stocks of whales through unrestricted catches, although Norwegians working in Iceland were required to become subjects of Denmark, which ruled Iceland at the time. They hunted blue, fin, humpback, and sei whales.

Decades of unrestricted hunts in Icelandic waters caused whale stocks to be depleted there too, leading Iceland's Althing to pass a ban on whaling in 1915. The ban was repealed in 1928, and a permit for a new whaling station issued in 1935. In 1948, the company Hvalur H/F bought the American naval base at Hvalfjörður and converted it to a whaling station.



Commercial whaling station in Hvalfjörður. (Credit: Arnaldur Halldorsson/Bloomberg)

Hvalur H/F, owned and operated by multimillionaire Kristján Loftsson, hunts endangered fin whales and exports the meat to Japan. Another company, Útgerðarfélagið Fjörður ehf, hunts minke whales for meat sold domestically in Iceland mainly to tourists.

International Whaling Commission

Since 1948, whaling in Iceland has been the source of international contention, both with other countries and with nongovernmental organizations. Much of that contention has played out through the International Whaling Commission, especially after the 1982 whaling moratorium, between nations that support managed whaling and nations that don't support whaling at all.

The IWC was formed in 1949 by 14 whaling nations to “provide for the proper conservation of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry.” Although Iceland was a founding member, it didn't always follow IWC rules. For example, the commission banned hunting blue whales in 1955 but Iceland continued to hunt them until 1960.

Iceland staunchly opposed efforts to ban whaling, joining a handful of whaling nations to vote down proposals for a moratorium in 1972 and 1973. These whaling nations prevailed for a time, but in the 1970s, IWC membership increased from 14 to 37 mostly anti-whaling nations, and the moratorium passed in 1982. Under pressure from the United States, Iceland's Althing voted 29-28 not to object.



Signing the convention that formed the International Whaling Commission, Dec. 2, 1946, in Washington, D.C.

Even after the moratorium passed, Iceland used every tool at its disposal to continue whaling. Most important was Article VIII of the 1982

moratorium, which allowed governments to issue permits to kill whales for scientific research. From 1986 to 1989, Hvalfur H/F killed 386 fin and sei whales under the research permit, despite the fact that biologists in Iceland condemned the program as unscientific. Most of the whale meat was exported to Japan despite IWC requirements to sell the meat domestically.

Leaving and rejoining the IWC

Iceland had to apply for permits to do research whaling each year, and in 1990 and 1991 the IWC rejected its applications. This led Iceland to leave the IWC in 1992. Iceland complained that the commission's purpose had changed from managing whale stocks to banning whaling completely. However, Iceland's whaling industry was unable to operate outside the IWC because IWC rules required member nations not to trade in whale parts with non-members.



A Hvalfur H/F boat returns to Hvalfjörður with a dead fin whale lashed to its hull. (Credit: IFAW)

This led Iceland to try to get back into the IWC in 2001. Once again Iceland acted to protect its whaling industry by demanding that the IWC allow it to conduct commercial whaling under a "reservation" to the 1982 moratorium, even though Iceland had not opposed the moratorium at the time it was passed. The IWC responded by re-admitting Iceland only as an observer, without the status to vote.

than observer status. Then Iceland was allowed to vote in favor of its own demand for the reservation to the moratorium that would allow it to continue the whale hunt. By a 19-18 vote, Iceland regained a full membership to the IWC, and its reservation was allowed to stand.

Iceland's status changed again at a special meeting of the IWC in 2002. First, Iceland was granted voting rather

For the next five years, Iceland killed 200 minke whales under a research permit, despite condemnation by Britain and 23 other countries. In 2006, Iceland restarted its commercial whale hunting, leading to a formal diplomatic protest by 25 nations. From 2006 to 2015, Hvalfur H/F killed 706 fin whales, using quotas three times the number set by the IWC.

Protests

Because the IWC has been unable to stop Iceland from hunting whales, many environmental and animal protection groups have come to see the commission as toothless and decided to take matters into their own hands. Some of their tactics have been peaceful and legal, while some have not.

On the non-legal side, Greenpeace used its ship *Rainbow Warrior* to interfere with Iceland's whale hunt in 1978 and 1979, prompting Iceland to send navy ships to seize the Greenpeace ship and escort whaling vessels at sea. In 1986, Sea Shepherd Conservation Society activists Rodney Coronado and David Howitt sabotaged the Hvalfjörður whaling station and sunk two Hvalfur H/F whaling ships near Reykjavik. No one was hurt, but the attack caused \$2 million in damage.

These tactics set off a fierce debate in which animal rights activists were called terrorists, and responded by saying the whale killers were the real terrorists. Although Coronado and Howitt were never convicted, Sea Shepherd Captain Paul Watson was made a persona non grata in Iceland and Sea Shepherd's observer status in the IWC was revoked. Many believe these illegal tactics caused public opinion in Iceland to turn against the cause of saving whales.

Because of the poor international response to illegal tactics, environmental groups moved to legal tactics, where they saw more success. For example, in 1987 Greenpeace worked with authorities to seize 170 tons of Icelandic fin whale meat in Germany, and in 1988 to seize 197 tons in Finland. Both seizures were conducted under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, which prohibits trade in endangered species such as the fin whale without a license.



Protesters at the Hvalfur H/F whaling station in Hvalfjörður. (Credit: IFAW)

Greenpeace has also organized international boycotts of Icelandic seafood. Major grocery store and restaurant chains such as Wendy's and Long John Silver's canceled their contracts, hurting Iceland's entire seafood industry. Wegman's and Legal Sea Foods are among companies that signed a pledge not to source seafood from companies linked to Icelandic whaling in Boston.

Another tactic has been to create protests at ports of call where ships carrying whale meat from Iceland to Japan have to dock. Ports in Ghana, Angola, and South Africa have all turned away cargo ships full of whale meat due to local protests. In a related tactic, more than 1 million people signed an online petition posted by Avaaz last year asking St. Kitts and Nevis to withdraw its flag from Hvalfur H/F's cargo ship Winter Bay so that the ship cannot set sail at all.

Economics

In part due to the persistence of international protest, Iceland's whaling industry has been losing money over the past several years. Only 3 percent of Icelanders eat whale at all, meaning that most of the minke whale meat is sold to tourists and all of the fin whale meat is sold to Japan.



Hvalur whalers cut open a fin whale at the Hvalfjörður processing station in 2009. (Credit: Halldor Kolbeins, AFP/Getty Images)

Demand in both instances is falling. In Iceland, the number of tourists who try whale meat has fallen from 40 percent in 2009 to 18 percent in 2014. And in Japan, the whale meat market is glutted with meat from its own whaling done under the scientific research exemption. The amount of meat sitting in freezers has doubled over the past decade with more being added each year.

As whale hunting in Iceland has declined, whale watching has grown. The number of tourists who go on whale watching trips in Iceland has now reached 300,000 per year, equal to the country's entire population. Whale watching is now Iceland's top tourist attraction, bringing in revenues of \$15 million a year.

This too has led to conflict, as whale-watching tours have sometimes gotten more than they bargained for by running into whaling ships carrying carcasses of dead whales lashed to their hulls. American tourist Timothy Baker turned over pictures of such an encounter in 2015 to animal and environmental protection groups, which continue to urge Iceland to end whaling.

Whale-watch touring companies have also complained because friendly whales most likely to approach their ships are also the first to be killed by whalers. Reykjavik City Council recently passed a cross-party resolution calling on the minister of fisheries to create a whale sanctuary in Faxafloi Bay, the large bay off western Iceland where most whale watching takes place.

In 2016, Hvalfur H/F announced it would not hunt fin whales this year. CEO Kristján Loftsson blamed Japan's insistence on testing the meat for toxins, common in an increasingly polluted and acidifying ocean. It is unclear whether fin whaling will start again next year, or what will happen to Iceland's minke whale hunt. But clearly international pressure to end whaling has had an effect, along with increasing logistical problems and falling demand for whale meat.

Perhaps one day soon Iceland will transition from an economy and identity based on killing whales to one based on protecting and celebrating them. Such a new economy would not only put an end to decades of international turmoil over the whaling industry, but would make Iceland a destination of choice in a world that is losing too many other species to extinction.

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