

Ocean

An Indefensible Practice

Iceland's commercial whaling in the face of climate, economy, welfare and biodiversity concerns

August 2023

Introduction

On 20 June 2023, Iceland announced a suspension of the controversial fin whale hunt undertaken by Kristján Loftsson's Hvalur company after a Government-commissioned report laid bare its appalling cruelty.¹

Noting that the whale hunt did not comply with Iceland's animal welfare law, Svandís Svavarsdóttir, Iceland's Minister of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries, stated: "I have decided to suspend all whaling operations in view of the decisive opinion of the Expert Advisory Board on Animal Welfare. In my opinion, the conditions of the Act on Animal Welfare are mandatory. This activity cannot continue in the future if the authorities and the license-holders cannot ensure the fulfilment of the welfare requirements."²

The whale hunt was suspended until 31 August. However, reports indicate that Kristján Loftsson intends to continue the fin whale hunt in September if the suspension is not maintained.³ A defiant Loftsson has even claimed that commercial whaling in Iceland could contribute to achieving Iceland's climate objectives.⁴

In fact, the reverse is true. Whales, including fin whales, provide vital and unique ocean ecosystem services, including capturing carbon from the atmosphere.

In contrast to Loftsson's claim, a report by the University of Iceland commissioned by Minister Svavarsdóttir found that whaling reduces the ocean's ability to sequester carbon.⁵ Whales accumulate carbon in their bodies and sink to the ocean floor when they die. According to a study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), each great whale thus sequesters an estimated 33 tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) on average.⁶ One study suggests that rebuilding whale populations devastated by commercial whaling would remove 160,000 tonnes of carbon each year just through sinking whale carcasses.⁷

Furthermore, throughout life, whales play an important role in the redistribution of nutrients. The excretion of whale faeces, including during migration (known as the 'great whale conveyor belt'), provides valuable nutrients, notably iron and nitrogen, while the vertical movement of whales, the 'whale pump', brings these minerals to the ocean's surface, enhancing primary productivity, i.e. phytoplankton.⁸ A significant number of species and deep sea ecosystems also rely on the nutrients derived from whale carcasses when they sink to the ocean floor.⁹

Front cover: Hvalur's two whaling ships docked in Reykjavik in August 2023

Below: The meat and blubber from fin whales landed at Hafnarfjörður is primarily shipped to Japan.





Greenhouse gas emissions from the international trade in fin whales

Icelandic whaling not only eliminates the climate and other benefits to the climate and ocean productivity that accrue from whales living a long life in the ocean, it also generates significant carbon emissions which directly threaten the country's ability to meet its climate goals and committed objectives.

Greenhouse gas emissions directly arising from the hunting of fin whales in Iceland include:

- emissions from powering the hunting vessels each day through the hunting season
- emissions due to the refrigerated storage of whale products for long periods
- emissions from the storage and shipping of fin whale products to Japan.

Although Kristján Loftsson has struggled to find a market for whale meat, with some fin whale products ending up as dog treats in Japan,¹⁰ the Hvalur whaling company has nevertheless exported more than 13,738 tonnes of fin whale products (meat and blubber) to Japan since 2008.¹¹

In December 2022, after having killed 148 fin whales earlier that year, the Hvalur company shipped 2,576 tonnes of fin whale meat to Japan in the Norwegian-flagged Silver Copenhagen, a Dutch-owned cargo ship. This 49-day journey involved a container ship travelling more than 17,700 nautical miles.¹²

According to calculations undertaken by a marine expert for EIA, we estimate that the voyage of the Silver Copenhagen from Hafnarfjörður in Iceland to Shimonoseki in Japan resulted in greenhouse gas emissions within the range of 2,939-3,054 tonnes CO₂-equivalent. This is based on estimated CO₂ emissions from the main engine and auxiliary power as well as fugitive refrigerant emissions, using assumptions based on the fourth International Maritime Organization (IMO) greenhouse gas (GHG) emission study.¹³

The emissions from a single shipment of whale meat are equivalent to almost one per cent of Iceland's shipping and port annual emission reduction target (which is 320,000 tonnes).¹⁴ This does not account for the emissions incurred by Hvalur's two 70-year-old whaling vessels throughout the hunting season.

Above: The Silver Copenhagen offloads 2,576 tonnes of fin whale at the port of Shimonoseki, Japan.

Greenhouse gas emissions from refrigeration during storage and transport of fin whale products

Hvalur's business is also likely associated with emissions of potent fluorinated greenhouse gases (F-gases) such as hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), which are widely used as refrigerants during storage and transport.

From publicly available information, it is not possible to estimate the emissions from the storage of Hvalur's stock of fin whale products in Iceland. However, it is worth noting that Iceland's F-gas emissions were 201,000 tonnes CO₂e in 2020. Unlike its Nordic neighbours, Iceland's F-gas emissions have been increasing in recent years (see Fig 1).¹⁶

In fact, Iceland has the highest per capita F-gas emissions of all the Nordic countries, which it attributes to its relatively large fishing fleet, with emissions from refrigeration systems on board fishing vessels and its small population of about 365,000 people (see Fig 2).¹⁶

Fig 1: Trend in total F-gas emission per country 2015-20, 1000t CO₂e.

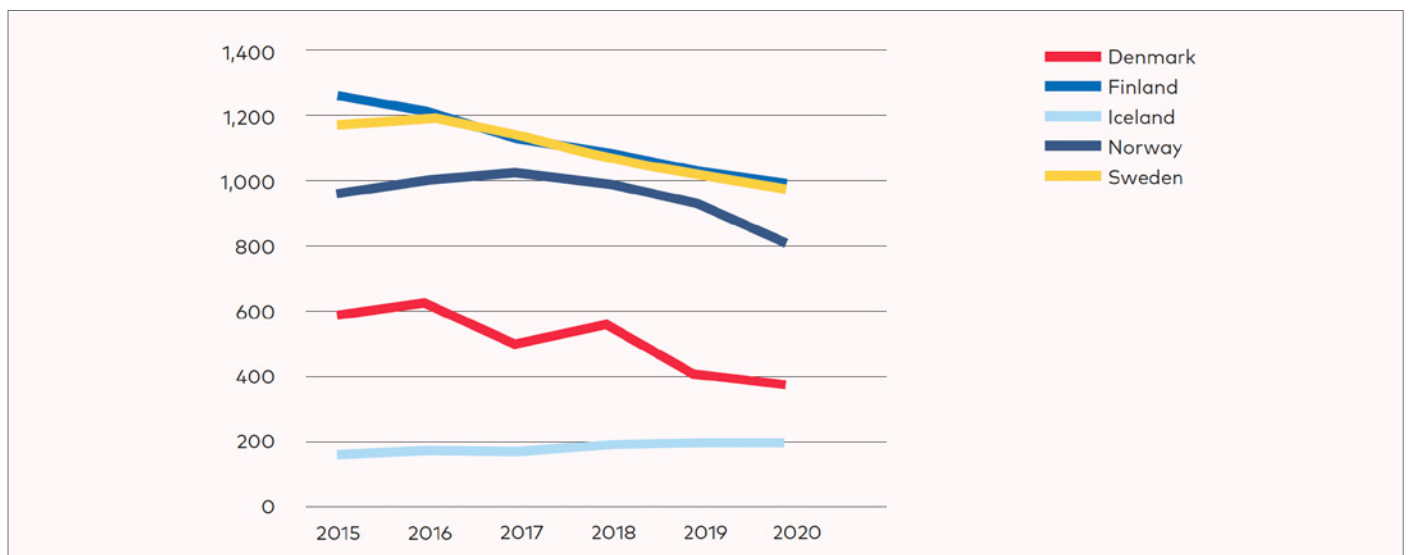
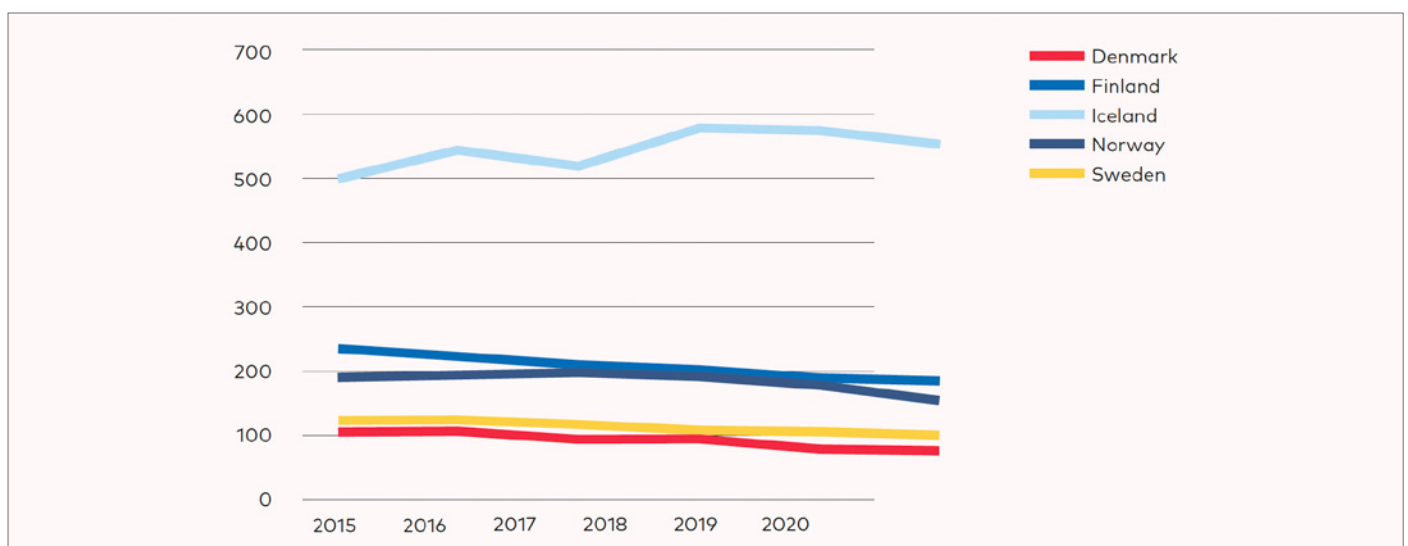


Fig 2: F-gas emission pr. capita, kg CO₂e.



Economic and social impact of commercial whaling

A long-awaited economic review of the impact of Icelandic whaling published in August 2023 by the Icelandic Government highlighted the insignificant economic gains from commercial whaling.¹⁷

According to the annual accounts of the sole remaining whaling company – Hvalur – the total export value of whale products since 2011 is nearly 9.8 billion Icelandic króna (ISK), almost €69 million. However, the company’s whaling arm has operated at a loss for seven years in a row, resulting in an overall loss from 2011-19 of ISK3 billion, or €21 million (see Fig 3).

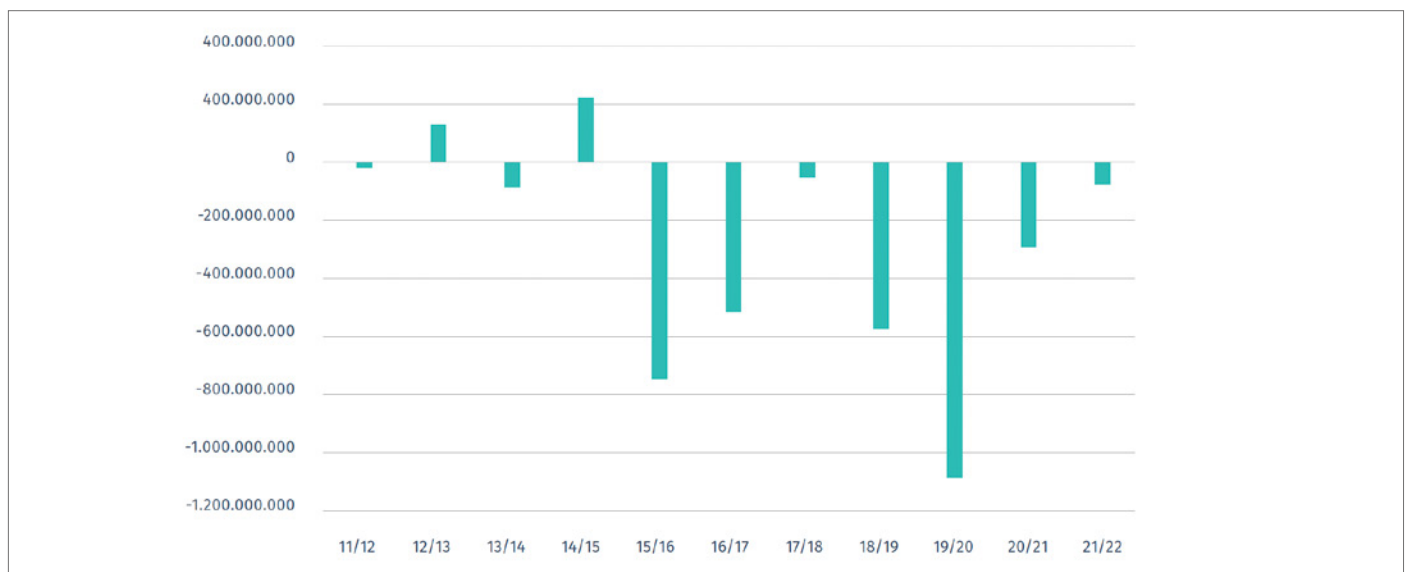
Moreover, the value of whale exports from Iceland to Japan during the past decade is totally insignificant compared to the total value of marine product exports, representing just 0.11-0.79 per cent per year.¹⁸

In contrast, whale watching in Iceland – which is negatively impacted by whaling – generates an estimated \$26 million (approximately €24 million) annually in revenue for the local economy.¹⁹

A recent poll suggests a growing number of Icelandic people do not actively support commercial whaling,²⁰ while they are becoming more vocal and high profile in their call to end it.²¹

At an anti-whaling protest headlined by the musician Björk in June 2023, the Icelandic Youth Environmental Association and Nordic Youth Biodiversity Network announced a pending lawsuit against the Icelandic Government if the whaling licenses are not revoked.²²

Fig 3: Hvalur’s ‘profits’ due to whaling (ISK)





Conclusion

Commercial whaling has been banned globally since 1986 by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and just three countries continue to defy the ban.

After three decades of commercial whaling under the guise of 'scientific research', Japan left the IWC in 2019 and openly resumed commercial whaling outside international law.²³ Norway and Iceland carry out commercial whaling under 'reservation'. While Norway's objection to the ban was lodged within the prescribed period after the moratorium decision, according to IWC rules, Iceland's reservation, which was contained in its application to rejoin the IWC in 2002, is legally contested by 19 IWC contracting governments.²⁴

The ban on commercial whaling is more relevant than ever in the face of global biodiversity loss. Fin whale populations were severely depleted in the first half of the 20th century due to commercial whaling. The remaining global population has not recovered from this commercial whaling period and is thus designated as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List.²⁵

In addition to the threat of commercial whaling, North Atlantic fin whale populations face other human-caused threats such as ship strikes, climate change impacts, noise pollution and plastic pollution. Fin whales feeding off the western coast of Iceland are estimated to ingest tens of thousands of plastic particles every day²⁶ and recent studies have identified plastic particles embedded in the meat and blubber of marine mammals.²⁷

There is an ever-growing consensus in Iceland that commercial whale hunts should be a thing of the past and the reasons for this are clear:

- Iceland's commercial whaling serves no economic purpose – the country's single remaining whaling company, Hvalur, has lost money on its whaling activities for the past seven years
- whaling is undeniably and unacceptably cruel and hunting the second largest animal on the planet from a moving platform at sea could never meet the requirements of Iceland's welfare laws
- not only is commercial whaling unsustainable, inhumane and unnecessary, it also creates significant greenhouse gas emissions and deprives the ocean of animals that provide essential ecosystem services and are part of nature's solution to climate change.

There is no better time than the present for Iceland to finally institute a permanent ban on commercial whaling and protect all cetaceans.

References

1. MAST news article, 8.5.2023. [Available here.](#)
2. Government of Iceland news, June 20, 2023. Hunting of fin whales suspended. [Available here.](#)
3. Iceland Review, August 9, 2023. All hands still on deck at Hvalur. [Available here.](#)
4. Ólafur E. Jóhannsson, Morgunblaðið 15.8.2023. Fishing ban against climate goals. [Available here.](#)
5. Dr. Edda Elisabetu Magnúsdóttir, Whales in the Marine Ecosystem. [Available here.](#)
6. Chami, R. et al. Nature's Solution to Climate Change [Available here.](#)
7. Pershing AJ, Christensen LB, Record NR, Sherwood GD, Stetson PB (2010) The Impact of Whaling on the Ocean Carbon Cycle: Why Bigger Was Better. PLoS ONE 5(8): e12444. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0012444>
8. Roman J, McCarthy JJ (2010) The Whale Pump: Marine Mammals Enhance Primary Productivity in a Coastal Basin. PLoS ONE 5(10): e13255. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0013255>
9. Li, Q. et al. 2022. Review of the Impact of Whale Fall on Biodiversity in Deep-Sea Ecosystems. Front. Ecol. Evol., 18 May 2022 Sec. Conservation and Restoration Ecology Volume 10 – 2022 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2022.885572>. Additional information [here](#) and [here](#).
10. EIA press release 2013. 28 May 2013. Iceland is killing fin whales for Japanese pet treats. [Available here.](#)
11. According to Japan import statistics since 2008. [Available here.](#)
12. The SC set sail from the port of Hafnarfjörður, Iceland on 21 December 2022, with a destination ETA listed as Singapore on 29 January 2023. On Wednesday Feb 8th, it arrived at Shimonoseki Port, western Japan. Distance calculated using <http://www.shiptraffic.net/2001/05/sea-distances-calculator.html>
13. Fourth IMO greenhouse gas study. 2020. [Available here.](#)
14. Iceland's 2020 Climate Action Plan. [Available here.](#)
15. Nordic cooperation on F-gas emission inventories. July 11th, 2022. [Available here.](#)
16. Nordic cooperation on F-gas emission inventories. July 11th, 2022. [Available here.](#)
17. Government of Iceland. Economic impact of whaling. August 2023. [Available here.](#)
18. Government of Iceland. Economic impact of whaling. August 2023. [Available here.](#)
19. SDGAction42838: Reducing Commercial Whaling in Iceland (SDG 8, SDG 11, SDG 12, SDG 14). [Available here.](#)
20. RÚV English News Service 28.8.23 Opposition to whaling grows [Available here.](#)
21. Iceland Review. May 31, 2023. Björk to Participate in Anti-Whaling Protest This Saturday. [Available here.](#)
22. Iceland Review. May 31, 2023. Björk to Participate in Anti-Whaling Protest This Saturday. [Available here.](#)
23. The Guardian, 1 July 2019. Japan resumes commercial whaling for the first time in 30 years. [Available here.](#)
24. See footnote to para 10(e) of the Schedule, available here. Iceland did not lodge an objection to the moratorium and left the IWC in 1992, having carried out scientific whaling. It then rejoined in 2002 with a highly controversial reservation to the moratorium which is not recognised by the Governments of Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, San Marino, Spain, Sweden, UK and the USA.
25. IUCN Red List, Fin whale. [Available here.](#)
26. Odei Garcia-Garin et al (2021). Ingestion of synthetic particles by fin whales feeding off western Iceland in summer, Chemosphere, Volume 279, 2021, 130564, ISSN 0045-6535, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chemosphere.2021.130564>.
27. Greg B. Merrill et al, Microplastics in marine mammal blubber, melon, & other tissues: Evidence of translocation, Environmental Pollution (2023). DOI:10.1016/j.envpol.2023.122252