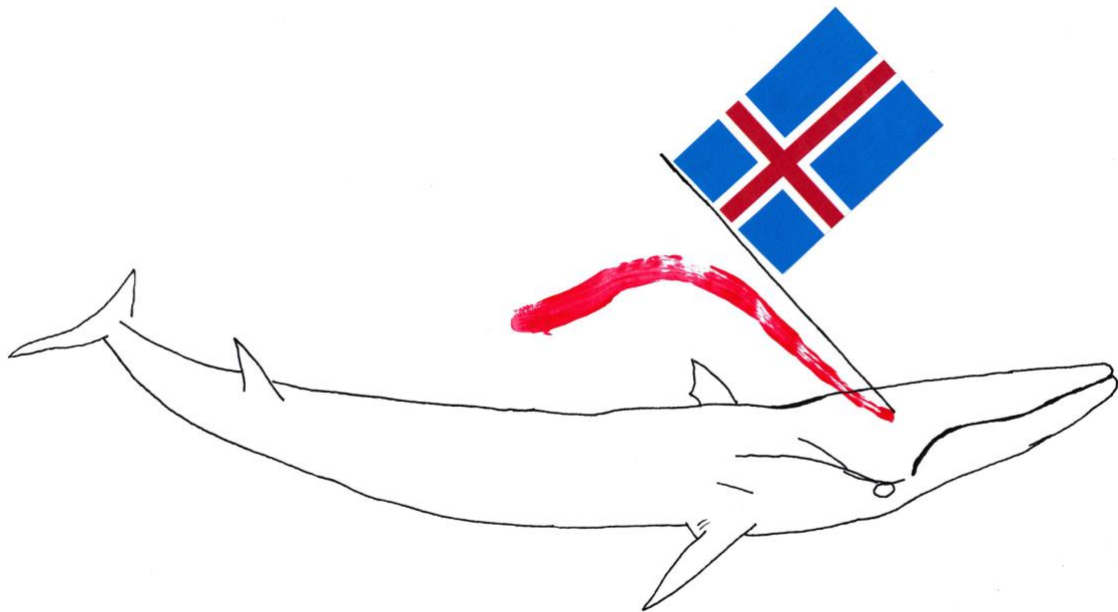


We need to fight against whale hunting in Iceland



Author: Dalrún Kaldakvís, environmental historian

"We need to fight against whale hunting in Iceland" is an English translation of an Icelandic radio lecture given by the historian Dalrún Kaldakvís Eygerðardóttir on the radio show Víðsjá in The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service (RÚV). 10.05.2022. Original title: "Ríkishvalræði og langreyðar." Picture: Dalrún Kaldakvís.

Majestic blows are now rising from the surface of the sea off Iceland. It is the month of May and the second largest animal in the world, the fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*) is increasingly showing up in its ancient feeding grounds in Icelandic waters. Below the surface of the sea the deep tones of the fin whales resound, singing and talking to each other; bulls, cows and calves. The voices of the fin whales travel great distances through the depths of the ocean; tones that have belonged to the North Atlantic for a long time. In the sound world of the ocean it is the songs of the fin whales that resonate the loudest, because the songs of these giants can travel hundreds of kilometers through the depths - and actually further because according to a new study the sounds of fin whales narrow all the way down to the earth's crust. Fin whales make different kinds of sounds depending on the individuals, groups and seasons. For example the adult bulls sing their love songs in the winter to attract the attention of the females, but it is estimated that the bull's singing can last up to 32 beautiful hours. These striking marine mammals, which feed primarily on crustaceans and small schooling fish, are dark gray or brownish black in color at the top and white at the bottom. As mentioned before, fin whales are the second largest animal in the world after the blue whale.

Fin whales can grow up to 23 meters in length. They are streamlined with a beautifully shaped pointed head and observant dark eyes. Fin whales, like so many whale species have majestic

flukes, though they rarely raise their flukes out of the sea when diving; but when fin whales raise their flukes above the sea, there is no more beautiful sculpture to be found above sea level. The lifespan of a fin whale is generally 80-90 years but the oldest fin whale ever recorded was a 114 years old fin whale. But what does science tell us about the social skills of these remarkable animals? It has long been clear that fin whales are great social animals that have their own social structure and language. They often stay together in small groups, usually 2-7 together in a group. The most intimate relationship between fin whales is between mother and offspring as is often the case with mammals. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) standards, fin whales are defined as a vulnerable species. However, in Iceland it is often asserted that fin whales are not a vulnerable species, which is inconsistent with the fact that they are migratory whales and generally considered endangered on Earth. Fin whales are for example on the Endangered Species Act's list of endangered animals.

Climate research shows that the ocean plays a key role in the health of the Earth's atmosphere. Scientists estimate that up to 80% of the earth's oxygen is produced in the ocean. Whales are hugely important for the ocean's ecosystem and at the same time for the earth's ecosystem as a whole. Biodiversity is a prerequisite for a healthy ecosystem. Experts have pointed out the importance of nurturing whale stocks as they play a key role in maintaining the necessary balance in the ocean's ecosystem and thus play a part in the fight against climate change. Whales distribute nutrients throughout the oceans, ensuring the growth of phytoplankton that sequester a great amount of carbon dioxide. Another example of whale's role with regards to carbon sequestration in marine ecosystems is their ability to capture carbon. When the whales end their lifespan they sink to the bottom of the ocean where the carbon returns to the bottom layers and is bound there for hundreds of years. When humans disrupt the ecological balance in the ocean the health of the ecosystem at sea and on land is impaired. In our day it is clear that we are at the forefront of destroying the earth's ecosystems. In fact, the damage has been such that climate experts say we have about 10 years to improve our ways of life if we are not to suffer lasting damage. Time is running out – therefore it is important to take any possible measures to protect the ocean and its inhabitants.

The ocean is a fundamental element in the existence of the earth's ecosystem; the lungs of the earth. That is why it is so important that Icelanders, surrounded by the North Atlantic, treat their ocean with vital caution and forethought during these most difficult times in human history. One of the things nations have agreed to do in order to protect marine life is to stop whaling, a decision based on the scientific basis for the role of whales in the marine ecosystem and on a natural respect for the life of these evolved animals. Over whaling escalated through the last centuries, so much that some whale populations are still on the verge of extinction, like the North Atlantic right whale (ice. íslandssléttbakur) is an example of. Over fishing of whales is difficult to reverse; whales mature late, the cows carry their offspring for a long gestation period and the calves stay with their mothers for a long time. As a result, humans have a strong responsibility to ensure that whale populations are not disturbed in these unequivocal times. In this context it is clear that people are asking themselves the question: Why are Icelanders fishing fin whales in the year of 2022?

Before discussing whaling in Iceland in modern times, let's look at the history of whaling in Iceland which was for the most part practiced by foreign parties. Sources about Icelandic

whaling in previous centuries are quite sparse, but they show that up to the 20th century Icelandic whaling was traditionally very small in scope. Whaling off the coast of Iceland began in earnest with the arrival of the Basques in the early 17th century. The Americans, the Dutch and the Danes then tried whaling in Iceland between 1863-1872. The Norwegians then started whaling off Iceland from fish processing plants that they built in Iceland in the period 1883-1915; a period which is often called the Norwegian whaling season. The Norwegian whaling had a huge negative impact on whale stocks off Iceland, including fin whales. It is worth noting that the Norwegian whaling history in Iceland is eerily reminiscent of the destructive path that Norwegians have in modern times begun to create in Icelandic nature with sea trout farming (with the help of the Icelandic Left-Green Movement and other governing parties). Norwegian whale harpoons almost destroyed whale stocks off Iceland, but now it is genetic mixing from Norwegian farmed salmon as well as salmon lice and diseases from these industrial salmon ocean farms that threaten the existence of wild Icelandic salmon.

In 1915 the supreme national parliament of Iceland (Althingi) passed a law banning whaling in Iceland. However, the Norwegians continued whaling off Iceland from 1929-1934. Icelanders and whales on the other hand lived in harmony for 20 years until Icelandic whaling resumed in the period 1935-1939. The whaling operation Hvalur hf. was established in 1948 and is still fishing to this day. Today Hvalur hf. hunts fin whales and exports them to Japan, but before the company also fished blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*), sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) and sei whales (*Balaenoptera borealis*) until it was banned due to overfishing of those whales worldwide. In 1986 the International Whaling Commission banned all whaling. However, Icelanders who were members of the International Whaling Commission, continued to fish whales for scientific purposes until 1989. In 1992 Iceland resigned from the International Whaling Commission and established its own council (North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission/NAMMCO) in consultation with the whaling nations Faroe Islands, Greenland and Norway – Japan also had their representatives at council meetings. In 2002 Iceland rejoined the International Whaling Commission. Nevertheless Iceland resumed commercial whaling in 2006, citing the reservations made by Iceland to the International Whaling Commission's conventions. By continuing hunting whales Iceland opposed the conventions of the supreme international council on whaling in the world. Iceland also went against the international treaty CITES, an international agreement on the purchase and sale of endangered animals and plant, which Iceland became a party to in 2000. Icelanders cited their reservations to whale species on the CITES list – something that has to be regarded as an unlogical act; it would be comparable to if CITES member countries where elephants and rhinos live in, would decide to hunt elephants and rhinos and sell their horns - but nonetheless testify that in all other respects they would respect the CITES standards!

Iceland's popularity declined worldwide due to their attitude towards whaling and in light of this Icelanders decided not to renew the fishing quota for 2007 and 2008. Then it happened that the then Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture Einar Kristinn Guðfinnsson renewed the fishing permit for whaling for 5 years – something that would have a very negative effect on Iceland's image and our relations with other nations, including the United States. In 2014 US president Barack Obama addressed his remarks to Icelandic officials in his address to the US Congress. Obama asked the Icelandic government to respect the CITES agreement on international trade in endangered species and requested that the whaling country Iceland

would become a whale watching country instead. Obama's request was ignored and the fishing license of Hvalur hf. was renewed again in 2014 to 2018. It is worth noting that in the years 2006-2018, 852 fin whales were killed off Iceland. Fishing license for Hvalur hf. was renewed again in 2019-2023 and the company was then granted a much higher whaling quota than before. What is surprising is that the government led by the prime minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir of the Left-Green Movement was behind the commercial whaling renewal 2019-2023. Her government allowed fishing for up to 2130 whales – and in that light the governing party the Left-Green Movement is not green at all. Whaling in Iceland is carried out by the company Hvalur hf. that is mostly owned by one person, a company that seems to spend more work finding a market for illiquid whale products than fishing the whales themselves. The financial benefits of discontinuing whaling are many times greater than whaling in Iceland, due to the negative impact of whaling on the Icelandic economy, not least on the Icelandic tourism industry and exports of goods.

Despite the fact that the Icelandic government's decisions have weighed on the existence of whales off Iceland, we must not forget the individuals who have made a great effort to protect whales in Icelandic waters. The animal protectionist Paul Watson and his organization the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, have contributed greatly to the protection of whales off Iceland's coast. Another nature conservationists who has helped whales in Iceland is Ole Anton Bieltvedt, founder and chairman of *Jarðarvinir*, an association for animal, nature and environmental protection. Bieltvedt brought two criminal cases against Hvalur hf. due to violations in their commercial whale fishing activities.

It is not acceptable that the Icelandic government is still discussing whether whaling in Iceland is financially suitable for Iceland or not, with reference to the renewal of whaling licenses in 2024. Such discussions are far-fetched in times when leading world experts such as the world-renowned marine biologist Sylvia Earle, agree that whaling should be a thing of the past. Icelanders have only one realistic option regarding their treatment of whales; to stop whaling and start whaling protection instead. By protecting fin whales, the second largest animal in the world, Iceland would unite with other nations in order to protect these vulnerable animals; the bulls, the cows and the calves. The Icelandic company Hvalur hf. starts hunting fin whales in the first half of June. It gives you, dear reader, time to protest a massive crime against our nature. Are Icelanders going to be a nation among nations in nature conservation – or are Icelanders going to go against international standards of nature conservation and remain an immoral island?

May fin whales swim undisturbed in Icelandic waters in 2022 and forevermore.

Author: Dalrún Kaldakvísl Eygerðardóttir, an Icelandic environmental historian

dalrunsaga@gmail.com dalrun.net