



LÖGMANSSKRIVSTOVAN
Prime Minister's Office

INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

Community-based whaling in the Faroe Islands

May 2017

This memorandum presents a brief description of the sustainable and regulated use of small whales for food in the Faroe Islands. The Government of the Faroe Islands promotes openness and rational and informed discussion about whales and whaling. Everyone with an interest should be assured access to reliable and factual information on whale drives in the Faroe Islands.

More comprehensive and up-to-date information is available on the official website (in English, German, Spanish and French) about whales and whaling in the Faroe Islands: www.whaling.fo.

The Faroe Islands

- The Faroe Islands are situated roughly half way between Scotland and Iceland and consist of 18 mountainous islands, 17 of which are inhabited by the population of around 49,000. As a self-governing nation under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Denmark, the Government of the Faroes administers independently of Denmark all areas of self-government under Faroese legislation, including the conservation and management of fish and whale stocks within the 200-mile fisheries zone. The Faroe Islands have chosen not to be a part of the EU, but maintain bilateral trade agreements and bilateral fisheries agreements with the EU and other countries.

Living off the sea

- The Faroese economy is based largely on modern fishing and aquaculture industries, which produce high quality fish products for export. Traditional means of food production from local resources are an important supplement to the livelihoods of Faroe Islanders. These include mountain grazing sheep, coastal fishing for household use, limited catches of certain sea birds, and occasional catches of pilot whales and other small cetaceans. Dairy cattle satisfy all domestic milk needs, and potatoes and rhubarb are grown by many households for private use.

- Sheep farming, whaling and fowling have enabled the Faroe Islands as an island nation to maintain a relatively high degree of self-sufficiency in food production. In the Faroes it is considered both economic and environmental good sense to make the most of locally available natural resources, and to maintain the knowledge required to use what nature can provide in a harsh oceanic environment.

- International principles for conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources apply to all components of the marine ecosystem, including whales. As a nation highly dependent on the resources of the sea, upholding these principles is a priority for the Faroe Islands.

Community-based whale drives

- Many different species of whales and dolphins occur in the waters around the Faroe Islands, most of which are protected by law. The commonly occurring pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) are taken for their meat and blubber in whale drives which are organised on the community level and regulated by national legislation and regulations. This centuries-old form of food production in the Faroe Islands, known as “grind”, has successfully adapted to modern standards of resource management and animal welfare.
- Both the meat and blubber of pilot whales have long been - and continue to be - a valued part of the national diet. Catches are shared largely without the exchange of money among the participants in a whale drive and residents of the local district where they are landed.
- White-sided dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus acutus*) are also a commonly occurring and abundant species around the Faroe Islands. Individual animals occasionally occur together with schools of pilot whales, while separate schools are also sometimes driven and beached, and fully utilised for human consumption. The driving and killing of dolphins in the Faroe Islands must be carried out according to the same regulations which apply to pilot whales.
- Whale meat and blubber is stored, prepared and eaten in a variety of ways. When fresh, the meat is boiled or served as steaks, with blubber and potatoes. The meat and blubber can be frozen, or preserved using traditional Faroese methods such as dry-salting or storing in brine. Strips of whale meat are also hung to wind-dry for several weeks. Thin slivers of blubber are also a popular accompaniment to dried fish.

Sustainable catches

- Annual catch records for pilot whales and other small cetaceans in the Faroe Islands date back to 1584. These provide over 400 years of nearly unbroken documentation, representing one of the most comprehensive historical records of wildlife utilisation anywhere in the world. The annual long-term average catch of pilot whales in the Faroe Islands is around 800 whales, with large fluctuations in total catches and the number of individual whale drives from year to year. In the period since 1991, annual catches have ranged from zero (in 2008) to 1,572 (in 1992). Since 2009, the annual average catch of pilot whales has been 562.
- Regular international scientific sighting surveys in the North Atlantic since 1987 have provided valuable information from which to estimate and monitor the stock abundance of different whale species. The Faroe Islands participate actively in these surveys, with comprehensive coverage across the Faroe Plateau and adjacent areas.
- The most recent scientific estimate of abundance for the pilot whale stock is 128,000 in the Iceland-Faroese survey area. This estimate is based on data from the latest Trans-Atlantic Sightings Survey (T-NASS) in 2007, coordinated by the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO). The latest NASS survey was carried out in the summer of 2015 and the results will be presented in 2017.
- In August 2015 the Natural History Museum of the Faroes attached satellite transmitters to a small pod of pilot whales, which were released back into the ocean. The aim of this survey is to track the migration patterns and to estimate the distribution of the pilot whale stocks in Faroese waters. This was the fifth time the Natural History Museum carries out such monitoring survey.

- The long-term annual average catch of pilot whales in the Faroe Islands represents less than 1% of the total estimated stock. It has long since been internationally recognised that pilot whale catches in the Faroe Islands are fully sustainable.

Methods used to kill whales

- Whale drives are only initiated when whales are sighted by chance close to land. The organisation of participants, both in boats and on shore, is crucial in ensuring an effective whale drive. Prevailing weather and tidal conditions will also have a bearing on whether and where a group of whales can be driven and beached. The spontaneous nature of a whale drive requires swift mobilisation of manpower to drive and kill a group of large wild animals quickly.
- Faroese animal welfare legislation, which also applies to whaling, stipulates that animals shall be killed as quickly and with as little suffering as possible. Whales are killed on the shore and in the shallows of bays especially authorised for the purpose. The blow-hole hook is used to secure beached whales for killing and causes no injury prior to slaughter.
- The recently developed spinal lance has now been officially introduced as regulation equipment for the killing of pilot whales. From 1 May 2015 it must be the primary instrument used. As with the traditional whaling knife, the lance is used to sever the spinal cord, which also severs the major blood supply to the brain, ensuring both loss of consciousness and death within seconds. The spinal lance has been shown to reduce killing time to 1-2 seconds, while also improving accuracy and safety.
- Innovations and improvements to the equipment used in Faroese whaling, such as the blowhole hook and the spinal lance, have been developed on the initiative of experienced participants in the whale drive. To maintain a high level of skill and expertise in the future, from 1 May 2015 only those having attended a certified course of instruction in the whaling regulations and killing methods will be permitted to kill whales.
- There is no doubt that whale drives in the Faroe Islands are very dramatic and result in a lot of blood in the water. They are, nevertheless, well organised and fully regulated. By their very nature, whale drives take place in the open, in authorized bays around the Faroes. As such, they have been photographed, filmed, written about and widely discussed internationally for many years as a unique part of the Faroese way of life.
- All meat, including whale meat, involves the slaughter of animals. Most meat production in industrialised countries today is hidden well away from public view. In the Faroe Islands, people are familiar with the local processes by which whales, sheep and seabirds are killed for food. Faroese children grow up with an intimate knowledge and understanding of their natural environment, and it is considered natural for them to see and understand where the meat on their dinner plates comes from.

Environmental & health concerns

- Pilot whales, like other small toothed whales and seals, are known to accumulate high levels of heavy metals such as mercury (in the meat and organs) and organochlorines (in the blubber). These contaminants are deposited in the marine environment through airborne pollution and

waste from industrial processes, bio-accumulating up through the food chain where they are often found in high levels in top marine predators.

- This is a matter of considerable concern to Faroe Islanders. Over the past two decades, extensive international research has focussed on the health effects of contaminants from whale meat and blubber in the diet of Faroese people. In 1998, public health, food and environmental authorities in the Faroe Islands issued comprehensive, precautionary recommendations for the safe consumption of pilot whale meat and blubber.
- In response to more recent research, and based on the latest internationally applied standards for precautionary limits, a review of these recommendations resulted in revised recommendations issued by the Faroese Food and Veterinary Authority in June 2011. These advise that consumption should be limited to one meal of whale meat and blubber per month. Women of child-bearing age are advised, as in 1998, not to consume blubber at all until they have had their children. Women are also advised to refrain from eating whale meat three months prior to, and during, pregnancy and while breast feeding.
- These limits are intended to safeguard against the risks associated with heavy metals and PCBs. At the same time, the nutritional benefits of whale meat and blubber, which is rich in poly-unsaturated fats and essential vitamins and minerals, should also be acknowledged.
- The major focus of international efforts by governments, international bodies and environmental organisations must be to protect and promote the rights of coastal nations to the sustainable use of their marine resources. This is best achieved by adopting effective measures to reduce and eliminate, at its source, global industrial pollution, which can end up in the valuable food provided by the sea.

International cooperation

- The Faroe Islands cooperate internationally through NAMMCO – the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission - on the conservation of whales and the management of whaling. NAMMCO is an inter-governmental organisation which provides for political, scientific and technical cooperation on marine mammal conservation and management in the North Atlantic.
- Denmark ratified the Bonn Convention (Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals) in 1983. Since 1990 this membership has also covered the Faroes. Only the North and Baltic Sea populations of pilot whales are listed under the Bonn Convention on Appendix II. These stocks are covered by a regional agreement under the auspices of the Bonn Convention known as ASCOBANS (Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans in the Baltic and North Seas), to which Denmark is a Party. This agreement does not extend to the Faroe Islands.
- Nevertheless, the population of pilot whales in the Northeast Atlantic which is exploited in the Faroe Islands meets all the criteria under the Bonn Convention by which a species is defined as having a "favourable conservation status".

Anti-whaling campaigns

- For the past 30 years anti-whaling activists have been campaigning against whaling in the Faroe Islands. The Government of the Faroe Islands underlines the importance it has always placed on dialogue, freedom of speech and the democratic right of all citizens, both in the Faroe Islands and in all other countries, to express their views openly. But law and order must be maintained and violation of our laws must be dealt with by the police and the legal system.

- During the summer of 2015 anti-whaling activists representing the animal rights group Sea Shepherd have deliberately attempted to disrupt pilot whale drives, leading to the arrest, prosecution and expulsion from the Faroe Islands of a number of these activists.
- Faroese authorities will not tolerate the disruption of the pilot whale drive in the Faroe Islands, which is a legal, fully regulated and sustainable use of an abundant natural resource. Obstructing a whale drive can be dangerous and can put people and property at risk.
- Illegal and potentially dangerous actions by activists from the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, combined with attempts to spread deliberately misleading information to the media, have been the hallmark of the activities of this group for decades. Sea Shepherd representatives will go to any lengths to paint a negative picture of the Faroese whale hunt as “unnecessary”, “evil” and “lunacy” describing Faroese as “sadistic psychopaths”, with the aim of inciting anger and outrage against the people of the Faroe Islands. They have chosen an easy target, as whale drives in the Faroe Islands take place in the open for anyone to watch and document.