



Sustainable whaling in Icelandic waters

Iceland attaches great importance to the principle of sustainable use of living marine resources as the sustainability of these resources is essential for the long-term prosperity of the country. Whaling in Icelandic waters is only directed at abundant whale stocks, North Atlantic common minke whales and fin whales, it is science-based, sustainable, strictly managed and in accordance with international law.

Several countries catch whales, including the United States, Russia, Norway, Japan, Greenland and Iceland. The whaling operations practiced by all those countries are legal and in accordance with the rules of the International Whaling Commission (IWC).

Iceland has always emphasised the need for careful conservation of marine resources and was one of the first countries in the world to take a conservationist approach to whaling. As signs of overexploitation of whales by foreign nationals emerged early in the last century, Iceland declared a ban on whaling for large whales around Iceland in 1915. Whaling was not resumed until 1948, except for limited catches from 1935 to 1939. Strict rules and limitations were applied to whaling in Iceland from 1948 to 1985 when commercial whaling was halted again following a decision by the IWC. Limited catch for scientific research was taken during the following years in accordance with the provisions of the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (IWC Convention), but commercial whaling was resumed in 2006.

According to a regulation issued in 2013, sustainable catch limits for common minke whales and fin whales follow the advice given by the Marine Research Institute of Iceland. The advice for the 2014 and 2015 seasons is for an annual maximum catch of 229 common minke whales and 154 fin whales, respectively.

The abundance of both common minke whales and fin whales has been confirmed by the Scientific Committees of the IWC and the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO), as can be seen on their respective websites (www.iwc.int and www.nammco.no). According to recent whale surveys, there are around 20,000 fin whales and at least 30,000 common minke whales in the East Greenland-Iceland Jan Mayen stock area. The recommended catch limits of both species are less than 1% of these stocks, well within the generally accepted values for sustainable catch rates of whale stocks. It should be noted that neither of the two species harvested by Iceland qualify for any of the IUCN threatened categories (“critically endangered”, “endangered” or “vulnerable”) in the most recent regional assessment for North Atlantic cetacean populations (www.iucnredlist.org/initiatives/europe).



Iceland is an advocate of international cooperation in ensuring conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources, including whales. This has been the position taken by Iceland within the IWC, based on the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. The stated role of the IWC, according to its founding Convention, is to “provide for the proper conservation of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry”.

For information on various scientific research projects on whales and other marine mammals in the North Atlantic, please refer to the websites of the Marine Research Institute of Iceland, www.hafro.is, and the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission, www.nammco.no.