

The history of commercial whaling in Iceland

Advocates of whaling in Iceland would have us believe that Iceland has a long and continuous history of whaling, marked by concern for the well being of whale populations. The truth is very different. The true history of Iceland's whaling is of a start/stop industry with high foreign involvement that was characterised by massive over-exploitation of the kind that has characterised the commercial whaling industry wherever it has been conducted.

Commercial whaling in Iceland made its first appearance in 1865 with the establishment of a shore station at Seydisfjordur on the east coast of Iceland by two Americans, Thomas Roys and GA Lilliendahl. They used a rocket-powered explosive harpoon of their own design and took 119 whales from 1865 to 1867 but went bankrupt and abandoned whaling after a slump in oil prices.

Modern whaling was re-established in Iceland in 1883 by the Norwegian Svend Foyn, inventor of the exploding harpoon. The Danish authorities (at the time Iceland was part of Denmark) demanded that all Norwegians involved in whaling should become Icelandic citizens and that their ships should fly the Danish flag. They also established taxes on whale products. But they did nothing to regulate whaling other than a ban on catches within Iceland's territorial waters, which had little effect on the whalers since most of their catches were outside the 3-mile territorial limit.

While catches off the Norwegian coast were falling, catches off Iceland were increasing and were mostly large and valuable blue whales. In 1897 an Icelandic company was formed but the manager, crews, machinery, catching equipment, whale catchers and even the houses for the factory crew were imported from Norway. By 1903 there were ten Norwegian companies operating whaling stations in Iceland; an attempt to ban whaling in 1903 was rejected by Iceland's parliament, the Altingi. By 1907 it was obvious that catches and whale populations were declining and some Norwegian companies were moving out. The one lone Icelandic company went bankrupt in 1906, and was reconstituted, but went into rapid decline after 1910 and closed down in 1913 due to a lack of whales. In 1913 a ban on whaling, from 1915 to 1925, was agreed in order to preserve the whales that remained.

Whale products formed 10% of the value of Iceland's exports for every year between 1894 and 1910, reaching a high of 20% in the peak production years. A total of 17,189 whales, mostly blue whales, were reported as caught between 1883 and 1915, but the true number killed was higher - Norwegian chroniclers of whaling estimate that the stuck and lost rate for this period was at least 30%. There was no further whaling until an Icelandic company renewed it in 1935, but it abandoned operations in 1940. Whaling began again in 1948 concentrating on fin whales, the next largest species. Blue whales were caught whenever possible but the catch between 1948 and 1954 averaged 18 a year, compared to the 1,305 landed in 1902, the peak year of the fishery.

At its 1954 meeting, the IWC, acting on scientific advice, agreed to totally protect blue whales in the North Atlantic for a five-year period from 1955 to 1960. The proposal was supported by Norway and there were no votes against it. Iceland, which had not attended the meeting, filed an objection and continued to catch blue whales until 1959. Their final catches of blue whales averaged just 8 per year.

When the IWC agreed a moratorium on commercial whaling the Altingi decided by a majority of 1 vote to accept the decision and not to file an objection. Iceland's whaling industry responded by beginning 'scientific' whaling, intending to export the catch to

Japan. But when 'scientific' whaling was strongly opposed by the IWC, Iceland agreed to a resolution that called upon it to use the whale meat produced primarily for local consumption. Iceland subsequently agreed that they would export no more than 49% of the meat produced.

In fact, almost all the meat was exported. In March of 1987 Greenpeace discovered seven containers in the freeport of Hamburg, destined for Japan, marked 'frozen seafood', which in fact contained 140 tonnes of whale meat. The meat was confiscated and returned to Iceland as was a shipment of 197 tonnes found in Helsinki in June of 1988. A review of Icelandic export figures and Japanese import figures for whale meat in the period 1986 to 1991 shows that almost a thousand of tonnes more were recorded as entering Japan than were recorded as leaving Iceland.

Iceland has since rejoined the IWC, with a highly controversial objection to the moratorium, and has resumed 'scientific' whaling. Icelandic spokesmen, including the Prime Minister, say that the future of 'scientific' whaling depends on whether Iceland can export the products of whaling to Japan, underlining the commercial motive behind this 'scientific' whaling. A total of 36 minke whales were taken in 2003 with plans to expand the catch to fin and sei whales and the total to 250 if Iceland gained access to the Japanese market.

In June 2004 the Icelandic government announced their decision not to hunt sei and fin whales, and to cut back their quota from 500 whales over two years to 25 minkes this year. This decision was in response, partly, to more domestic pressure than expected.

References

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