

GREENPEACE

Backgrounder Icelandic Whaling

In August 2003 Iceland announced the resumption of its "scientific" Whaling programme, after a 14-year hiatus. Iceland had previously ended its illegal commercial hunt in 1989 following worldwide boycotts and economic pressure.

Commerce in disguise

Iceland's "scientific" whaling programme, like Japan's, is merely commercial whaling in disguise. Commercial whaling was banned by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1982, but a loophole allows the killing of whales for research purposes. Iceland plans to sell the products of its "research" to Japan, where whale meat generates 4 billion yen in sales annually.

Iceland claims to be worried that whales are eating too many fish. As Icelandic Ambassador Helgi Ágústsson put it in his automated response to a Greenpeace cyber-action: "The annual consumption of fish, krill and other biomass by whales in this region has been estimated at around 6 million metric tons, several times the total Icelandic fishery landings of 1.5 to 2.0 million metric tons."

But the Fisheries Minister has lumped "krill and other biomass" into the tonnage consumed, neither of which are harvested commercially, and which other studies indicate make up the majority of the minke whales' diet.

If Iceland only wanted the answer to the question of how many fish whales eat, there are plenty of non-lethal means of studying whale interactions with the ocean food chain.

Tourism

Iceland has been an increasingly popular tourist magnet, and a burgeoning whale watching industry has taken hold. More than 277,000 people visited Iceland in 2001 - almost equivalent to the entire population of the island. It is estimated that in 2001, one third of those visitors went whale watching. Whale watching firms have sprung up around the Icelandic coast-line over the past decade, generating around US\$8.5 million in revenue in 2001. Whaling only brought in US\$3 million to US\$4 million annually between 1986 and 1989, before hunts were stopped.

The Icelandic Tourist Association voted in April of 2003 to strengthen its stand against whaling. One whale-watching village hung its flag at half-mast when the Fisheries Ministry made its unpopular announcement.

Whaling is impacting Iceland's tourist industry in a negative way – in early 2004 whale watching bookings were down 90 percent on the year before. The chairman of the Icelandic Whale Watching Association sent a letter to Icelandic MP's blaming this decrease on Iceland's whaling policy.

Last year 36 minke whales were caught in Icelandic waters as part of the programme. 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.