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Unravelling the truth: *Whale killing in the Faroe Islands*



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Some of the images included in this report are of a graphic nature and readers are warned that they may find them disturbing. They are included to aid the readers' comprehension of the nature of the hunts conducted in the Faroe Islands.

Situated between Scotland and Iceland in the North Atlantic Ocean, the Faroe Islands are a self-governing territory of the Kingdom of Denmark, with a population of about 54,000 people.¹ Opportunistic killing of entire pods of pilot whales (one of the largest members of the dolphin family) and other dolphin species – known as the *grindadráp* – has taken place in the Faroe Islands for centuries, with meat from the hunts distributed among the islands' inhabitants. Whale meat is also sometimes sold in supermarkets and restaurants.

The hunting of small cetaceans² is prohibited in the European Union (EU),³ but the Faroe Islands are not part of the EU. In the period 2010–2020, Faroese whalers have killed an average of 685 pilot whales and 114 dolphins each year.⁴ These hunts have provoked international outcry – most notably in September of 2021, when more than 1,400 Atlantic white-sided dolphins were killed in a single hunt.⁵

The Faroese government and many of its citizens strongly defend the *grindadráp* as traditional, sustainable, and humane. This document challenges those claims and provides facts about the hunting techniques, use of the whale/dolphin products and the status of the populations, as well as data from recent opinion polls conducted in the islands.

CLAIM 1: ALL TYPES OF WHALING ARE WIDELY SUPPORTED IN THE FAROE ISLANDS.

Recent surveys find that 81-84 percent⁶ of Faroese citizens support the continuation of pilot whale hunts, for reasons that are often difficult for outsiders to understand. (Support for whaling in the islands is not homogenous across gender, age and other demographic categories, but overall approval rates are generally in this range.)⁷

However, most Faroese people view the killing of other dolphin species differently.⁸ While they may feel traditionally entitled to hunt and eat pilot whales, there is substantially more domestic opposition to the hunting of smaller dolphin species for meat. Specifically, many people feel that dolphin meat is not necessary.⁹ One study conducted in 2022 found that 58.7 percent of Faroese constituents were opposed to dolphin hunting, against 33 percent in support,¹⁰ while an April 2022 Gallup poll found 69 percent were opposed to dolphin hunting, with just 7 percent strongly in support.¹¹

CLAIM 2: FAROESE WHALING IS CONDUCTED HUMANELY.

Proponents of pilot whale hunting argue that the capture and killing process is humane. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) defines '*humane killing*' as 'when an animal is either killed instantly or rendered insensible until death ensues, without pain, suffering or distress'¹² – criteria that the Faroese *grindadráp*, by its very nature, cannot meet.

Modern hunting techniques – with motorised vessels, cell phones and more effective killing tools – have made the hunt more efficient, but not humane. The techniques used to chase, secure and kill groups of pilot whales and dolphins in the *grindadráp* would not be permitted in the killing of livestock or other animals in most countries.¹³ Indeed, a recent review of these techniques concluded that the *grindadráp* method of killing cetaceans is ethically and morally unacceptable, given our understanding of the sentient nature of these animals.¹⁴

Faroese drive hunts begin with a noisy and often long chase, as many boats converge to pursue the group of pilot whales or dolphins from open coastal waters into a designated whaling bay. As footage of the hunts illustrates,¹⁵ the chaotic and prolonged nature of drive hunts – from animals being chased by a line of noisy boats, to bleeding out on the shore while hearing and seeing the slaughter of the other members of their social group – may take hours (depending on the number of humans and cetaceans involved), and results in acute stress and prolonged physical suffering for these intelligent, social and sentient marine mammals.¹⁶ Cetaceans have been observed making distress vocalisations and attempting to assist members of their social group who are injured, distressed or dead,¹⁷ further illustrating that these hunts cause severe stress to the animals. This is the opposite of the definition of ‘humane’.¹⁸

The pilot whales or dolphins are driven into shallow water, which is known to cause distress in cetaceans.¹⁹ The whalers then secure individual whales by inserting a round-ended gaff (large hook) into their blowhole (in effect, their nostril). The blowhole is an extremely sensitive organ with a dense complex of nerves.²⁰ The insertion of this hook causes pain and obstructs the whale’s breathing, and potentially allows water to enter its airway.²¹ The animal is then hauled onto shore by people pulling on a rope attached to the hook. As adult pilot whales weigh between 1,300kg and 2,300kg,²² this takes time and inflicts significant strain on a whale’s sensitive breathing passage.

Whalers then use a knife or a short, double-bladed spinal lance developed for this purpose²³ to cut into the whale’s or dolphin’s neck behind the blowhole. This is meant to sever the spinal cord. This may paralyse the animal, **but it does not necessarily mean that the animal is dead, unconscious or insensible to pain.**²⁴



Spinal lance. Source: NAMMCO



Dolphin killing tools. Source: Faroese Whaler's Association, screen grab accessed June 2023.

The whalers' instruction manual indicates that the blade should then be moved from side to side to sever the adjacent blood vessels.²⁵ Death typically results from the animal bleeding out.²⁶ In 2023, it was announced by the Whaling Association that a similar but smaller killing tool designed for use on dolphins was being widely distributed around the islands.²⁷

CLAIM 3: WHALE AND DOLPHIN HUNTING IS SUSTAINABLE.

Claims that Faroese *grindadráps* are sustainable reflect a gross oversimplification of a complex issue. These claims are largely based on comparing take levels with population estimates for the species at large rather than considering local population dynamics. Such population estimates are typically based on surveys of large ocean areas and do not consider that these areas may include more than one geographically and/or genetically discrete population unit. The cetacean populations, in effect, are treated like pelagic fish stocks with a single undifferentiated population in the whole of the northeast Atlantic Ocean, from which a certain number can be removed with no significant effect. Given what we now understand about cetacean culture and societies, this is neither accurate nor appropriate.²⁸ It ignores other factors that also adversely affect these populations in the 21st century, including pollution, climate change, ship strikes and incidental capture in fishing operations.

For some of the species hunted by the Faroese, including the Atlantic white-sided dolphin, population data are particularly scant. There is no adequate population estimate for this species that could be used to justify any killing quota.²⁹ In 2022, the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) noted the high number of Atlantic white-sided dolphins recently killed in the Faroe Islands,³⁰ and that this had occurred without a full assessment of their status at a species and population level. The

committee reiterated its longstanding recommendation that no small cetacean removals should be authorised until a full assessment of status has been made.³¹

Pilot whales are slow to reproduce and have one of the longest birth intervals of any cetacean, giving birth only once every three to five years.³² Gestation lasts 12–16 months. The calf then nurses for 36–42 months. Thus, a pilot whale will typically give birth to only five or fewer calves during her lifetime.³³

Additionally, the Faroese hunting approach is to kill entire groups of cetaceans, sometimes consisting of many hundreds of individuals. This means that whole social units are permanently removed along with their distinct culture, including their knowledge of how to best navigate local areas and find local food sources.³⁴ This may be especially important for pilot whales, who appear to live in matrilineal societies, with the entire pod relying on the long lives, memories and guidance of their elders.³⁵ The transmission of such essential knowledge is certainly impeded by the whalers' killing of entire pods, rarely leaving survivors who would be able to pass on such knowledge to associated whale clans.

CLAIM 4: THE HUNT IS WASTE-FREE.

The official Faroese whaling website claims that *'when whales are caught, everything is exploited and nothing goes to waste'*.³⁶ But today, not all parts of the whales are eaten or used in the Faroe Islands. In fact, the Faroese pilot whale hunts generate a substantial amount of waste, much of which may be dumped back into the sea.³⁷



Whale remains to be discarded as waste, after meat and blubber are removed. Source: Arnø, Wikimedia Commons

Pilot whales and dolphins are butchered to remove muscle and blubber, which are consumed locally. On average, 54 percent of the total weight of a whale is consumed as muscle (meat) and blubber. This increases to as much as 60 percent in larger whales, which have proportionally larger muscle mass than smaller whales.³⁸ This means that the rest of each animal is discarded as waste.

During a *grindadráp*, the entire social group is typically driven to shore together and all are killed regardless of whether any are too small or sick to be eaten. Instead, these individuals may be discarded and join the waste stream.

The IWC prohibits the killing of suckling young or female whales accompanied by young in both commercial and subsistence hunts of the species it regulates.³⁹ Despite this established norm, this practice is routine in the Faroese *grindadráp*.

Whaling in the Faroe Islands is most intensive in summer,⁴⁰ coinciding with the height of pilot whale calving season.⁴¹ Pilot whales are believed to seek out the shelter of calmer waters (like those afforded by the Faroese archipelago) to give birth. Consequently, maternally dependent young and pregnant females are rounded up alongside the other members of their groups and are killed together. Foetuses are usually discarded, and whilst it appears that the numbers of foetuses are recorded, this information is not made public.



Foetus being removed from mother pilot whale after slaughter. Source: L.A.L. 2012



Small, dependent calves killed with their mothers. Source: L.A.L. 2012.

As an example, in the photo below from a hunt in October 2022, out of 225 pilot whales killed, at least 32 (14 percent) were smaller calves, meaning they were likely dependent young.⁴²



Aerial photo: After a pilot whale grindadráp, 12 October 2022, Tórshavn. Red numbers represent the official body count. Green circles (added by authors) identify smaller and likely dependent young. Source: <https://jn.fo/sedlarnir-koma-ut-umleid-kl-2330>

The April 2022 Gallup poll indicated that 60 percent of Faroese people are willing to consider abandoning hunts targeting groups of whales or dolphins that include mothers with young. Only 7 percent of the respondents were opposed to this idea.⁴³

Even people with the capacity to freeze and store pilot whale meat may dump ‘old’ meat when another *grindadráp* occurs. An October 2022 poll sponsored by the Faroe Islands’ public broadcast service (KVF) found that one in four Faroese have thrown away whale meat.⁴⁴ More broadly, a study carried out in November 2022 found that up to 55 percent of household waste in the capital Tórshavn is composed of *food waste*, a higher percentage than in Denmark and parts of Norway.⁴⁵

CLAIM 5: THE GRINDADRÁP IS A FIXED PART OF FAROESE CULTURE.

Pilot whale hunting has been conducted in the Faroe Islands since the Viking Age.⁴⁶ Whale meat was traditionally an important source of food, but the islands are now a modern, prosperous society with one of the highest standards of living in the world.

Despite the historical significance of pilot whale hunting in the Faroe Islands, cultures are not static. Rather, they evolve in response to need and our expanding understanding of how human activities negatively impact animals and the environment. Some examples of this are the replacement of the Mexican Kots Kaal Pato festival involving the ritual slaughter of iguanas, opossums and ducks with a humane alternative;⁴⁷ the bullfighting ban in Catalonia, which ended 600 years of that tradition;⁴⁸ and the shift in South Korea away from the ‘norm’ of farming dogs for meat, as evidenced by the government’s closure of major dog meat markets and slaughterhouses.⁴⁹ Most apposite, the drive hunts of whales in the Scottish Islands, which were very similar to those in the Faroe Islands, were abandoned long ago due to lack of need for their meat.⁵⁰

Today, most Faroese people do not participate in whaling, nor do they consume cetacean products from the hunt. According to the KVF poll, 61 percent of Faroese people never or rarely participate in whaling,⁵¹ while the Gallup poll found that 71 percent of Faroese people never or rarely participate in hunts, or have not done so for over 10 years.⁵²

In the Faroe Islands, men are both the primary consumers of whale meat and the greatest advocates of whaling. The Gallup poll found that 33 percent of men in the Faroe Islands participate in whaling activities at least once a year, while 94 percent of women never or rarely participate in whaling.⁵³

In large part due to national health warnings (see Claim 7 below) increasing numbers of Faroese people are abstaining from eating whale meat. According to the Gallup poll, 66 percent of Faroese people rarely or never eat cetacean meat and only 4 percent eat whale meat weekly.⁵⁴ The KVF poll found that only 0.6 percent of Faroese people eat whale meat weekly, with 13 percent eating it 1–3 times per month.⁵⁵

There is now an opportunity for the people of the Faroe Islands to find other ways to honour their relationship, past and present, with the marine mammals that helped sustain earlier generations.

CLAIM 6: WHALE MEAT IS AN IMPORTANT FOOD SOURCE FOR DISADVANTAGED MEMBERS OF FAROESE SOCIETY.

Recent surveys indicate that the Faroese workforce is the most financially active in Europe,⁵⁶ with the highest employment rate.⁵⁷ The unemployment rate is extremely low, at approximately 0.7 percent.^{58,59} In February 2023, this was equivalent to just 214 unemployed persons⁶⁰ out of a total labour force (as measured the previous year) of 32,855.⁶¹ In addition, given that the Faroese economy is based on the Nordic welfare model, citizens are entitled to a wide range of publicly financed services and support, such as social security, healthcare and education.⁶²

According to Faroese whalers, those who participate in the *grindadráp* receive a free share of the meat and blubber.⁶³ Yet, the Gallup poll indicated that only 11 percent of low-income Faroese participate in whale hunts as often as possible. In comparison, 10 percent of the highest income Faroese participate as often as possible.⁶⁴ So, whether rich or poor, participation in the *grindadráp* is the same, demonstrating that ‘free meat’ does not incentivise the participation of low-income residents.

The same poll found that 58 percent of lowest-income Faroese eat whale meat rarely or never, compared to 66 percent of the overall population,⁶⁵ indicating that it is only a slightly more significant food source for economically challenged citizens. Finally, as dolphin hunts provide another source of ‘free meat’, the Gallup poll indicated that 77 percent of low-income Faroese oppose dolphin hunting (above the national average of 69 percent),⁶⁶ suggesting that this extra source of meat is unnecessary.

CLAIM 7: THE WHALE AND DOLPHIN MEAT CONSUMED IN THE FAROE ISLANDS IS WHOLESOME AND HEALTHY.

Concerns were raised in the late 1970s about the accumulation of high levels of toxic pollutants, including both mercury and persistent organic compounds⁶⁷ in the tissues of the dolphins and pilot whales consumed in the Faroe Islands.⁶⁸ Consequently, since 2011, the Faroese Food and Veterinary Authority has recommended that women and girls avoid consuming blubber until they have finished having children. Women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy within three months and breastfeeding women are advised to avoid consuming whale meat.⁶⁹

A long-term independent study of cohorts of children and adults in the Faroe Islands revealed a range of health concerns associated with the ingestion of chemical contaminants in pilot whale meat and blubber. These included adverse effects on the development of the foetal nervous system and children’s immune system, as well as increased risk of developing Parkinson’s disease and increased risk of hypertension and arteriosclerosis of the carotid arteries in those who often eat pilot whale.⁷⁰ These findings resulted in Faroese medical and health authorities recommending to their government that pilot whale be considered *unsafe* for human consumption.⁷¹ Since 2008, Dr. Pál Weihe, chief physician for the Faroese Department of Occupational Medicine and Public Health and chair of the Faroese Board of Public Health, has repeatedly recommended that pilot whale no longer be consumed by humans.⁷²

CLAIM 8: FAROESE WHALING PARTICIPANTS ARE SPECIALLY “ACCREDITED” AND ADEQUATELY TRAINED.

Video evidence of the killing of more than 1,400 Atlantic white-sided dolphins in September 2021 ignited international criticism of the methods used and the inability of Faroese whalers to ensure a swift and humane death, especially when large numbers of animals are targeted in a single hunt.⁷³

A license to participate in whaling and use the specially developed spinal lance requires no test or practical training prior to taking part in a hunt. Instead, since 2015, anyone 16 or older who simply watches a presentation developed by the Faroese Whaling Association can obtain a license and use a spinal lance.⁷⁴

It may be argued that new hunters gain practical experience by participating in hunts alongside more experienced people. However, having inexperienced people taking part in the killing process itself raises concerns. The inadequacy of the preparation for killing a large, sentient mammal safely and humanely under potentially dangerous conditions that require close human cooperation and communication were illustrated in July 2022; a Danish activist who spoke no Faroese was ‘certified’ after only attending a short video presentation and lecture.⁷⁵ The ensuing criticism prompted the Fisheries Minister to announce that the accreditation process should be revisited. To date, however, no changes have been made.

CONCLUSION

The killing of whales and dolphins in the Faroe Islands meets no subsistence need in the 21st century and causes considerable suffering for the cetaceans. Given this, as well as the adverse effects on human health associated with the consumption of contaminated whale products, it is difficult to understand why these hunts continue.

We hope that in the very near future the people of the Faroe Islands seek a more benevolent and respectful relationship with the sentient and ecologically valuable animals that once sustained them. This would not deny the special relationship that the people of this remote archipelago have with the animals and with the sea but would recognise it in a different way.

ENDNOTES

- Hagstova Føroya (Statistics Faroe Islands). 2023, June 13. Population. Available at: <https://hagstova.fo/en/population/population/population>.
- Cetaceans in this document refers to the group of wholly aquatic mammals that includes whales, dolphins and porpoises. Small cetaceans refers to the smaller toothed species.
- The European Union (EU) Council Directive 92/43/ EEC 2 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora lists all cetaceans as species of EU interest in need of strict protection.
- Whaling.fo. 2023, Catches 2000–2023. <https://www.whaling.fo/en/regulated/450-years-of-statistics/catches/>.
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- April 2022 Gallup Poll: Telephonic poll of 522 randomly selected Faroese citizens aged 18 or above conducted by Gallup Faroe Islands. 1–29 April 2022. Faroese original and unofficial translation available on request from grindpollinfo@gmail.com; KVF Poll October 4, 2022 by Spyr (poll results are available in video accessible at link). Available at: <https://kvf.fo/ljoarin?sid=145780&page=1>. KVF—Kringvarp Føroya, is the national public broadcasting service of the Faroe Islands and includes national news/media, TV, radio. A loose translation of these poll results can be found on page 12 of this document.
- KVF poll, *supra* note 6.
- Pilot whales are members of the Delphinidae family and are considered a species of oceanic dolphins.
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- Humane in this context means the treatment of animals that ensures their welfare and minimizes pain, stress, and suffering.
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KVF commissioned Spyr poll from 4 October 2022 was part of a radio show called Ljóarin (<https://kvf.fo/ljoarin?sid=145780&tpage=1>). An unofficial translation of the poll part of the program is as follows:

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| <p>1. Have you participated in grindadráp?</p> <p>12% as often as possible</p> <p>26% several times</p> <p>22% once or occasionally</p> <p>39% never</p> | <p>5. Do you eat pilot whale meat?</p> <p>8% not at all</p> <p>60% every week</p> <p>13% 1-3 times per month</p> <p>28% 6-12 times per year</p> <p>34% 2-6 times per year</p> <p>17% more rarely</p> |
| <p>2. Should we set a cap on the number of whales we can kill?</p> <p>51% yes</p> <p>38% no</p> <p>11% don't know</p> | <p>6. Food habits when it comes to grind:</p> <p>86% eat dry pilot whale meat</p> <p>77% eat cooked fresh pilot whale meat</p> <p>71% eat salted blubber</p> <p>45% eat boiled blubber</p> |
| <p>3. Should we continue to kill pilot whales in Faroe Islands?</p> <p>84% yes</p> <p>9% no</p> <p>7% don't know</p> | <p>7. Have you discarded whale meat or blubber?</p> <p>Every fourth person has discarded whales meat</p> <p>Three out of four have never discarded whale meat</p> |
| <p>4. Should we continue to kill dolphins?</p> <p>33% yes</p> <p>53% no</p> <p>15% don't know</p> | <p>8. Do you agree with pilot whale meat being sold?</p> <p>34% yes</p> <p>66% no</p> |