

Why Iceland is set to resume whaling despite international opposition

Written by Julia Jabour, Senior Lecturer, Ocean and Antarctic Governance Research Program, University of Tasmania

After a two-year pause in the fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*) hunt, Icelandic whaling company Hvalur hf. will [resume whaling this summer](#), with a government-issued quota.

Two factors help explain why Iceland and other countries are determined to hunt whales in defiance of international disapproval. The first is demand for the product; the second is Iceland's interpretation of international law on whaling.

Whale meat and its buyers

Demand for whale meat appears to be stable in Iceland. Many reports suggest that [Icelanders no longer eat whale meat](#) in great numbers. Yet minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) meat is readily available in supermarkets and sells for the equivalent of A\$29.80 per kilogram.

Much of this is imported from Norway, indicating that there remains a strong domestic demand that is not being met by Icelandic whaling, and suggesting that it is not just Iceland's growing number of tourists who want to eat whale meat. The fin whale hunt, in contrast, is intended primarily for export to Japan.

Read more: [A necessary harvest: it's time to allow Japan to kill whales](#)

Fundamentally different rationales

The second, and far more complex, factor to understand why pro- and anti-whaling nations differ is that they have different interpretations of the basic purpose of the international regime to protect whales.

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The [International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling](#) has banned commercial whaling. In line with the norms of international law, only parties to the whaling convention are obliged to observe this ban.

Iceland was an original member of the [International Whaling Commission](#) (IWC) and accepted the temporary halt on commercial whaling, which came into effect in the mid-1980s.

However, Iceland left in 1992 after the IWC refused to authorise quotas, even when scientific evidence indicated that controlled commercial whaling would not threaten the survival of the targeted species. The zero quota on all whale species, irrespective of their conservation status, has been criticised by several other countries, including Norway and Japan, as non-scientific.

Iceland later re-adhered to the convention, but with a [reservation](#) to the temporary ban. Iceland's reservation included the [statement](#) that:

Under no circumstances will whaling for commercial purposes be authorised without a sound scientific basis and an effective management and enforcement scheme.

Read more: [Could 'whale poo diplomacy' help bring an end to whaling?](#)

Iceland argued that the ban had become a permanent one and that this was contrary to the object and purpose of the convention, which was initially about regulating whaling rather than prohibiting it.

Essentially, Iceland and other pro-whaling countries reject arguments that the object and

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purpose of the convention has evolved into the preservation of whales rather than their conservation for sustainable use.

Iceland also objects to the ongoing situation whereby a scientific [procedure](#) adopted by the IWC to assess stocks and the potential for sustainable whaling was not followed up by the promised adoption of a non-scientific (political) [scheme](#) that would allocate actual quotas. Because of majority voting in the IWC, this standoff has created a persistent stalemate between pro- and anti-whaling countries.

Iceland's current position

After a couple of years of heated discussions among members, Iceland was readmitted to the IWC. However, other countries (including Australia) still object to its reservation, meaning there is no universal acceptance of Iceland's position.

If Iceland were cast out of the IWC, then it would not be bound by the convention at all. However, it would not be able to export to other IWC members, including Japan.

The whaling firm Hvalur hf. intends to resume its commercial hunt for fin whales in June. Quotas have been awarded consistently since 2006, but in 2016 and 2017 the company did not use them, citing doubts about profitability because of difficulties reaching target markets (especially Japan). A couple of shipments of whale meat were made recently (one in 2015 and one in 2016), using the [Northern Sea Route](#) to avoid customs delays and, potentially, protesters at Dutch harbours. The pause merely reflected the commercial reality of the time.

For 2018, Fiskistofa (the Directorate of Fisheries) has set [a quota of 161](#) fin whales, with an additional 30 carried over from the unused 2017 quota. Although the [IUCN](#) listed the fin whale as endangered in 2008, there are no concerns about sustainability since the Icelandic quota represents 0.9% of the lowest [estimate of fin whale numbers](#) off the Icelandic coast.

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The harvest is primarily destined for the Japanese market, which had been difficult to access for a number of reasons, including the effects of the 2011 tsunami, which disrupted processing facilities.

Minke whales are hunted by the company IP-Útgerð ehf., mostly for Icelandic consumption. In 2017, only 17 were taken. This was well within the [quota of 269](#), although numbers were higher in [previous years](#). The [IUCN](#) assesses the status of minke whales as “least concern”.

Read more: [Whale of a problem: why do humpback whales protect other species from attack?](#)

Iceland is making no efforts to stop whaling and never has. Unlike Japan, Iceland does not claim that its whaling is for scientific research, which is authorised under [Article VIII](#) of the whaling convention. It agreed to the temporary ban in order to gather scientific evidence that was supposed to protect the whaling industry in the medium to long term.

Iceland has never had sentimental ideas that whales should not be hunted. Nevertheless, the country has [two whale sanctuaries](#), in Faxaflói (the bay around Reykjavík) and in the north, to support the tourism and whale-watching industry.

Whaling might not be popular in some countries – and indeed some Icelanders would like to see it end – but foreign interference is viewed with suspicion and is more likely to make the traditionalists who support the whale hunt dig in their heels (and harpoons) still further.

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