



UTTANRÍKIS- OG VINNUMÁLARÁÐIÐ

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, TRADE AND INDUSTRY

INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

Utilisation of pilot whales and dolphins for food in the Faroe Islands

July 2023

Faroese whaling in context

As a large ocean nation, the Faroe Islands have a strong commitment to United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 14 – to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. The Government of the Faroe Islands underlines the right and responsibility of the Faroese people to utilize the resources of the sea sustainably.

Traditional means of food production from local resources are an important supplement to the livelihoods of Faroe Islanders. These include mountain grazing sheep, coastal fishing for household use, seasonal catches of certain seabirds and occasional catches of pilot whales and other small cetaceans.

These food resources have enabled the Faroe Islands as an island nation to maintain a relatively high degree of self-sufficiency in food production. In the Faroe Islands it is considered both economically and environmentally responsible to make the most of local natural resources, and to maintain the knowledge required to make use of what nature provides in a harsh oceanic environment.

Pilot whales and other small whales represent one of few local sources of meat that does not have to be imported from afar. The meat from each whale drive provides valuable food which is distributed for free in the local communities where the whale drives take place. This is protein that would otherwise have to be imported from sources in other countries.

The Faroese pilot whale drive

Many different species of whales and dolphins occur in the waters around the Faroe Islands, most of which are protected by law. The commonly occurring pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) are taken for their meat and blubber in whale drives which are organised at the community level and regulated by national legislation and regulations.

The annual catch is on average 600 pilot whales, with numbers fluctuating from year to year. It has long since been internationally recognised that pilot whale catches in the Faroe Islands are sustainable and the stock of pilot whales in the Northeast Atlantic is abundant.

The Faroe Islands cooperate internationally through NAMMCO, the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission, on the conservation of whales and the management of whaling. NAMMCO is an inter-governmental organisation which provides for political, scientific, and technical cooperation on marine mammal conservation and management in the North Atlantic.



UTTANRÍKIS- OG VINNUMÁLARÁÐIÐ

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Regular international scientific sighting surveys in the North Atlantic since 1987 have provided valuable information from which to estimate and monitor the stock abundance of different whale species. The Faroe Islands participate actively in these surveys, with comprehensive coverage across the Faroe Plateau and adjacent areas. For the latest information on the status of pilot whales in the North Atlantic, see <https://nammco.no/topics/long-finned-pilot-whale/>

Whale drives are only initiated when whales are sighted by chance close to land. The organisation of participants, both in boats and on shore, is crucial in ensuring an effective whale drive. Prevailing weather and tidal conditions will also have a bearing on whether and where a group of whales can be driven and beached. Whale drives in the Faroe Islands mainly occur from May to September.

Whale drives are a dramatic sight to people unfamiliar with the slaughter of mammals. The hunts are, nevertheless, well organised, and fully regulated. Faroese animal welfare legislation, which also applies to whaling, stipulates that animals shall be killed as quickly and with as little suffering as possible.

In recent decades, dedicated measures have been taken to improve hunting methods and animal welfare in whale drives. Innovations and improvements to the equipment used in Faroese whaling have been developed on the initiative of experienced participants in the whale drive.

The most recent example is the spinal lance, which is now required equipment for the killing of pilot whales. The lance is used to sever the spinal cord of the whale, which also severs the major blood supply to the brain, ensuring both loss of consciousness and death of the animal within seconds. The spinal lance has been shown to reduce killing time to 1-2 seconds, while also improving accuracy and safety. Normally, an entire pod of whales is killed in less than fifteen minutes.

White-sided dolphins

White-sided dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus acutus*) are also a commonly occurring and abundant species around the Faroe Islands. Individual animals occasionally occur together with schools of pilot whales, while separate schools are also sometimes driven and beached, and fully utilised for human consumption. The driving and killing of dolphins in the Faroe Islands are subject to the same regulatory framework as pilot whales and must be carried out accordingly.

To avoid any future unmanageable catches such as that which occurred in September 2021, the Ministry of Fisheries has decided to introduce an annual catch limit of 500 white-sided dolphins for 2022 and 2023. This will be reviewed for 2024 and subsequent years when the full assessment of white-sided dolphins requested from the NAMMCO Scientific Committee is expected to be complete. In addition, high priority will be given to the improvement of killing methods for white-sided dolphins. A prototype spinal lance for use with white-sided dolphins has been made and will be tested. Consideration will also be given to whether a special knife should be developed that can also improve killing methods.

Until the most recent catch, the average annual catch of white-sided dolphins over the past 20 years has been around 250, with catches fluctuating annually from none to several (see table). Based on the latest abundance estimate, the Faroese catch of white-sided dolphins is also considered to be sustainable.

For the latest information on the status of white-sided dolphins in the North Atlantic, see <https://nammco.no/topics/atlantic-white-sided-dolphin/>.



UTTANRÍKIS- OG VINNUMÁLARÁÐIÐ

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Annual catches of pilot whales and white-sided dolphins 2009 - 2022

(last updated 16 June 2023)

Year	Pilot whales	No of drives	White-sided dolphins	No of drives
2022	527	8	0	0
2021	666	11	1423	1
2020	576	4	35	1
2019	682	11	10	1
2018	624	10	256	4
2017	1203	18	488	8
2016	295	5	0	0
2015	501	6	0	0
2014	48	2	0	0
2013	1104	11	430	1
2012	713	10	0	0
2011	726	9	0	0
2010	1107	14	14	1
2009	310	3	170	4

CATCHES TO DATE IN 2023 (as of 13 July)

Pilot whales:

Six separate drives have taken place so far in 2023 with a total catch of 646 pilot whales.

White-sided dolphins:

No catches of white-sided dolphins have taken place to date in 2023.

On 10 June, a group of 25 white sided dolphins was driven into the bay of Fuglafjørður where scientists from the Faroe Marine Research Institute fitted six of the dolphins with satellite tracking tags, after which the entire group was driven out again.

This is part of on-going research to monitor the behaviour and distribution of white-sided dolphins in the Northeast Atlantic. The Marine Research Institute provides updated information on the movements of the tagged animals, which since 10 June have dispersed into different groups and have moved widely in different directions. See this [link](#).

- Further information on whaling in the Faroe Islands: www.whaling.fo.
- For further information on international cooperation on conservation, management and research on whales and seals in the North Atlantic, see NAMMCO - the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission: www.nammco.org.