

Faroe Islanders whaling, what a shame.

Written by Bernardo Ramos Duran

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This protest message decries the killing of pilot whales in the Faroe Islands and includes a series of photographs that graphically depict this bloody slaughter. The message calls on Denmark, of which the Faroe Islands is a part, to stop the slaughter and urges recipients to pass on the message in order to raise awareness of the issue.

This is true, such whale hunts do indeed occur in the Faroe Islands, usually during the summer months. The Faroe Islands are made up of a number of small inhabited islands. Every year, hundreds of Long-finned Pilot Whales are killed in such slaughters. The hunts are non-commercial and anyone in the island communities can join in at will. When a school of whales is spotted close to shore, messengers are dispatched to inform local inhabitants of the particular island involved. A formation of small boats is then used to drive the whales ashore, where they beach themselves in the shallow water and are killed by waiting islanders. A special whaling knife is used to sever the animal's spine near the dorsal fin. Information on a Faroe Islands website about whaling in the province describes the killing process:



Men gather on the shore to kill the beached whales. Ideally, most of the whales will strand far enough up on shore that it is unnecessary to secure them. However, those remaining in the shallows must be secured and hauled closer. Traditionally, this is done by driving a steel hook, or gaff, with a rope attached to it into the back of the whale. A new blunt hook inserted into an airsac in the whale's blowhole has now been widely tested in practice and it is hoped that this new equipment may eventually replace the traditional gaff as the standard method for securing whales. The whale is killed using a sharp knife to cut down to sever the spinal cord, which also severs the major blood supply to the brain, ensuring both the loss of consciousness and death within seconds.



These whale kills have occurred in the Faroe Islands for hundreds of years and are considered by Islanders to be an important part of their social culture. It is generally only Faroese men who take part in the killings while female islanders look on. The whale hunts have caused international outrage and have been roundly condemned as unnecessary and barbaric by conservation and animal rights groups around the world. However, Faroe Islanders vigorously defend their right to engage in the hunts. A Wikipedia entry on the subject notes:

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Most Faroese maintain that it is their right to catch pilot whales given that they have done so for centuries. The Faroese whalers defend their actions before international organizations like Greenpeace with three arguments: one, that grindadráp is not a hunt as such, but a dráp meaning a kill (ie that they do not regularly take to sea just to hunt for pilot whales, but only kill those which are sighted swimming to close at land); two, that the pilot whale hunt does not exist for commercial reasons, but for internal food distribution among households; and three, they do not believe the pilot whale to be an endangered species.



They further argue that most people in the modern world have become so far removed from the harsh realities of animal food production that they have formulated unrealistic notions of how food actually gets to their tables.

However, conservation organisations do not consider these factors to be valid arguments for the continuation of the slaughters. They argue that modern day Faroe Islanders have ample food and do not require whale meat to survive as in earlier centuries. Moreover, they point out that Pilot Whales in the region are known to have high levels of mercury, PCBs and environmental poisons and excessive consumption of whale meat could be detrimental to the health of Islanders.

In spite of its cultural significance, the continuation of the practise is very difficult to convincingly defend and even some Faroe Islanders have begun opposing it.



It should be noted that, although the Faroe Islands are indeed a part of the Kingdom of Denmark, they are largely an autonomous entity. A home-rule law was brought into effect in 1948 which gave the Faroe Islands a considerable degree of political independence from Denmark. The Faroese are self governing in most matters other than foreign affairs, the legal system and defence. Furthermore, although Denmark is certainly part of the European Union, the Faroe Islands are not. Information about the Faroe Islands on the UK Trade & Investment website notes:

Denmark granted the Faroe Islands a measure of Home Rule as a self-governing populace in 1948. Over the years the ties to Denmark have gradually relaxed so that, whilst being part of the

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Kingdom of Denmark, the islands have their own parliament and flag and issue their own bank notes and stamps. The special status of the Faroe Islands means that their policies and tax regimes do not always coincide, indeed some differ greatly, with those of Denmark. For example, the Faroe Islands are not a member of the European Union and all trade is governed by special treaties with the EU. In November 2003 the Faroe Islands agreed with the EU and acceded to membership of the Pan-European System of Cumulation of Origin. In principle this is a mutual free-trade agreement.



Thus, demanding that Denmark put a stop to the slaughter may not be the most effective approach. The continuation of international condemnation and pressure to stop the whale kills might be more effectively aimed directly to the Faroe Islanders themselves.