



Whaling in the Faroe Islands

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Abstract

Mass whaling in the Faroe Islands, a constituent territory of Denmark, has been a prevalent practice for hundreds of years. Long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*), in particular, are routinely hunted on these islands as a food source, during what local Faroese call a *grindadráp*. However, in recent years this issue has become wildly contentious. As public perception for whaling rapidly declines, arguments of subsistence hunting, sustainable harvest, and the preservation of culture have also arisen. We intend to describe the potential issues with whale conservation in this area, while also providing some insight and solutions for the future management of these marine mammals. In particular, the sustainability of the practice is at risk due to the overall uncertainty of pilot whale populations and sheer number of take per season. Additionally, bioaccumulation of mercury and DDT in whale meat may also cause significant hazards to human health.

Introduction

- The long-finned pilot whales typically live in the northeast Atlantic Ocean, ranging from Newfoundland, all the way to the Faroe Islands.¹
- The Faroe Islands is one of two countries that currently hunt these pilot whales, since public support for whaling has been declining in recent years.¹
- Whales have been hunted on the Faroe Islands since the 1500s. This tradition has kept the Faroese population fed for hundreds of years, as the island has limited farming opportunities.²
- Additionally, whale hunting provides ample protein and fat sources, which are also difficult to source in this given region.³
- While there are approximately 778,000 million long-finned pilot whales in the wild, the ethics of current regulations are regularly challenged.⁴
- As of May 2022, specification regarding age, sex, and maturity during “grinds” are nonexistent. Bycatch is also a significant issue.¹
- Concern for human health is now equally as pressing as whale conservation. Recently, mercury has been found inside sections of whale meat due to PCB and DDT pollutants in oceanic environments, which can continue to bioaccumulate.⁵



Figure 1 Over the course of 10 weeks and between 19 designated whaling bays, nine separate grindadráps were documented, accounting for 436 pilot whale deaths in 2017 From: “Sea Shepherd,” <https://www.seashepherdglobal.org/latest-news/bloody-fjords-witness-team2/>. Accessed 2 May 2022. © Sea Shepherd.

Current State of Knowledge

Ethics

- One significant argument for traditional whaling in the Faroe Islands is that it’s a sustainable system that prioritizes non-commercialized meat and upholds egalitarian values.^{3, 6}
- Through historically ethical limitations on how quickly and brutally whales were killed were vastly looked over, current use of spinal-lances’ (*monustingarar*) now work to minimize conscious harm to these animals.⁶
- Although generally public opinion on whaling has declined in recent years, youth in the Faroe Islands tend to support the practice, as grinds are considered “organic” and “humane.”^{6, 7}

Faroe Islands Cetacean Take 1710–2019, by Decade

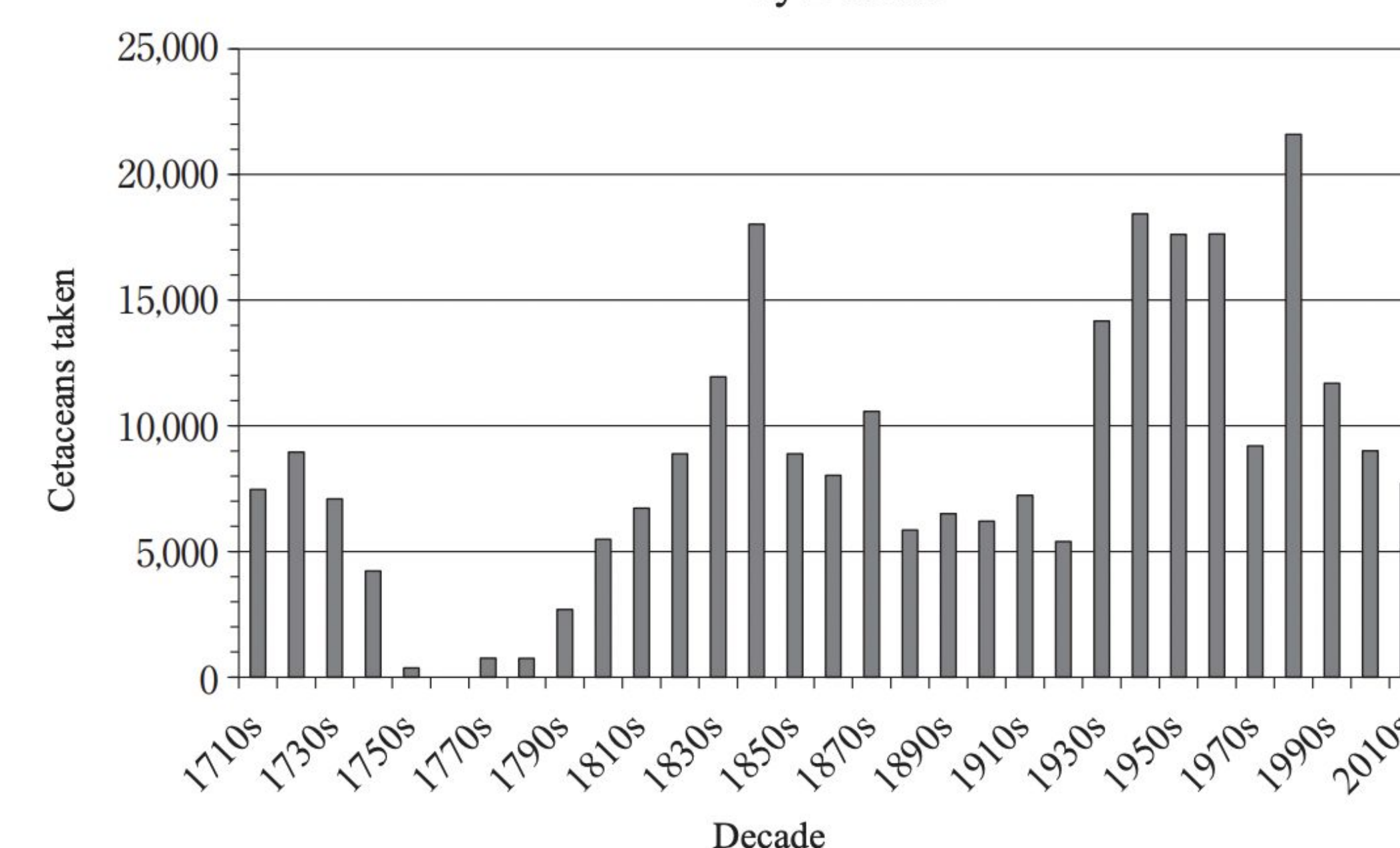


Figure 2 Number of cetaceans taken in the Faroe Islands by decade From: “Contemporary Whaling in the Faroe Islands: Its History, Challenges, and Outlook,” https://minpaku.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_action_common_download&item_id=8602&item_no=1&tribute_id=22&file_no=1. Accessed 2 May 2022. © National Whaling Statistics, Foroya Naturrugripasavn”

Policy/Regulations

- While in 2015 efforts to create a certification process for Faroese participation in *grindadráps* were created, many regulations for taking part in these ritual hunts have been minimized to small, informal restrictions.⁸
- These casual rules are often self-regulating, with a team of police, nominated officials, and communities whalers who come together in order to ensure hunts run smoothly.⁹
- Concerns from international communities have shed light on the potential impacts of this highly unstructured system, however. While human obedience may be mostly successful, enforcement of over extraction appears to be neglected.¹⁰
- For example, short finned pilot whales and bottlenose dolphins are often a bycatch of these takes. Currently, the Faroese government has failed to address effective ways to prevent this take while conducting their grindadráps.¹¹
- Another potential risk arises from indiscriminate sex and age class captures. A study conducted during a grind in 2003 showed that the majority of whales that were taken were composed of related females and their offspring of both sexes.¹
- With large and frequent catches taken at the Faroe Islands (an average of 6.1 grinds/year and 846.8 whales/year during 1709–2001), removing mass amounts of female and juvenile whales can be destructive towards future population regeneration.¹
- Since female whales can live up to 46 years in the wild, this could have exorbitant repercussions for long-term viability.¹²

Human Health

- Recently mercury and DDT have been found in sections of pilot whale meat due to bioaccumulation of these compounds through their prey sources. If consumed in a large enough quantity, this amount of mercury and DDT could be harmful to humans.¹³
- The high concentrations of mercury are found in the whales liver, kidneys, and muscles. This is cause for more caution when it comes to eating these whales, especially as this is a main food source for Faroese.⁵
- Studies have shown that the more mature the whale, the more mercury that was typically found in its system.⁵

Recommendations

In order to sustain whale populations:

- Firm restrictions need to be implemented to reduce the number of grinds that occur annually.
- Take laws limiting the amount of whales killed per year would help reduce the yearly population impact and subsequent bycatch. This can be achieved by creating a capture limit for each area and each grind that occurs.
- Along with the capture limit, restrictions to keep sustainable populations of juveniles and females in the wild should be put into law to keep a healthy population growing. This would offset the annual grinds by restricting take of sensitive individuals

In order to sustain human health:

- Reduce intake of whale meat by the Faroese Islanders to help mitigate negative health effects associated with the bioaccumulation of toxins in high trophic level marine carnivores.
- Providing education for locals on the negative effects of DDT and mercury on both animal populations and by association, themselves.



Figure 3 Long-finned pilot whale From: “ORCA,” <https://www.orcaweb.org.uk/species-sightings/dolphins/long-finned-pilot-whale>. Accessed 2 May 2022. © Anna Bunney.

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