

# The Resumption of Whaling by Iceland and the Potential Negative Impact in the Icelandic Whale-watching Market

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**Whale-watching tourists were surveyed to determine their opinion on whether they would visit, to go whale-watching, in a country that conducted whale-watching operations: 79% of whale-watchers in the study area said they would boycott a country that conducted hunts for cetaceans, and a further 12.4% stated that although they would visit a country conducting whaling operations, they would not partake in a whale-watching trip in that country (i.e. 91.4% of whale-watchers would not go whale-watching in a country that hunted whales). The results of this study are of great significance to the whale-watching industry in Iceland (currently estimated to be directly worth over US\$12 million per annum), a country whose government has stated its wish to resume commercial whaling in 2006, and 'scientific' whaling prior to this date.**

**Keywords:** Whaling, whale-watching, Iceland, tourism boycott

## Introduction

Whale-watching, which can be defined as 'any commercial enterprise which provides for the public to see cetaceans in their natural habitat' (Hoyt, 1995), is currently one of the fastest growing sectors of the world tourism market (Hoyt, 2001). Although a relatively young industry – the first whale-watching operation started business in 1955 (Hoyt, 1992) – since the International Whaling Commission's (IWC) moratorium on commercial whaling was enacted in 1986, whale-watching has become perhaps the most economically viable and sustainable use of cetaceans. The industry expanded rapidly throughout the 1990s: whereas in 1983 only 12 countries hosted whale-watching operations, this had risen to 65 by 1994, and to 87 by 1998 (Hoyt, 1992, 1995, 2001). The number of participants and the economic value of whale-watching has likewise increased from 5.4 million tourists spending US\$504 million in 1994 to 9 million tourists spending US\$,1059 million in 1998 (Hoyt, 2001).

Within this international whale-watching market, Iceland has quickly become a major player. Whale-watching in Iceland did not begin until 1990 (Fisher, 1998), but the industry has enjoyed over a 250% annual growth rate and by 2002 it was estimated that the direct value of Icelandic whale-watching was in excess of US\$12 million (Bjorgvinsson, 2003; Oddsson, 2003). If it continues to grow at the

current rate direct expenditure on Icelandic whale-watching will be worth in excess of US\$20 million by 2006 (Oddsson, 2003). The coastal waters of Iceland host a variety of cetacean species that are the target of whale-watching operations, including humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), minke whales, (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), blue whales (*B. musculus*), killer whales (*Orcinus orca*), white-beaked dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*) and harbour porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena*). Operators in Húsavík, a small coastal town on the north coast of Iceland market the area as 'one of the best spots in the world to watch whales' (North Sailing, 2003).

The importance of whale-watching to the tourism economy has been recognised by Iceland's leading tourism body, the Icelandic Tourism Industry Association, which has stated: 'whale-watching has become one of the most popular tourist activities in Iceland, providing considerable income for the economy, as well as creating a very positive image for Iceland' (Kirby, 2003a).

Whaling in Icelandic waters ceased in 1989. However, in 2002 the Icelandic government, amid considerable controversy that has yet to be resolved, rejoined the International Whaling Commission. It subsequently stated its intention to resume commercial whaling in 2006. However, actual lethal catches of whales has begun sooner due to Icelandic proposals for a catch of up to 100 minke, 100 fin whales and 50 sei whales per annum for 'scientific purposes' (Kirby, 2003b). In the summer of 2003 the first 36 (of an initial quota of 38 animals) of these whales were killed.

There has been little consideration by the Icelandic government on how the resumption of commercial whaling might impact the whale-watching industry. Some proponents of the resumption of commercial whaling argue that commercial whaling and whale-watching can coexist, with economic value being derived from watching the whales, then subsequently hunting members of the same population (e.g. Moyle & Evans, 2001). Regardless of the biological accuracy of this argument (it is possible that hunted whales would react indiscriminately with evasive manoeuvres to whale-watching and whale-hunting vessels), such arguments as these do not take into account the nature and opinions of whale-watching tourists who are often concerned about the impacts of human activities, such as commercial whaling, on the health and welfare of marine mammals.

For example, studies on tourists who go marine wildlife-watching, and particularly whale-watching, in Scotland have indicated that whale-watchers are very environmentally motivated and display great interest in animal welfare issues (Warburton *et al.*, 2000). For example 91% of marine wildlife-watching tourists on the Isle of Mull were involved in environmental/wildlife-related activities; 58% were members of environmental charities (with one in seven being a member of Greenpeace) and an astonishing 18% stated that they actually engaged in voluntary work for environmental charities (Warburton *et al.*, 2000). Moreover, marine wildlife tourists were seven times more likely to consider commercial whaling as a threat to cetaceans populations than the average tourist to the area (Warburton *et al.*, 2000).

In addition, studies have also shown that the introduction of marine mammal culls in rural coastal areas could potentially result in large-scale boycotts of that region as a tourist destination. For example, it was estimated that the introduction of seal culls could cause a loss of tourism revenue of more than US\$150 million to the Highland region of Scotland (Parsons, 2003).

Those supporting the resumption of commercial whaling in Iceland argue that whaling is completely compatible with whale-watching; however, no studies have been conducted to specifically evaluate the opinions of whale-watchers on whether the resumption of commercial whaling would influence their decisions to visit, or to go whale-watching, in Iceland.

Therefore this study seeks to investigate whether the resumption of commercial whaling in a country (such as Iceland) would cause whale-watching tourists to reconsider visiting that country as a holiday destination, or to reconsider going whale-watching in such a country, and thereby evaluate the potential impact on the whale-watching market.

### Methodology

In the summer of 2001 and 2002, interviews were conducted with, and questionnaires distributed to, tourists alighting from whale-watching vessels based in Tobermory, Isle of Mull, western Scotland. The whale-watching operation was deemed to be representative of other whale-watching companies in the area, and was similar in size and scope to whale-watching operations in Iceland. Thus the clientele was judged to be representative of whale-watching tourists, in general, for this region of Europe. A total of 271 questionnaires were completed and answers, to questions relating to tourist opinions of whale-watching in a country that conducted commercial whaling, were extracted and collated.

### Results

When asked whether they would consider boycotting a trip to a country that was actively engaged in hunting cetaceans, 79% of whale-watching tourists said that they would boycott trips to such a country. A further 4% of respondents said that they did not know if they would boycott visiting a country that hunted whales.

Of those that said 'no' or 'don't know' (21% of whale-watchers), when further asked if 'the commercial hunting of whales in a country would stop you from going on a whale-watching trip in that country', 40% said that yes, commercial whaling by a nation would stop them from going whale-watching in that country. However, 10% stated that they 'didn't know' if commercial whaling would keep them from whale-watching in a country they were visiting.

### Discussion

Not only did 79% of whale-watchers in the study area say that they would boycott visiting a country that conducted hunts for cetaceans, 40% of the remainder, i.e. a further 12.4% of whale-watchers, stated that although they would visit a country conducting whaling operations, they would not partake in a whale-watching trip in that country. Therefore, if commercial whaling was resumed in Iceland, the whale-watching industry could potentially lose 91.4% of its tourist market (79% boycotting the country plus a further 12.4% visiting the country but avoiding going whale-watching).

Several studies have indicated that whale-watching tourists around the world display remarkably similar demographic characteristics (e.g. Duffus, 1988; Forestell & Kaufman, 1990; Lück, 2003; Parsons *et al.*, 2003; Pearce & Wilson,

1995; Tilt, 1987). The assumption that the opinions of whale-watching tourists in Scotland will be echoed by whale-watching tourists in Iceland is arguably a valid one. This is reinforced by the findings of a survey on the opinions of tourists visiting Iceland in 1998, in which it was determined that 78.2% of tourists were opposed to whaling in general and 68.9% were opposed to Iceland resuming whaling (A.S. Thorsdottir in Hoyt, 2001).

As mentioned above, the fledgling whale-watching industry is growing rapidly and its current value (Bjorgvinsson, 2003; Oddsson, 2003) is considered to be worth more than commercial whaling was in Iceland even at its peak: an estimated US\$4.5 million to US\$6 million per annum (Fisher, 1998). It is interesting to note that Norway, a country that is currently taking a quota of approximately 600 whales a year, derives an income of only US\$6 million per annum from this commercial whaling catch (Toolis, 2001). If this value is correct, it equates to only 50% of the current direct value provided by watching live cetaceans in Iceland.

Moreover, the indirect income from Icelandic whale-watching was estimated to be at least two to three times that of, and in addition to, the direct income value noted above (Oddsson, 2003). Therefore, the resumption of commercial whaling could cause a massive and critical reduction in the number of whale-watching tourists coming to, or going on, whale-watching trips in Iceland, and potentially resulting in a loss of direct income of almost twice that currently derived from hunting whales in the most active whaling nation in the North Atlantic. Moreover, when considering the additional indirect income from whale-watching, this financial loss in real terms could total as much as six to eight times the whaling income.

This potential loss in income has been anticipated by Iceland's tourism industry. For example, in March 1999, when Icelandic whale-watching was worth a fraction of the most recent estimates, the Iceland Tourist Industry Association passed a resolution at its annual meeting which stated 'to resume whaling . . . would cause great damage to the Icelandic tourism industry. Furthermore . . . marketing of Iceland as a tourist destination has increasingly been directed at tourists seeking wilderness and living nature, which also includes whale-watching. The meeting urges the Government of Iceland not to resume whaling without consultation and acceptance of the international community. Otherwise there would be dire consequences.' This resolution was reiterated by the Iceland Tourist Industry Association at a meeting of 3 April 2003 (Sanders, 2003).

As mentioned above, the whale-watching industry in Iceland is growing rapidly and projections of income that could be generated in the future are substantial (Oddsson, 2003). However, the resumption of commercial whaling has the potential to catastrophically affect this industry in terms of tourist boycotts and other tourist protest actions. Whale-watching is currently the golden egg of the Icelandic economy. Care must therefore be taken by the Icelandic government not to kill the goose that laid it.

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