

No Whaling in Iceland for Second Straight Year

by Elizabeth Claire Alberts 27 April 2020



One of the rare blue whale-fin whale hybrids killed by Hvalur in 2018. Image by Hard to Port.

- *An Icelandic whaling business, IP-Utgerd, has announced that it will stop whaling altogether, while the largest whaling company in the country, Hvalur hf., has halted its whaling operations for the second year in a row.*
- *Hvalur has continued to whale in spite of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) placing a global moratorium on whaling in 1986, mainly targeting threatened fin whales.*
- *Conservationists say they hope that whaling ends permanently in Iceland, although it's possible that Hvalur will resume hunting whales again in the near future.*

Icelandic whaling company IP-Utgerd announced April 24 that it is stopping whaling completely, while the country's largest whaling firm, Hvalur hf., says it won't be hunting any whales for the second year in a row.

IP-Utgerd, which mainly targeted minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), cited financial difficulties after no-fishing zones were extended off the Icelandic coast, forcing its boats to go further and further offshore. Hvalur, which hunts threatened fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*) as well as minke whales, is ceasing operations because of stiff competition with Japan, among other reasons, according to Kristján Loftsson, the company's CEO.

In the past, Hvalur sold most of its whale meat to Japan, but Loftsson said Hvalur is not currently able to compete with Japan's own whale meat products, which are subsidized by the Japanese government. Loftsson also said Japan now has strict requirements for imported whale meat, which has made dealings with Japan even more difficult.

Additionally, Loftsson said the COVID-19 outbreak would make it impossible for his company to hunt whales and process the meat, since workers would need to be in close proximity to each other, and social distancing rules would be difficult to follow.

For conservationists, this interruption to whaling, however long it lasts, is welcome news.

"This is indeed terrific news that for a second straight year, vulnerable fin whales will get a reprieve from Hvalur hf's harpoons, the sole fin whaling company," Fabienne McLellan, co-director of international relations at Ocean Care, told Mongabay. "This said, fin whaling has been suspended in Iceland in the past, only to resume. While it looks promising that whaling in Iceland might stop for good, the temporary cessation of fin whaling must become permanent."

Rob Read, director of Sea Shepherd UK, a group that documented Hvalur's whaling operations in 2018, also welcomed the news.

"I believe the writing is on the wall now for the world's most notorious whaler — Kristjan Loftsson — and his company Hvalur hf," Read told Mongabay. "Now is the time for Loftsson to hang up his harpoons and for Iceland to become an ethical whale watching, not whale killing nation."

Hvalur has been whaling in Iceland since 1948, and it didn't stop when the International Whaling Commission placed a global moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986. From 1948 to 1989, the company caught an average of 220 fin whales a year, according to a report by the Animal Welfare Institute.

In 2018, Hvalur killed 146 fin whales and six minke whales, many of which were pregnant females. Two of the whales also turned out to be hybrids between fin whales and blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*), which stirred a substantial amount of controversy.

"We're celebrating the moment that there's not going to be any whaling, but we're also aware of the possibility that they're going to resume next year," Feuerhahn told Mongabay. "We have to look at the past, and I know that with fin whaling, Iceland sometimes takes a pause for two years.

"It's a family business and he [Kristján Loftsson] wants to keep it alive, so despite all the problems with the Japanese market, and the problems in Iceland with the [COVID-19] guidelines, he might come up with a solution for it, and we could go back to whaling in 2021," Feuerhahn added.

Despite these reservations, Feuerhahn said he believes Loftsson could successfully convert Hvalur's whaling facility into an educational center.

"He could make something really educational and lasting from it and ... tell visitors and the Icelandic community about the history of whaling, and about his family business without killing whales anymore," Feuerhahn said. "This has been done in the past in Australia. When Australia killed their last whale ... the last whaling station in Albany, Australia, has been transformed into a museum. I think this could work very well in Iceland as well."

<https://news.mongabay.com/2020/04/iceland-wont-be-killing-any-whales-this-year/>

Article title was changed by Museum staff