

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses whaling in Iceland and invites your thoughts on the subject.

Is Iceland really going to stop whaling? Has it hung up its harpoons for good? We're certainly one step closer to a permanent end to the horrors of the past – no whales have been killed in the land of ice and fire for two years – but, despite press reports to the contrary, we're definitely not there yet.

Iceland is one of three countries continuing to make a mockery of the International Whaling Commission's 1986 moratorium on commercial whaling (the others are Norway and Japan). During the late 1980s, it killed 292 fin whales and 70 sei whales, under the guise of 'scientific whaling', before storming out of the IWC in 1992. Then it rejoined 10 years later and this time, disgracefully, was allowed to take out an official 'reservation' against the whaling ban. It promptly resumed commercial whaling in 2003 and has killed no fewer than 852 fin whales and 653 minke whales in the years since.

But why do it? Why fly in the face of so much anger and opposition from the rest of the world? It's certainly not about money. The latest figures show that whaling runs at a loss (in contrast, whale watching contributes an impressive US\$15 million directly to the Icelandic economy and has a total economic impact of US\$22 million).

It's not even about food. According to a 2018 survey, only about 2 per cent of Icelanders had eaten whale meat six or more times over the previous year and 84 per cent said that they had never tasted whale meat at all. It was heavily promoted to tourists as a 'traditional delicacy' to help fill the gap (I've seen people step off

whale-watch boats in Reykjavik Harbour, then walk straight into a restaurant and order grilled minke whale). But most whale meat is exported to Japan. By no stretch of the imagination can it be considered traditional in Iceland either (Icelanders didn't start commercial whaling until 1948) and there is absolutely no scientific evidence that whales have a significant impact on marketable fish stocks.

So what is the appeal? In truth, whaling is more about patriotism and political point-scoring than it is about whales. It is easy for the Icelandic government to stomp about defending national pride against unwelcome foreign pressure over something so 'insignificant' (at least, on the world stage).

“Why fly in the face of so much opposition from the rest of the world?”

But what has pushed it to the brink is economics. In particular, far fewer tourists are eating whale meat (after years of campaigning); and the Japanese market is shrinking rapidly (there is a growing stockpile of whale meat in Japan – not surprising, given that on average the Japanese eat only about one ounce per person per year).

Attitudes are changing, too. Support for hunting whales has declined as the income from watching them has climbed. Even the Icelandic fishing industry is no longer willing to defend whaling – it is more interested in exporting fish to countries that disapprove of whaling.

There are two whaling companies in Iceland. IP-Utgerd hunts minke whales and Hvalur hf hunts fin whales. Both have been struggling financially. Earlier this year, IP-Utgerd declared that it had stopped whaling for good. Citing the impracticalities of social distancing regulations, and financial difficulties, Hvalur hf then announced that it would not be whaling this summer (for the second year running). But fin whaling in Iceland has been suspended in the past, only to resume, so there are no guarantees.

The irony is that if Iceland was to announce a complete end to commercial whaling, instead of new whaling quotas, it would be the toast of the world. 🐳

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Icelandic whaling companies killed hundreds of fin whales in the 1980s.