

ICELAND'S APPALLING DECISION TO RESUME whaling this summer came as a bolt from the blue. The shocking announcement followed months of hopeful speculation, after last year's hunt was temporarily put on hold due to significant welfare issues.

The country's last remaining whaling company, Hvalur hf, has been granted a licence to kill up to 128 fin whales this summer. It's devastating news for the planet's second largest animal, which is still recovering from the ravages of more than one and a half centuries of commercial whaling. At least 915,000 fin whales have been killed worldwide – and they are listed as vulnerable to extinction on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

It looked as if Iceland had hung up its harpoons for good – we were on the verge of celebrating a permanent end to the horrors of its past – after the previous five-year whaling licence expired in December 2023. But our cautious optimism was clearly premature.

The decision is incomprehensible. First, the Iceland Food Minister, Bjarkey Gunnarsdóttir, said that issuing the licence was not necessarily a decision that is in line with her views or the views of her party, but that she had to “follow the laws and regulations”. Then a statement on the Icelandic government website said that the licence was issued “... based on a precautionary approach and reflects the government's increased emphasis on the sustainable use of resources”. They contradicted themselves – because, in my view, there is zero justification for Iceland's whaling.

It is by no stretch of the imagination beneficial to Iceland's economy – indeed, according to Iceland's Left-Green Movement, whaling activities have a negative financial impact. Whale watching, on the other hand, contributes an impressive £20 million to the economy every year. More importantly, its appalling brutality and cruelty – laid bare in an official report by the Icelandic Food and Veterinary Authority in 2022 – is blatantly in contravention of the country's own Animal Welfare Act.

Iceland is one of three countries continuing to hunt

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At the time of going to print, these whaling vessels remained in Reykjavik Harbour

“What I find indefensible is that we are still talking about quotas for whalers”

MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

whales in defiance of world opinion and the International Whaling Commission's 1986 moratorium on commercial whaling (the others are Norway and Japan). Since 2003, under an official ‘reservation’ against the whaling ban, it has killed no fewer than 876 fin whales and 653 minke whales – under its own self-allocated quotas.

Public and political support for whaling does appear to be waning. A poll in June found that 51% of Icelanders are against whaling (29% are in favour). And Iceland's former Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, who stood down in April this year, also expressed her concerns in an interview with the Icelandic newspaper *Stundin*: “I have grave doubts that whaling off the Icelandic coast can be considered sustainable from an environmental, social and economic perspective.”

Meanwhile, Japan recently announced that it will start hunting fin whales in the North Pacific (with a self-allocated quota of 59 in 2024). This is in addition to an annual quota of 25 sei whales, 142 minke whales and 150 Bryde's whales. Japan has also just launched a colossal £37.5 million ‘factory ship’, paid for with a government loan, to assist with

its controversial whaling operations (smaller, catcher vessels bring the dead whales back to the factory ship for processing and freezing). The new vessel is overkill for the (relatively) small number of whales being hunted in Japanese waters, fuelling concerns that Japan may be considering a return to whaling in the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary, around Antarctica.

I believe there is still some cause for optimism. The government subsidies that have kept loss-making Japanese whaling afloat for so many years are gradually being phased out. And, in Iceland, the Government's decision came so late (perhaps intentionally?) that Hvalur hf may be unable to prepare its whaling vessels in time for this season's hunt.

But what I find truly disgraceful and indefensible is that, in 2024, we are still talking about declaring quotas for whalers to harpoon some of the largest and most sentient beings on Earth – for products that nobody needs.

If we're ever able to talk to whales (there is a lot of discussion these days about the complexities and meaning of whale language), I know what I will say: “Sorry”.

“This appalling brutality and cruelty is blatantly in contravention of Iceland's own Animal Welfare Act”



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