

THE WIDELY CONDEMNED KILLING OF 1,428 Atlantic white-sided dolphins in the Faroe Islands in September wasn't a hunt. It was unmitigated, unregulated, unnecessary slaughter. And it happened in our own backyard (the islands lie halfway between Scotland and Iceland).

But it's old news. Literally hundreds of thousands of long-finned pilot whales and dolphins have been killed in the Faroe Islands over many centuries. Speed boats and jet skis spend hours corralling entire pods of pilot whales into shallow bays (along with Atlantic white-sided dolphins and any other species that get caught up in the melee). Local villagers rush into the water to drag the animals – including pregnant and lactating females, and calves – further ashore with steel hooks that are rammed into their blowholes while they're still alive. No animal escapes. Eventually, they're all dispatched with lances and knives.

The Faroese vigorously defend the hunt, or 'grind', as it's known locally, claiming that it's a traditional part of their culture and provides an important free source of protein. What utter balderdash.

Cultural tradition is not a valid argument in itself (slavery comes to mind). And, while the meat and blubber are distributed to hunt participants and other local people, the 53,000 or so Faroese live in a modern, wealthy European community – a semi-autonomous region of Denmark – with a high standard of living. They get economic aid from Denmark (currently the equivalent of more than £70 million per year) and, as the islanders love to boast, their GDP per capita is among the highest in the world. They don't need free food handouts.

To add insult to injury, the Faroese don't seem to have any concept of cruelty. Many years ago, I witnessed one of these drawn-out, disorganised massacres and, despite all the hollow assurances by the Faroese government, it was one of the most sickening demonstrations of animal cruelty I have ever seen (and that's saying something).

Meanwhile, there are no official quotas – the islanders are free to take as many whales and dolphins as they want – and we have

Conservationist Mark Carwardine is exasperated by the empty justifications offered for ritualised slaughter



The Faroese government says about 600 pilot whales are usually killed annually

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OPINION

no idea if the hunt is an added threat to their survival, given all the other perils the animals already face. And finally, in an uncanny twist, the meat and blubber contain such high levels of mercury and persistent organic compounds that they pose a serious threat to the health of the Faroese people (not to mention the health of the whales and dolphins themselves).

So why hasn't the grind been stopped? Vociferous public pressure clearly hasn't worked – a quarter of a century of boycotts and petitions hasn't made the slightest difference. It's only made the Faroese dig their heels in even deeper. Neither have predominantly non-existent diplomatic solutions (it doesn't help that, when Denmark joined the EU, the Faroe Islands chose to remain outside and therefore is

not subject to European legislation that forbids whale and dolphin hunting).

Any hope of change from within the Faroe Islands is going to take an unacceptably long time. According to a poll published soon after the dolphin massacre,

53 per cent of the Faroese said they were opposed to the killing of white-sided dolphins (hardly anyone there eats dolphin meat or blubber and my guess is that most of the animals will have been dumped). But more than 83 per cent of the islanders still support hunting long-finned pilot whales.

What worries me is that if we can't stop the gratuitous slaughter of cetaceans in a tiny archipelago

just over 300km from the UK, what hope is there of tackling Japan over commercial whaling, Brazil over the destruction of the Amazon or China for being the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases? **W**

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