Iceland's Position on Whaling & Sustainable Management of Living Marine Resources

Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs
Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Summary

- *Iceland has been a leading advocate of sustainable use of natural resources, including living marine resources.*

- *Iceland's whaling policy is an application of Iceland's policy on sustainable utilization of natural resources. Iceland's position is that sustainable utilization of marine resources must be based on a comprehensive approach to the marine ecosystem as a whole.*

- *Iceland's scientific whaling program does not involve endangered species of whales.*

- *Scientific studies presented to the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission show that there are more than 67 thousand minke whales in the Central North Atlantic Ocean, 24 thousand fin whales and 10 thousand sei whales.*

- *A total number of 36 minke whales were taken in the first phase of the scientific program, which ended on October 1 2003.*

- *The annual consumption of fish, krill and other biomass by whales in Icelandic waters has been estimated around 6 million metric tons, several times the total Icelandic fishery landings of 1.5 to 2.0 million metric tons.*

- *Iceland was one of the first countries in the world to realize the importance of a conservation approach to whaling declaring a ban on whaling for large whales in Iceland in 1915 - 1935. When whaling was resumed in 1948 to 1985, strict rules and limitations were applied and whaling was restricted to small-scale land based operations.*

- *Iceland was among the first countries in the world to extend its fishing limit to 200 nautical miles in the year 1975 to put an end to the uncontrolled fishing around Iceland by trawlers from other European countries.*

- *Iceland has a reputation for applying one of the most rigorous scientific based fisheries management systems found in the worlld*

- *Iceland has committed itself to not to authorize commercial whaling before 2006 or while progress is being made within the International Whaling Commission in the negotiations of a Revised Management Scheme for whaling and has also made it clear that commercial whaling will not be authorized in Iceland without a sound scientific basis and an effective management and enforcement scheme.*

Iceland's scientific whaling program does not involve any of the endangered species of whales. The scientific programme that was launched in 2003 is designed to gain knowledge on the role that minke whales have in the marine ecosystem, especially their interaction with fish stocks.

A total number of 36 minke whales were taken in the first phase of this program, which ended on October 1 2003. Icelandic scientists are now working on the data gathered from the research, which is linked to Iceland's overall policy of sustainable utilization of marine resources and only involves non-endangered species. The number involved is so small that it will not have any impact on the minke whale stock around Iceland.

According to scientific studies presented to the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission there are abundant stocks of some species of whales while some are still threatened. It is estimated that there are more than 67 thousand minke whales in the Central North Atlantic Ocean, 24 thousand fin whales and 10 thousand sei whales.

The scientific programme is based on a research plan Iceland put forward for discussion within the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission. According to the original plan a total of 100 sei whales, 100 fin whales and 200 minke whales were to be taken in a periode of two years, i.e. 50 sei whales, 50 fin whales and 100 minke whales each year. Although all the elements of the plan are scientifically valid and the proposed takes would not threaten the whale stocks in any way, it was decided to show utmost restrained and go even slower in implimenting the plan by limiting the catches in year 2003 to 38 minke whales.

Icelandic authorities fully appreciate the need for careful conservation of marine resources, and indeed of all natural resources. Iceland's economy depends heavily on sustainable utilization of its natural resources. Thus marine resources account for more than two thirds of Iceland's exports and seventy percent of Iceland's energy needs are provided with renewable resources. This includes almost all electricity and house heating.

Disruption of the ecological balance in the sea around Iceland due to overfishing or other reasons would have catastrophic consequences for the livelihood of Icelanders. This is why the Government of Iceland has invested so much knowledge and resources to ensure that the marine resources in Icelandic waters are appropriately managed.

Iceland was among the first countries in the world to extend its fishing limit to 200 nautical miles in the year 1975 to put an end to the uncontrolled fishing around Iceland by trawlers from other European countries, endangering the fish stocks. Since then Iceland has taken great care in maintaining balanced and sustainable fishing in Icelandic waters by enforcing a strict quota system for

various fish species including cod, herring and capelin, based on rigorous scientific assessment and monitoring.

Iceland takes pride in its pioneering work in this field, which has been emulated by many countries in the world wishing to avoid overfishing. The quotas for fishing are based on the recommendation of scientists, who regularly monitor the status of each stock. As whales form an integral part of the marine ecosystem, they also need to be included as part of a comprehensive study.

Sustainable utilization of marine resources must be based on a comprehensive approach to the marine ecosystem as a whole. Marine resource management which does not involve all factors of major importance is bound to induce unsustainable imbalances in the ecosystem. Various species of whales are major factors in the ecosystem of the ocean and it is quite clear they must be included in any policy of sustainable utilization of marine resources.

The annual consumption of fish, krill and other biomass by whales in Icelandic waters has been estimated around 6 million metric tons, several times the total Icelandic fishery landings of 1.5 to 2.0 million metric tons. This is an indication of the impact that whales are having on the marine ecosystem.

It would be irresponsible to ignore a factor of such a magnitude. It has been pointed out that the great number of minke whales is threatening the recovery of various species of fish such as cod, which the minke whale consumes in great quantities. At the same time it seems probable that the more numerous whale species, such as minke whales, fin whales and sei whales, may actually be taking over the ecological niche, which some of the endangered whale species used to fill, making it more difficult for them to recover as a result. This also is an object of further study.

Iceland's research program on minke whales is a part of a comprehensive scientific study on the ecological interactions between minke whale and other marine species. Similarly it is necessary to research various aspects of the biology feeding ecology and pathology of fin and sei whales in the Northern Atlantic. This will be considered at a later stage.

Iceland was one of the first countries in the world to realize the importance of a conservation approach to whaling. As signs of overexploitation of whales emerged early in the last century, Iceland declared a ban on whaling for large whales in Iceland 1915 - 1935. Whaling was not resumed again until 1948 (except for limited catches from one land station 1935 - 1939). Strict rules and limitations were applied to whaling in Iceland and they were restricted to small-scale land based operation from 1948 to 1985 when all commercial whaling was halted again because of the so-called international moratorium on whaling. This is an important reason for the robust condition of the main whale stocks of large whales Iceland used to utilize, i.e. the fin whales and sei whales in the Central Northern Atlantic.

Iceland has been a leading advocate for international cooperation in ensuring sustainable use of natural resources, including whales. This has been the stance taken by Iceland within the International Whaling Commission (IWC), based on the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling from 1946. The stated role of the IWC is to provide for the proper conservation of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry.

Iceland recently rejoined the IWC with a reservation to the so-called moratorium on commercial whaling. Iceland had left the IWC in protest over the latter's failure to abide by its intended role of regulating whaling and promoting whale research instead of totally banning all whaling, regardless of scientific findings. It has now rejoined the organization and is taking part in its work on the Revised Management Scheme (RMS), the IWC's framework for commercial whaling. Iceland has committed itself to not authorizing commercial whaling before 2006 or while progress is being made in the negotiations of RMS. It has also made it clear that commercial whaling will not be authorized in Iceland without a sound scientific basis and an effective management and enforcement scheme. Iceland has no plans for commercial whaling at this stage.

Further information:

- For information on the governance of Icelandic marine living resources please refer to www.fisheries.is
- For information on various scientific research projects on whales and other marine mammals in the North Atlantic please refer to www.hafro.is and www.nammco.no