

The Image of Iceland in the Local and Global Nexus of Whaling Politics

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Abstract – This paper looks at the development of the whaling debates and their contribution to the international image of Iceland. It traces the debates through two stages: an “era of peaceful protest” from ca. 1978 to 1985 and a “battle-lines” period after 1985, explaining the positions of both sides and the images each produced. For the anti-whaling side, the Icelanders were “bloodthirsty hunters,” while the pro-whalers portrayed themselves as citizens of a small nation bullied by “sentimental eco-terrorists.” The paper concludes by commenting on the development of the Icelandic whale watching industry after 1995 and how this industry has promoted an international image of Icelanders as whale-protectors rather than whale-hunters to foreign tourists.

Keywords – Whales, whaling, Iceland, Norway, International Whaling Commission, Greenpeace, Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, environmentalism, indigenous rights, whale watching

Who is endangered, and who must be protected? In the globally interconnected 21st-century world, these are fundamental and complex moral questions for which the answers are not easy or clear. When the issue of species protection is raised, one thinks first and foremost of animals whose lives or environments are being threatened by human actions. Since the environmental campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s, which urged concerned citizens of rich Western nations to donate money or to take action to “save” certain animals, it has been tacitly understood that human actions have placed animals at risk of extinction and in need of protection, and that the rights of animals for survival should assume precedence over the desires of humans for meat, leather, fur, or other such products. But the Greenlandic politician and indigenous rights activist Finn Lynge turned the usual formulation of this moral claim on its head when he identified “carnivorous humans” as an endangered population deserving protection. Lynge, who made this statement in response to

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the Greenpeace anti-sealing and anti-whaling campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, was not, of course, referring to carnivorous humans in general—a group so large that it could hardly be thought of as endangered—but to indigenous people as a group with a particular relationship to meat consumption, to hunting, and ultimately to nature. According to his argument, indigenous people have a direct connection to nature, and this particular relationship with nature is not comprehensible to people who have separated their consciousness from the natural world—that is, by most of the rest of the carnivorous and non-carnivorous humans on earth, who purchase their food from stores in exchange for money. This relationship of indigenous people to nature, Lyngé argued, makes their cultures distinctive and deserving of protection from the threats to their traditional food supplies posed by industrialized nations and non-governmental organizations such as Greenpeace. By saving the animals, we endanger our fellow humans and their cultures.¹

Since the 1985–1986 hunting season, a voluntary international agreement negotiated and regulated by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) has maintained a commercial hunting quota of whales set at zero (this zero-catch quota is often referred to as a “ban” in media discussions of whaling, although this is not technically accurate), with exceptions for certain cases defined as indigenous hunting.² This agreement attempts to satisfy both of these moral principles: animals deserve to be protected from humans, and minority groups deserve to be protected from majority ones. The global discussion about whales and whaling since the 1960s has resulted in an uneasy consensus on both of these principles, and the current policy attempts to balance the two ideals. This consensus, however, is not the result of a fundamental philosophical agreement between parties, but has emerged from a history marked by negotiation, protests, even violent protests, and compromise in which the sides not only disagreed, but misunderstood each other’s philosophical position. This article traces the history of these whaling debates in and around Iceland and, to a lesser degree, as they have applied to the other whaling nations in the North Atlantic, including

¹ Lyngé 1992.

² International Whaling Commission, <<http://www.iwcoffice.org/conservation/rms.htm#moratorium>>; see also Friedheim 2001.

Norway, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland. The purpose is to show what effect the whaling debates have had on the international image of Iceland from the 1970s to the 2000s. The main source materials for tracing the shifts in this debate are newspaper articles from this period, especially *Morgunblaðið*, the largest Icelandic daily newspaper at the time, and *Aftenposten* (hereafter, *AP*), one of the major Norwegian dailies.³

An overview of this material shows that the North Atlantic whaling debates have fundamentally transformed themselves in the thirty or so years over which they have taken place. In the early phase of the debate, there was a relatively long period—from the late 1970s until at least the mid-1980s—during which the “pro” side failed to understand what was at stake in the “anti” efforts to achieve a ban on whaling. (For the purposes of simplicity, I refer to the two parties in the debate as the “pro” and “anti” whalers, although this is too absolute a distinction.) The pro camp did not grasp what it was about whaling that the whaling protesters found morally objectionable, and therefore made gestures that were meaningless to the other side—for example, proposals to reduce their hunting quotas, or to hunt whale species that they did not consider to be endangered. In the eyes of the anti side, however, such proposals were useless at best and offensive at worst. Their position was that whales had been scientifically proven to be sentient, intelligent beings, and that killing even one was the moral equivalent of murder. Since proposals to reduce the hunting quotas obviously did not meet this moral demand, the anti-whalers perceived whalers and their supporters as “bloodthirsty” and “barbarous,” and promoted this image of whaling nations in the international media in order to gain public support for their cause.

The anti side, for their part, failed to understand what symbolic role whaling played for whalers and whaling nations, and that whaling could have cultural meanings apart from its economic significance. They therefore made proposals of the kind that Lynge and other whaling proponents found paternalistic and condescending,

³ References to *Morgunblaðið* before 1986 are to the paper copies; thereafter most of the articles (with a few exceptions) were obtained from the electronic archive, <<http://mbl.is/mm/gagnasafn/>>, and therefore do not include page numbers. All references to *Aftenposten* are from its electronic archive (<<http://www.aftenposten.no/>>).

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suggesting that other people from different cultures ought to change their traditional food sources and livelihoods in order to meet the moral demands of foreigners. In the heated debate that ensued, the anti-whalers were publicly castigated as “sentimentalists” and “terrorists,” and thus consigned to a category outside the realm of rational discourse and negotiation. One of the major outcomes of the debate that I trace in this article was actually the development of this cultural meaning of whaling in Iceland, which had not emerged as a significant piece of Icelandic identity until it came under attack in this period.⁴

The progression of the whaling debates in the North Atlantic, and especially in Iceland, can be divided into two phases. The first phase could be seen as an “era of peaceful protest” lasting from about 1978 until 1985—from the first demonstrations against whaling by environmental protection organizations in Iceland—until the IWC’s moratorium went into effect. This “peace,” however, was less the result of tolerance and understanding for the other’s position, than of each side misunderstanding the fundamental premises of the other. The era of peaceful protest was followed by a period in which positions on both sides solidified, a period of “battle lines,” as the two sides came to the rude awakening of the true nature of the opposition in the period after 1985. This phase was marked by the sabotage of whaling boats and equipment in Iceland and Norway, the unsuccessful Norwegian attempt to extradite the perpetrators of the sabotage, the Norwegian resumption of commercial whaling under the objection clause of the 1985 agreement, and the withdrawal of Iceland from the IWC in 1992.⁵ In 2002, Iceland returned to the IWC and resumed whaling under a scientific permit in the 2003–2004 whaling season.⁶ In 2006, the year in which the 1986 IWC agreement

⁴ Brydon 1991, 2006; see also Mathisen 1996.

⁵ On the rights of member nations’ to register objections to the 1985 agreement, see <http://iwcoffice.org/conservation/table_objection.htm>.

⁶ Some of the conditions under which scientific permits are allowed are defined under <<http://iwcoffice.org/conservation/permits.htm>>. Scientific catches are based on the stipulation that the nation conducts legitimate and necessary scientific research on the whales that could not be performed by non-lethal means. The scientific legitimacy of many of these permits—especially Japanese scientific whaling—has come under intense public debate. While the IWC requests the submission of scientific data, including the assurance that the proposed catch will not harm the stocks, ultimately it is the nation itself that decides whether to not or engage in scientific whaling.

was due to expire, the maintenance of the zero-catch quota was upheld by a narrow vote at the annual IWC meeting.⁷ In the 2006–2007 season, Iceland followed Norway in registering a scientific objection with the IWC and killed its first fin whale in a commercial hunt since ceasing whaling. Iceland’s re-entry into the IWC and resumption of whaling marked a shift in the cultural meaning of whaling for Icelanders from the “peaceful protest” era. It asserted in an international arena that whaling was a fundamental element of Icelandic culture and that Icelanders, rather than international organizations, were the authorities on the sustainability of North Atlantic whale populations.

The Development of the Whaling Debates, 1970s to 2003

During the first phase (ca. 1978–1985)—the “era of peaceful protest”—the pro-whaling factions were not organized, unlike the anti-whaling factions. Supporters of whaling in Iceland did not perceive the anti-whaling movement as fundamentally hostile to their activities. They believed that environmental protests were mainly aimed at the so-called larger whaling nations such as Japan and the Soviet Union and did not affect small-scale whaling of the type in which they were engaged. Naturally, they assumed, the larger nations were responsible for most of the environmental problems in the world, and therefore were the objects of protest in the age of increasing environmental awareness. Icelandic newspaper articles during this period more often discussed the effect that a whaling ban would have on the Japanese economy than on the Icelandic economy. For example, *Morgunblaðið* reported in 1980 that, of every 100 whales caught in the world, the Japanese caught ninety-nine.⁸ A 1983 article on a boycott of fish from the whale-hunting nations Japan, Norway, Peru, and Russia organized by the Animal Welfare Institute did not even mention the possibility that Iceland might also be affected by such a boycott.⁹ Since the United States and Great Britain were at the

⁷ International Whaling Commission, <<http://www.iwcoffice.org/Meetings/meeting2006.htm>>.

⁸ “Hvalur í hættu” [Whales in Danger] 1980: 1.

⁹ “Hvetja menn til að kaupa ekki fisk frá hvalveiðiþjóðunum” [Urging a Boycott on Fish from Whale-Hunting Nations] 1983: 16.

forefront of the anti-whaling movement and two of the major whaling nations were the Soviet Union and Japan, anti-whaling was seen in Iceland as an expression of political opposition to the Soviet Union and a fear of Japanese economic power. Therefore, nations like Iceland, a NATO member with a small economy, essentially friendly to the interests of the United States, had no reason to be concerned about the anti-whaling protests.

Furthermore, Icelanders were not themselves united around the whaling issue in this early period, as is also the case today. An Icelandic nature protection group, Skuld, protested against whaling in Reykjavík in 1979 and 1980.¹⁰ They pointed out that hunting and eating whales was unnecessary for the Icelandic economy and food production, as well as anti-modern, now that scientific research had made us aware of the intelligent and sympathetic nature of whales, a position borrowed from the Greenpeace/environmentalist platform.¹¹ A reporter for *Morgunblaðið* travelled with a Greenpeace boat on some of the group's attacks on so-called pirate whalers in Spain in 1980 and wrote articles sympathetic to Greenpeace.¹² In fact, the newspaper never wrote editorials on the whaling issue until 1985, apparently regarding the impending moratorium as not being sufficiently worthy of particular Icelandic interest. The general feeling of Icelandic pro-whalers before 1985 was that, by catching a few hundred whales per year, the Icelanders were not contributing to environmental problems or species endangerment, and therefore not really the objects of the foreigners' anger.

Greenpeace and other anti-whaling groups perceived the matter quite differently, however. Because of their perceived characteristics of intelligence and maternal nurturing, the anti-whalers thought of whales as essentially human, and killing even one, for any reason, was the moral equivalent of murder. In popular environmentalist rhetoric during this early period, nuanced questions such as which nations killed whales, for what purpose, with which weapons, how many whales were killed, and which species they belonged to, were secondary issues compared to the central charges of murder and

¹⁰ "Friður með hvölum" [Peace with Whales] 1980: 30.

¹¹ Agnarsson 1983: 45.

¹² Kjartansson 1980a: 16–17 and 1980b: 1.

genocide. This environmentalist view of whales as intelligent and human-like animals was a popular rendering of the work in the 1960s and 1970s of a number of biologists and zoologists, such as Scott McKay, Robbins Barstow, and Roger Payne (the founder of Ocean Alliance), on topics such as humpback whale songs and dolphin communication. Some of the scientists were inspired by their research to become environmental advocates themselves. Barstow, for example, writing for the popular press, described whales as having “a special affinity for human beings,” a “universal appeal,” and a “mystique” that “inspires wonder and exhilaration among people from all races and all nations in a way that no other non-human species has equalled so widely.”¹³ The view of whales as unique and highly intelligent animals with a special relationship with humans became also a theme in popular media by the mid-1980s, with films with explicit environmental messages about whales becoming commercially successful. Some examples include *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), which features the crew of the starship *Enterprise* travelling into the past and obtaining a humpback whale song to save the Earth from a threatening alien probe and the whales from extinction. A film that later came to have particular relevance for Iceland, *Free Willy* (1993), details a troubled boy’s relationship with a killer whale; the boy finds redemption himself through his efforts to free the whale from an amusement park.

For environmentalists in the 1970s and early 1980s, whales took on an even greater significance than the blue whale’s status as the world’s largest mammal would suggest. As the organizers of a 1983 conference, sponsored in part by the IWC and Greenpeace, acknowledged, whales, in addition to being of interest in their own right, function as “powerful symbols of environmental concern.”¹⁴ As symbols of endangered animals and threatened environments, their main role in popular discussions in recent years has been to draw attention to general environmental concerns about a range of causes, rather than specific debates over the health of certain species of whales, the issue in which the pro-whaling advocates are most interested. At a meeting celebrating the 1985–1986 hunting moratorium, Sir Peter Scott, one of the founders of the World Wildlife Fund, summed up the significance of whales to the global

¹³ Barstow 1987: 19.

¹⁴ Barstow 1987: 19.

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environmental movement: “If we can’t save the whales, we can’t save anything—least of all the human species. The whales are a symbol of survival, perhaps the symbol of all life on earth.”¹⁵

After the zero-catch quota went into effect, the whaling debates entered a second stage from 1985 on as the “battle lines” between the two sides hardened. As the IWC has no regulatory apparatus, the agreement on zero-catch quotas was purely voluntary. Norway ceased commercial whaling in compliance with the agreement the following year, in 1987, but Iceland continued to whale until 1989. Greenpeace and a splinter group, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, founded by former Greenpeace member Paul Watson, took responsibility for the enforcement of the moratorium upon themselves. This was carried out by so-called Greenpeace actions, where members placed themselves between whaling boats and whales, and by the more radical activities of the Sea Shepherd members, who destroyed whaling vessels and the equipment of whaling companies.¹⁶ In one of these actions, two men from the Sea Shepherd sabotaged two boats and navigational equipment belonging to the whaling company Hvalur hf. in the Reykjavík harbour before racing back to Keflavík and fleeing Iceland in November 1986. On the road to the airport, they were stopped by an Icelandic policeman for speeding, but, unsuspecting of what these foreigners were up to, the policeman only gave a warning before allowing them to proceed to the airport and flee the country. The next morning, when their actions were discovered, the reaction of the Icelandic public was one of shock and disbelief, as the headline in *Morgunblaðið*, finally aroused over this issue, reflected: “This never happens here...”¹⁷

In the face of an opposition prepared to intensify the battle, believing that they had both legal backing and the consensus of world opinion on their side, the pro-whaling side acted to organize itself, both locally and globally. In the North Atlantic, this took the shape of the High North Alliance (HNA), founded in Lofoten, Norway, in 1991 as an umbrella organization of Norwegian, Icelandic, Faroese, Greenlandic, and Canadian fishing and whaling groups, and the North

¹⁵ Quoted from “Peter Scott—A Passion for Nature” [Motion picture] (2006).

¹⁶ Watson 1994.

¹⁷ “Það gerist aldrei hér...”: 11 (my translation).

Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO), founded in Nuuk, Greenland, in 1992 with members from Iceland, Norway, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands. The HNA is an advocacy group that aims to protect the rights of hunters and whalers, while NAMMCO contests the scientific competence of the IWC to evaluate the health of whale populations in North Atlantic waters and argues that the pilot and minke populations there, among others, can be better managed by local authorities. The North Atlantic countries have also supported larger organizations with more global aims, such as the World Council of Whalers, founded in 1997, and the Inuit Circumpolar Council, founded in 1977, in their efforts to spread more positive images of whaling cultures and to promote the claim for an indigenous right to the consumption of whale meat.

Accompanying these structural moves, an organized pro-whaling argument emerged in Iceland during the “battle-lines” phase, grounded on the concept of the “rights of small nations.” In July 1985, as the IWC agreement was just about to go into effect, *Morgunblaðið* wrote that “no nation, especially a small nation, can afford to build policy and make decisions on such a two-faced morality.”¹⁸ What *Morgunblaðið* meant by “two-faced morality” was that the Greenlanders would be permitted to catch 200 minke whales under the indigenous whaling exemption, but the Icelandic minke catch of about the same number would be forbidden (in fact, the Greenland catch hovered between 100 and 200 whales in the following years).¹⁹ The assertion of the “rights of small nations” was a rhetorical attempt to cast the Icelanders and the history of their relationship with the sea—however short their history of whaling may have actually been—symbolically into the now-recognized category of indigenous people—that is, as a minority nation whose culture is misunderstood and threatened by the actions of powerful outsiders. From the mid-1980s, some Icelanders, Norwegians, and Faroe Islanders began to defend whaling as an expression of their cultural values and national sovereignty. They phrased their argument in language very similar to that of indigenous rights advocates like Finn

¹⁸ “Engri þjóð, síst af öllu smáþjóð, líðst það að byggja stefnu sína og ákvarðanir á tvöföldu siðgæði.” “Vísindalegur hvalveiðar” [Scientific Whaling] 1985: 26 (my translation).

¹⁹ Complete figures on aboriginal subsistence catches since 1985 are available at <http://iwcoffice.org/conservation/table_aboriginal.htm>.

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Lyng: The people of North Atlantic nations have historically experienced a struggle for survival against the harsh realities of nature. Having done so, they have a different relationship with nature than foreign urban dwellers, who are removed from the realities of life and death. Therefore, a person's national identity as an Icelander or Norwegian—although he or she might live in a large city, buy meat from the supermarket, and have never fished or whaled—endows this individual with certain rights, including the right to eat whale meat in a restaurant in Oslo.²⁰

Towards the end of the 1980s and on into the early 1990s, this argument solidified as the North Atlantic countries continued to be publicly attacked on the whaling issue, and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society continued its activities in Norway in 1992 and 1994 after the Norwegian resumption of commercial whaling in 1992.²¹ By this time, Iceland had left the IWC but was not whaling. Opposition to the globally accepted position on whaling became an important piece of North Atlantic identity in the political realm. It was regarded as necessary for smaller nation states to take strong stands against unfair pressure from larger nation states through the domination of the IWC, otherwise they would appear open to manipulation and their national sovereignty would be at risk. Furthermore, it was even more important not to give in to so-called terrorist attacks like those of the Sea Shepherd. The economic value of whaling to North Atlantic countries was not a significant point in the “rights of small nations” argument. It was the small nations against the large nations. In this spirit, the Norwegians declared their support in 1997 for Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe in their efforts to get elephants removed from the endangered species lists, a move that brought Norway under intense international criticism. Just as the Norwegians claimed for minke whales, the African nations maintained that elephants were not endangered, but were destroying farmers' crops and therefore had to be hunted. Kåre Bryn, the Norwegian whale commissioner, denied after his trip to Zimbabwe and South Africa that Norway was in the business of “trading whales for elephants.” Rather, he claimed that Norway and the African countries were in the same situation: “We have a relationship with

²⁰ Kalland 1994.

²¹ “Miljøterror straffes ikke” [Environmental Terrorism Goes Unpunished] 1996.

animals that ‘everyone’ thinks are endangered, but in reality these populations are highly sustainable.”²² That oil-rich Norway should attempt to cast itself on the world stage as a post-colonial African nation illustrates how symbolic and removed from economic realities—and, in the views of anti whalers, how “absurd”—the whaling debates had become by the late 1990s.

Between 1998 and 2003, an episode played out in North Atlantic waters that brought to life the abstract political and moral principles of both sides. It was embodied by the charismatic and famous figure of Keiko, the killer whale who had starred in the movie *Free Willy* in 1993. Although Keiko had become very ill in a Mexico City aquarium, by 1998 he had won friends worldwide through the movie highlighting his plight. The Free-Willy-Keiko Foundation had brought him to Oregon and negotiated successfully with the Icelandic government to return him to Icelandic waters where he was born. Returning Keiko to the wild seemed to be simple humanitarianism in the eyes of some animal rights advocates and environmentalists, but it actually violated Icelandic law against the import of living animals. Six years earlier, the Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries had refused to allow Sea World to return another killer whale to Icelandic waters because there was a risk that the animal could be carrying undetectable infections acquired during captivity. This whale was not, however, an international media star, but had been in part responsible for the death of a trainer.²³ In the negotiations with the Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries preceding Keiko’s return, many marine biologists cited the earlier case to support their contention that a whale who had grown to adulthood in captivity had not learned the skills to survive in the wild, and the entire plan was a flawed, sentimental idea based on a Hollywood script rather than good marine biological practice.

The Icelandic public, bemused at the idea of spending upwards of 9 million dollars to return a whale that had already lived half of his natural life span in captivity to the wild, cheerfully received Keiko as the celebrity he had become, with commercial promotions tied to his

²² “Norge og disse afrikanske landene er i same situasjon, ved å ha bestander av dyr som ‘alle’ tror er truet av utryddelse, men som i realiteten er svært bærekraftige.” “Norge får hvalstøtte, gir elefantstøtte” [Norway Gets African Support on Whaling, and Supports Africans on the Elephants] 1997 (my translation). See also Arnalds 1998.

²³ Davis 1997.

release in Icelandic waters.²⁴ Some Icelandic protesters against the Keiko decision, however, believed that the Ministry was acquiescing to the American cultural view of whales in allowing the return of the animal when the Icelandic position on whaling had not been respected by the Americans. One protester provocatively asserted in a letter to *Morgunblaðið*, “I furthermore oppose allowing foreigners telling us how and what we may eat [...] let’s eat Keiko and begin whale hunting immediately!”²⁵ In the same issue of the newspaper, Ólafur Hannibalsson expressed sympathy for the United States for the recent September 11th attacks, but noted that Iceland had experienced terrorism as well with the 1986 Sea Shepherd action, although the international press had not recognized it as such, and international courts had failed to address the issue. Only the injuries of powerful nations with popular causes were readdressed, he implied, while those of smaller countries were ignored.²⁶

Many Icelanders, however, seemed to see Keiko as an easy way of winning international goodwill on environmental issues and as a marketing opportunity. According to a poll conducted in the fall of 1998, 54% of Icelanders supported Keiko’s return, only 24% were against it, and the rest were indifferent.²⁷ The Norwegians also welcomed Keiko after he swam into their waters, and allowed him to be buried in Norwegian soil after his death there in December 2003. Keiko was a way of showing to the world that Norwegians and Icelanders were not heartless barbarians in their relationship with whales, as they had been so often portrayed in the media. Rather, they were protecting a whale that had been damaged not by North Atlantic peoples, but rather by commercial interests in anti-whaling countries. In any event, any good feelings between environmental interests and North Atlantic whaling nations generated by the Keiko story were short-lived. In 2002, Iceland re-entered the IWC, although only by a narrow vote, and it resumed scientific whaling in the 2003–2004 season. After the moratorium was sustained at the 2006 IWC meeting

²⁴ Orlean 2002, Brydon 2006.

²⁵ “Ég ennfremur mótmæli að láta útlendinga segja okkur fyrir verkum og hvað við megum éta [...] Étum Keikó og byrjum hvalveiðar strax!” “Étum Keiko og byrjum hvalveiðar strax” [Let’s Eat Keiko and Begin Whale Hunting Immediately] 2001: 42 (my translation).

²⁶ Hannibalsson 2001.

²⁷ Guðmundsson 1998.

when it came up for a vote after the twenty-year period, Iceland resumed commercial whaling in the following season.

Conclusion: The View from Húsavík

Húsavík, a small community of fewer than 3,000 people on the north shore of Iceland, advertises itself as the “whale watching capital of Europe.”²⁸ It is home to two whale watching companies, North Sailing (Norðursigling) and Gentle Giants (Hvalaferðir), which are located directly adjacent to each other on the harbour and take tourists five or six times per day into Skjálfandi Bay to see whales during the May–September season. Other highlights of tourism in Húsavík include two highly individualized museums: the Húsavík Whale Museum and the Icelandic Phallogical Museum, also located in close proximity to each other. As far as I could tell on my visit to Húsavík in June 2009, no formal cooperation takes place between these two institutions—the display of whale penises at the Phallogical Museum appears to be purely coincidental—but nevertheless both are strongly influenced by the personalities and interests of their founders. The Húsavík Whale Museum was founded in 1997 by the Icelandic anti-whaling advocate Ásbjörn Björgvinsson. The rooms of the museum, which is housed in the one of the buildings of a former slaughterhouse, are divided into different themes, such as whale biology, the history of whaling, whale watching, etc. The museum’s presentation is in many respects excellent and extremely accessible to the visitor, and the information is accurate (although not always entirely up to date). It is, however, fair to say that the information is selected to present a distinct position on the whaling debates: namely, that Icelandic whaling should not continue, and that the Icelandic whale watching industry should replace the whaling industry, as appears to be taking place outside the museum in Skjálfandi Bay. For example, the exhibit on whale biology compares the life cycle of whales and of humans and the amount of milk drunk by an infant whale to that of a human infant, encouraging visitors to think of whales in the terms of 1970s environmentalism, as intelligent fellow mammals. The exhibit on whaling history focuses on the whaling history of Iceland and Norway and avoids treating the history of Greenlandic or Faroese whaling

²⁸ Whale watching in Húsavík is discussed in detail in Einarsson 2009.

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(except for a brief reference to the Faroes). This overview simplifies some of the complexities of whaling and its cultural meaning for different North Atlantic peoples, as it appears from the presentation that whaling in the North Atlantic was historically limited to the Icelandic–Norwegian industrial hunt that began in the 19th century.

The whale watching tours in Húsavík—judging again from the one I went on in June 2009—do not take a position of advocacy so openly. The tour guides rather concentrate their narrations on the biology and behaviour of the whales and other animals in the bay, and, of course, on following the whales and pointing out their above-water sightings to tourists. When asked, however, the guide told me that foreigners “only rarely” ask questions about current Icelandic whaling, and she assumed they were probably mostly unaware that it goes on at all, despite the fact that whaling was taking place that season just beyond the boundaries of the whale watching ships’ tours. There was, she pointed out, “at least the possibility” that whale watching and whaling ships could run into each other in the waters while both practising their trades. A certain hesitation to discuss Icelandic whaling at all marked the conversation between us, which took place on the dock after the conclusion of the tour. It seems fair to conclude that the tourism industry in Húsavík would prefer that the foreign image of Iceland be represented by whale watching rather than by whaling.

This brief glance in summer 2009 at one of the sites where the image of Iceland in the whaling debates is produced suggests that Húsavík could be interpreted as a continuation of the “Keiko position”—that is, a place to show the world that Icelanders can protect whales instead of killing them. Húsavík’s geographical location on the north shore of Iceland and its history as a former whaling community stands in counterpoint to Reykjavík in the south, where decisions about how many and which species of whales to kill are made. Reykjavík perhaps represents to the world the pro-whaling position of the “battle-lines” period, while Húsavík could be seen as representing the “new” Iceland. This is obviously too simple a distinction, because, as my research has shown, an Icelandic anti-whaling voice existed from the beginning of the whaling debates. Whale watching as an alternative to whaling, and the image of Iceland produced by this industry, however, came much later, as one of the outcomes of the debate itself. Angela Walk dates the beginning of the

Icelandic whale watching industry to 1995, although a British company had conducted tours in Iceland in 1992, and whale watching tours had taken place already in the 1970s and 1980s in California and Japan.²⁹ Icelandic whale watching companies, like the Icelandic treatment of Keiko, show the world that some Icelanders act to protect and nurture whales, even as their countrymen kill and eat them.

The whaling debate continues to be volatile in Iceland and internationally, although overshadowed in the international reporting about Iceland by the financial crisis and the Icesave controversy after October 2008. It is impossible, especially for a historian like myself, to predict how these discussions will develop in the coming years. However, what seems to be clear is that—even with the Icelandic resumption of whaling—an alternative image to the “bloodthirsty Icelandic hunters” emerged in the late 1990s around Keiko, but perhaps more enduringly around the growth and development of Icelandic whale watching. Whether this will replace the older image remains to be seen, but the development of a second, alternative image of Iceland and whales moves the complexity of the discussion beyond the simplified positions of the 1970s debate. For example, Niels Einarsson sees the development of the whale watching industry in Húsavík as evidence of Arctic societies’ well-defined ability to adapt and survive in changing conditions.³⁰

In contrast with this new image, the whaling that continues in Iceland, now alongside whale watching, finds its philosophical justification in more traditional images of Iceland, many of which in some form date back several centuries to the first foreign visitors to the island.³¹ Icelandic whaling holds the image of Iceland as a small nation whose actions are too insignificant to injure anyone. The whales they catch are few in number and not of an endangered species,

Icelandic whaling advocates argue.³² At the same time, pro-whalers

²⁹ Walk 2005: 19–26.

³⁰ Einarsson 2009.

³¹ The history of these images is discussed in more detail in Oslund 2011.

³² For an example of this argument, see the *Report of the Status of Stocks in Icelandic Waters 2009–10* issued by the Icelandic Marine Research Institute (Hafrannsóknastofnunin).

see Iceland as a country protected by larger powers (historically by Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries; since 1945 by the United States) whose aberrant actions will be overlooked by the international community because Iceland is so central—either culturally or geopolitically—to their protectors. Although these two Icelandic images—self-contradictory though they are—have a long history, that does not mean that they will necessarily survive, or at least, not that they will survive in the guise of whale hunting. The emergence of a new Icelandic image around whale watching, one that conforms more to international norms, shows how new images can emerge that exist alongside or even replace older ones.

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