

Why Does Whaling Still Continue in Iceland Today?

An investigation into nationalism and cultural differences



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1. Introduction: Commercial Whaling in Iceland

- ❑ Every year, fin and minke whales are hunted in Faxaflói Bay (see fig. 1) to be sold in shops and restaurants
- ❑ The meat is not eaten by locals; tourists are the biggest consumers of whale
- ❑ Ironically, the whales are hunted in the same area in which whale-watching takes place
- ❑ Whales (animals) are “good to think” with (Levi-Strauss 1962) meaning that the way in which people interact with the whale tells us a lot about the people themselves

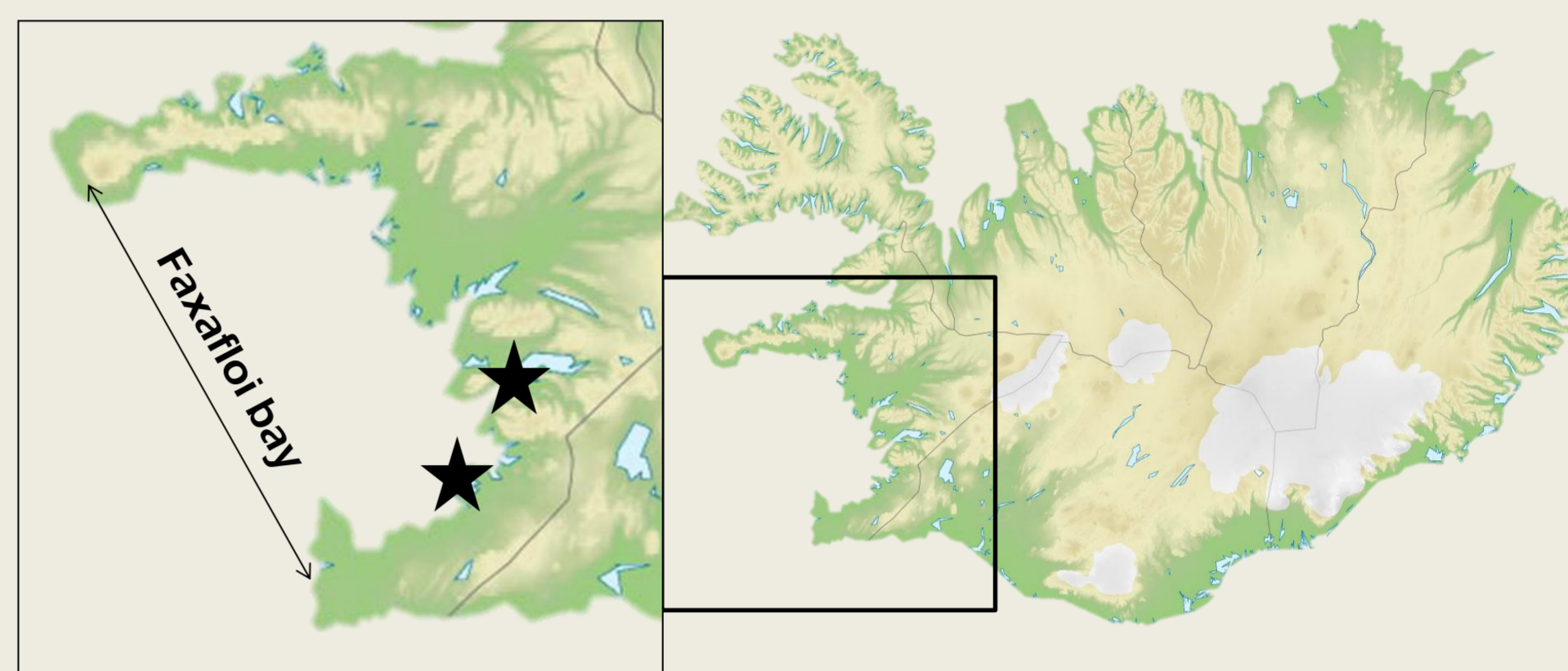


Fig.1: Map of Iceland showing close proximity of whale hunting boats and whale-watching tours.
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2. How did I carry out my study?

Semi-structured interviews with anti-whaling organisations



Documentary analysis of media articles about whaling



3. Discussions

Building upon Brydon's (1991) study of Icelandic nationalism, I found that Icelanders remain pro-whaling today because they see it as part of their identity. The whaling debate became increasingly polarised in the 1980's after rise of the anti-whaling green movement. The Icelandic government responded to this by releasing a state-funded, pro-whaling documentary to generate mass support from the Icelandic people (Brydon 2006). Even the commercial whaling businesses are family owned, and a significant part of certain people's livelihoods.

The dominant Western perception of whales is to see them as 'godlike' creatures. Anti-whalers place significant value upon these animals, as they are seen as an "urban totem" (Kalland 1993), and anyone who participates in whaling is a murderer. However this is a very ethnocentric perspective - Icelanders simply don't perceive the whale in the same way, they are seen as a resource which thus justifies hunting them. It is insensitive for anti-whalers to respond with such hate and aggression to a country's cultural differences.

Whaling continues in Iceland today because there are tourists around to consume it. the common discourse is that tourists are being 'deceived' into trying whale meat. Anti-whaling organisations aim their campaigns towards the tourists in the hope that they will stop buying the meat but as Boissevain (1996) demonstrated, tourists don't care about inauthenticity so long as it is entertaining. Tourists also participate in whale-watching, which is considered the sustainable alternative to whaling. This has been a success from an economic perspective, but some research suggests that this may also be problematic.

4. Conclusions and Further Research?

Contrary to media depictions, Icelanders are not barbaric, uncivilised people with no respect for life, they simply have a different perception of what whales mean to them

Anti-whalers are ambivalent; they are concerned about saving the whale but only for it to be exploited in a way which is economically beneficial for them

Iceland's increasing tourist population has played a significant role in the whaling issue. This has changed since the last ethnographic study of whaling in Iceland, which was in 1991.

Future research could take a number of directions: participant observation with anti-whaling organisations, or the conduction of interviews with Icelandic locals and tourists in order to further understand what it means to be for or against whaling