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Attitudes towards whaling in Iceland

An attempted explanation

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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Whaling, a controversial issue in the international arena, has spun interestingly into Icelandic society over the years. For the past decades the distinct whaling policy of the Icelandic government has been the subject of debate in international relations. This debate is likely to continue and even intensify now that the country's application for membership of the European Union has been acknowledged (see "Hvalveiðar ógna", 2010; "MEPs back", 2010). Following the accession talks, Icelanders and the Icelandic government need to come to terms with the future of whaling in Icelandic waters as the European Union has taken a strong stance against whaling.

Even though whaling has very limited support internationally, Icelanders have proven supportive of this industry over the years. In this article we set out to explore these positive attitudes with a qualitative study conducted in the spring of 2010. Our aim is to explain how these positive attitudes are formed and what values they build upon. We pay special attention to the political discourse on whaling in Iceland and if, or how, it is mirrored in public attitudes.

The article begins with a theoretical rationale for the study which is then followed by a background chapter on the history of whaling in Icelandic society. The main findings are presented in five subchapters, each devoted to one of the main themes found in the study: 1) attitudes towards whaling and awareness of the matter, 2) sentimentality and the whaling debate, 3) sovereignty related issues, 4) economic factors and, 5) conditionality of the attitudes. The article concludes with a summary of findings and their implications.

Theoretical rationale

Opinion polls are an accepted and efficient way of gauging the public's attitudes towards a particular issue. They do, however, only provide limited information and cannot give insight into the formation of attitudes and the various factors that can influence how they are reported at each time (Floyd, 2008; Maio & Haddock, 2010). The purpose of this study was therefore not to take a snapshot of the overall attitudes of Icelanders towards whaling; these have already been documented. Rather, we set out with the goal of examining the roots and influencing factors of the attitudes.

We used the focus group method as it was well suited to the study's objective to have participants discuss whaling openly in a setting as close to natural as possible. Listening to verbalized experiences of others stimulates memories, ideas, and experiences, therefore revealing data and insight that would be less accessible by other means (Krueger, 1994).

The study was conducted from February 1-8 2010 at the University of Iceland. Five focus groups, containing four to seven participants, were used for this study. Participants were all students at the University of Iceland who volunteered to take part in the study. They were grouped according to their field of study to create common

grounds for each focus group. Each focus group discussion lasted roughly two hours. Participants were offered refreshments during the discussions and received a token of gratitude after their participation.

The discussions were lead by a predetermined questionnaire containing open questions and focusing exercises. All discussions were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Grounded theory was used to reduce the data systematically through coding and formulating themes. To deepen the analysis, discourse analysis was applied to the data in order to gain a deeper understanding of the context and meaning of participants' ideas.

Background

The history of whales and whaling in Icelandic society runs a long path although the direct share of Icelanders in the industry is relatively new. Icelandic folktales and proverbs indicate the importance of whales in earlier times but because of lack of technical know-how, the use of whales was mainly limited to occasional stranding of whales. In the 16th and 17th century foreign whalers started making their way to the rich whaling grounds around Iceland and laid the foundation for this industry that has become so controversial. Although Icelanders benefited a great deal from this industry, there were many who resented not taking a direct part in it and hungered for a larger share of the profit. At the turn of the 20th century, opposition to the whaling industry, which was perceived as foreign, had grown in Iceland. This followed not only the diminution of the whale stocks but also the growing nationalistic sentiment rooted in the campaign for an independent Iceland. As a result whaling within Icelandic territorial waters was restricted from the year 1886 and forbidden from 1913 to 1928 (Trausti Einarsson, 1987).

It was not until 1935 that Icelanders started their first whaling industry, using Norwegian whaling vessels. By that time, the opposition towards whaling had worn out and locals welcomed the industry. The industry was neither large nor long-lived as the whaling vessels were called in for military service in 1939. In 1948 the Icelandic whaling industry was revived and it has been run intermittently since then, commercially and/or scientifically (Institute of Economic Studies, 2010; Trausti Einarsson, 1987). Around the mid 1980s, the global atmosphere regarding the protection of endangered species had changed and an international moratorium on whaling was instituted. What followed for Iceland was that this little known and seasonally based industry became the center of national discourse and raised harsh responses globally until the whaling ceased in 1989 (Jóhann Viðar Ívarsson, 1994). When the Icelandic government decided to resume whaling in 2003 it proved controversial, as expected, and raised yet again considerable attention both locally and internationally (Þorsteinn Siglaugsson, 2007; "23 ríki", 2003; "25 ríki", 2006; "26 ríki", 2009).

Even though support for whaling in Iceland has declined over the years, opinion polls still show considerable support for it. In Figure 1 the results of various nationally representative opinion polls conducted since the mid 1980s have been taken together to summarize the development of Icelanders attitudes towards whaling.

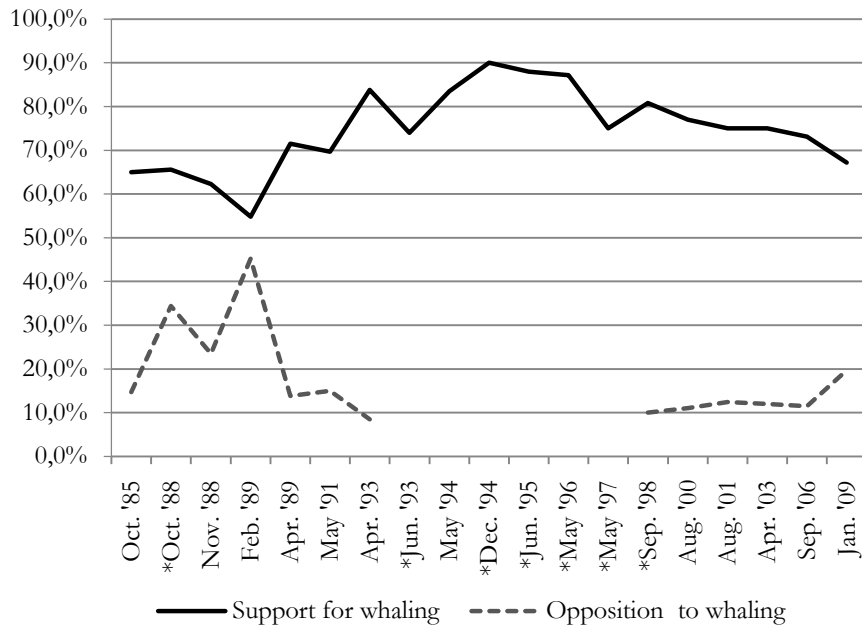


Figure 1. Attitudes towards whaling in Iceland, measured in various opinion polls (María Björk Gunnarsdóttir, 2010)

It is evident that the support for whaling was greatest during the 1990s when no whaling was conducted in Icelandic waters. The support at that time has in large part been attributed to the documentary *Survival in the High North* in March 1989. The documentary was a reaction against the declining support for whaling in Iceland in 1988 and early 1989 as a result of effective business coercions by anti-whaling groups (Brydon, 1991; Jóhann Viðar Ívarsson, 1994). It builds in large part on nationalistic sentiments in line with the political discourse on whaling at that time and depicts a negative image of anti-whaling groups. Interestingly and despite the fact that most Icelanders have either no recollection of the documentary or have never seen it, the message it sought to portray still seems to prevail.

The most likely explanation for the consistent support for whaling in Iceland is to be found in a political discourse that in many ways echoes the message of *Survival in the High North*. In that manner the Icelandic government emphasizes its sovereign right to determine the exploitation of all resources within Icelandic territorial waters, usually referred to as “our resources” (Jón Bjarnason, 2009-2010; Parliamentary Document 1047, 1999). Government officials have also openly undermined the credibility of anti-whaling groups and strengthened their negative image among Icelanders (Iceland Nature Conservation Association, 2003; Jóhann Viðar Ívarsson, 1994). Referring to research conducted by the Icelandic Marine Research Institute, the government has fiercely justified its whaling policy while criticizing the International Whaling Commission for using political, idealistic or emotional premises to determine the future of whaling (Árni R. Árnason, 1998-1999; Einar Kr. Guðfinnsson, 2003; Jóhann Viðar Ívarsson, 1994; Tómas H. Heiðar, 2010).

Added to the previously mentioned political discourse, whaling has increasingly been presented as an export industry that enhances employment (see Grétar Mar Jónsson, 2008-2009a; Grétar Mar Jónsson, 2008-2009b; Jón Gunnarsson, 2008-2009a; Jón Gunnarsson, 2008-2009b; Guðjón A. Kristjánsson, 2000-2001; Guðjón A. Kristjánsson, 2008-2009; Pétur H. Blöndal, 2008-2009; Þorgerður K. Gunnarsdóttir, 2008-2009). This emphasis on economic benefits is an especially effective way to garner the public’s support during the current economic recession in Iceland. Even

though opponents of whaling have doubted the real economic benefits of the industry, (see Álfheiður Ingadóttir, 2009-2010; Helgi Hjörvar, 2009; Kolbrún Halldórsdóttir, 2008-2009; Lúðvík Bergvinsson, 2007-2008; Steinunn Valdís Óskarsdóttir, 2007-2008) a report released earlier this year by the Institute of Economic Studies at the University of Iceland on the macro-economic importance of whaling, concluded that on the whole, whaling is beneficial. This conclusion is in large part explained by added value and the possibility to increase exploitation of other marine stocks in the future, due to reduced competition between whales and commercial fisheries over the resources (see The Institute of Economic Studies, 2010). The report has, however, been criticized openly and has received remarkably little media attention. The main criticism being that it is based on simplified research methods and unwary assumptions about the ecosystem and markets for whale meat (see Mördur Árnason, 2010; “Gagnrýnir skýrslu”, 2010; “Hvar á”, 2010).

Main findings

In this article we present five of the themes that emerged in this study. The themes build on the coding method used to conceptualize the core issues from the data. We report on how participants expressed matters related to these themes and put the themes in context with historical and societal matters that can increase our understanding of their attitudes.

1) Attitudes towards whaling and awareness of the matter: “This comes as a surprise, I thought I would be the only one”¹

In line with the results of the opinion polls referred to above, it soon became clear that the vast majority of participants proved to be in favor of whaling. Their positive attitudes however turned out to be rather moderate and many of them actually referred to their stance as being just on the positive side of neutral. Their attitudes were also weak, as is to be expected, because participants said they had paid this issue limited attention prior to the focus group discussions. During the discussions, a change of emphasis was also detected when participants started conditioning their stance, e.g. “I am in favor of whaling *if* we do not lose out more”. This kind of change in attitudes is quite common when attitudes are weak (Maio & Haddock, 2010). In this case the two-hour discussions may have lead participants to seriously consider and discuss the matter for the first time, and therefore give grounds for the changed emphasis.

Interestingly, the participants seemed unaware of the tendency amongst Icelanders to be in favor of whaling. They seemed to assume that anti-whaling discourse applied in Iceland and that anti-whaling groups had proven successful in lobbying against whaling not only abroad but also in Iceland. This idea is consistent with Milton Freeman’s (1995) idea of the “mediagenic megafauna”; the theory of the “super-whale” presented by Arne Kalland (2009) and the development of the anti-whaling discourse presented by Charlotte Epstein (2008). Freeman, Kalland and Epstein argue that the media has created a sacred image of whales, making it politically wrong to favor whaling. However, as the results of the opinion polls show, it is evident that these ideas have not received the same support in Iceland as abroad.

¹ Þetta kemur á óvart, ég hélt að ég yrði kannski bara ein.

2) Sentimentality and the whaling debate: “Sentimentality on par with religion”²

All in all, tolerance for anti-whaling groups proved negligible. Participants emphasized fanaticism when the subject was brought up and condemned the sentimentality they believed characterized the anti-whalers’ reasoning. They placed great importance on the role scientific knowledge should play in decisions about whaling, although they admitted not knowing the facts themselves. In their discussions they, therefore, seemed to have great trust in the government and the Icelandic Marine Research Institute as they argued that *we* would never continue whaling if the whales were really endangered.

Few participants noted that sentimentality not only characterized the arguments of the opponents of whaling, but also their own. This is a common phenomenon recognized in social psychology as naïve realism, or the tendency to consider ideas that are different to one’s own to be biased and sentimental (Pronin, Lin & Ross, 2002). In this line a trace of the so-called othering discourse was detected in the discussions. Othering has been defined as a way of defining and securing one’s own positive identity through stigmatization of an “other” (Carver & Pikalo, 2008). This was evident when participants started distinguishing between us and them; *them* being foreigners who based their arguments on sentiments while *we*, Icelanders, based our arguments on scientific facts. This negative image of anti-whaling groups did not seem to rub off on other conservation groups, as participants, just like the government, emphasized the need to protect nature. Participants also seemed more in favor of the work of Icelandic based conservation groups than the foreign ones, stressing that the Icelandic ones understood *our* situation better. Ann Brydon (1991), who studied the whaling debate in Iceland, came to a similar conclusion. She found that in the late 1980s Icelanders seemed to believe that not only were economic interests threatened because of actions of foreign anti-whaling groups, but the nation as a whole. This skepticism towards foreigners is also in line with the current political discourse in Iceland, in large part related to inroad of foreigners towards *our* resources (“Könnun: ESB yrði”, 2009; Saving Iceland, 2010).

3) Sovereignty related issues: “No matter what *they* say or do, they can not stop *us*”³

Sovereignty was a salient theme in all focus group discussions and most participants admitted finding this line of argument quite appealing. It was in large part brought up in relation to *our* resources and *our* right to use those resources, reflecting the most popular discourse in Icelandic politics. That does not come as a surprise considering the findings of Guðmundur Hálfðanarson (2004) who has specialized in European social and political history. He argues that “politicians fully realize that nothing galvanizes Icelandic voters in the same manner as nationalism.”

Referring to the legal base in the sovereignty argument most participants had a hard time recognizing the emotional touch in it. After looking deeper into this argument, however, they came to the conclusion that it did not justify whaling at all. They found the argument unlikely to gain support for whaling internationally and some even wanted to compare it to giving the international community the finger. Participants, therefore, agreed that it would be more beneficial to use other lines of arguments to justify whaling internationally, even though at the end of the day *they* could never stop us.

² Tilfinningasemi á sama skala og trú.

³ Það er sama hvað hinir gera eða segja, þeir geta ekki stoppað okkur.

4) Economic factors: “I mean, it produces revenue for us”⁴

Participants were familiar with the economically related reasoning in favor of whaling. In effect, it was one of the most prominent themes in all the focus groups’ discussions. Some participants argued for stronger marketing of whale products while others wanted to consider the possible negative impact of the industry on Iceland’s business interests. Whale watching and various import/export related businesses were frequently mentioned and that for some it might be more beneficial to have the whales alive.

Participants had, however, a hard time believing any long-term negative impact on the Icelandic economy following the whaling policy. It does not come as a surprise considering that international opposition towards the Icelandic whaling policy has been relatively peaceful in recent years. Few of the participants are old enough to remember the economic sanctions enacted against Iceland in the 1980s and were believed to have been close to reversing the public’s opinion on whaling at the time (Brydon, 1991; Jóhann Viðar Ívarsson, 1994). When looking at the bigger picture of possible revenues from whaling, participants also seemed to be familiar with the argument that the whales are eating up *our* fish stocks and therefore costing the fishing industry possible export revenues (see Árni Mathiesen, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Einar K. Guðfinnsson 2006-2007; Einarsson, 1996; Marine Research Institute, 2005).

5) Conditionality of the attitudes: “If we do not stand to lose more”⁵

As the discussions came to an end, participants seemed more and more cautious and did not want to jump to conclusions about the benefits of whaling. Some pointed out that no real evidence has been put forward in order to reveal the profit of the industry. Even though whalers have argued that the demand is great (“Allt hvalkjötið”, 2008; Landssamband íslenskra útvegsmanna, 2009; “Sala hvalkjöts”, 2009; The Minke Whalers Association in Iceland, 2008) export numbers indicate that the revenues of whaling have been nowhere near the 5 billion Icelandic króna (40 million USD) that were predicted when the whaling quota was increased considerably in 2009 (see Árni Finnsson, 2010; Þorbjörn Þórðarson, 2010; Statistics Iceland, 2010).

Participants got caught up in the “*what if*”. They started wondering how business coercions and other negative impacts of the whaling policy could affect the fragile Icelandic economic conditions. The result was that participants started conditioning their attitudes in manners such as favoring whaling as long as it did not backfire on us. Arguments such as: “We should continue whaling *if* it does not cost us more” were verbalized in all groups. This conditionality does not come as a surprise as it distances the participants’ emotions from their arguments. It does, however, leave open an important question yet to be answered: “Who is to determine whether or not it is costing us more?” Participants really resented their lack of information about the positive and negative impacts of whaling. They attributed this lack of information to both the limited attention they had given to the matter and also their lack of capacity to evaluate the altercation of the parties involved.

Concluding remarks

The formation and structure of attitudes towards whaling can be examined through the lens of a well known model of attitude formation called the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). According to this dual based model there are two main routes to persuasion: the systematic route, requiring the individual to pay

⁴ „Ég meina, þetta skapar okkur tekjur“.

⁵ „Ef við töpum ekki meiru“.

close attention to the contents of a persuasive appeal, and the heuristic route, which relies more on superficial qualities for attitude formation and requires less thought (Maio & Haddock, 2010). According to the HSM, motivation and capability are major determinants of how strongly a persuasive appeal is likely to affect attitudes. The lack of interest in whaling is therefore a prominent suggestion that participants used the heuristic route to determine their attitudes towards whaling. Attitudes formed through the heuristic route are also more likely to be weak and change over time than attitudes formed systematic processing (Maio & Haddock, 2010). Participants' weak attitudes and the shift in emphasis that occurred during the discussions further strengthen these conclusions.

Based on this study, the strong political discourse on whaling in Iceland can be regarded as a likely cause for the positive attitudes towards whaling detected among participants and among the general public in the various opinion polls over the years. This discourse has been appealing to Icelanders due to its nationalistic sentiment. It is also in line with the national image and, more recently, in harmony with the "back to basics" mentality that seems to be gaining support after the economic crisis (see Guðmundur Magnússon, 2008). In line with the skepticism towards foreigners when it comes to *our* resources, the strong images of anti-whaling groups as foreigners can also explain the persuasive appeal of the pro-whaling stance.

All in all, the pro-whaling stance seems to be something that *we*, Icelanders, are familiar with. The message is appealing and it seems that we still have not found any reason to distrust *our* informants about whaling. However, generalizing from these conclusions one cannot rule out retroversion of the public opinion towards whaling; the weak attitudes formed by the heuristic route can be fragile. New and more appealing arguments can, therefore, easily change the picture. In theory, just as successful marketing and affirmative sales reports could strengthen the positive attitudes towards whaling, any information showing poor markets for whale meat, or conclusive information showing negative impacts on other industries, could therefore reduce the support.

As Charlotte Epstein (2008) points out one should not underestimate the "power of words". The effects of the political discourse can be lingering and it will, therefore, be interesting to monitor the future discourse on whaling and the effects that the membership negotiations with the European Union might have on it. Opponents of Iceland's admission to the European Union have already started presenting whaling as a clear example of the alleged loss of sovereignty that membership entails. It is for that reason the whaling debate has been seen as a critical threshold in the admission talks. We end this article by concluding that Icelanders who are in favor of Iceland's admission to the European Union are likely to withdraw their support for whaling. For others whaling will be used as a reason for opposition and consequently their support for whaling will escalate.

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