

Agenda Item 5.1

Implementation of the Triennium Work Plan  
(2010-2012) – Other Issues  
Review of New Information on Population  
Size, Distribution, Structure and Causes of  
Any Changes

Document 5-01

**Pilot Whale Hunt in the Faroe Islands**

**Action Requested**

- Take note
- Provide guidance on further follow-up

Submitted by

Secretariat



**NOTE:**  
IN THE INTERESTS OF ECONOMY, DELEGATES ARE KINDLY REMINDED TO BRING THEIR  
OWN COPIES OF DOCUMENTS TO THE MEETING



## Pilot Whale Hunt in the Faroe Islands

1. Following a request of the 17<sup>th</sup> Advisory Committee Meeting, the Secretariat had in early 2011 contacted the Faroe Islands' Authorities in order to express the Parties' concern and request information on the small cetacean drive hunts. The exchange of correspondence was contained in AC18/Doc.5-06. The response of the Faroe Islands had indicated that the hunts of Risso's dolphins that had occurred in recent years were not set to continue. Key points on which information had been requested had however been left unanswered, in particular with regard to scientific information on population size, trends and distribution that was used to determine sustainability. The 2010 Annual Report of NAMMCO indicated that there was insufficient information on the status of populations of Pilot Whales and other species for setting hunting quotas. Accordingly, AC18 had requested the Secretariat to contact both the Authorities of the Faroe Islands and NAMMCO again about the matter.
2. The Secretariat contacted the NAMMCO Secretariat in June 2011 to find out the appropriate way to raise the ASCOBANS Parties' concerns with NAMMCO and how the requested information could be obtained.
3. In its response, the NAMMCO Secretariat pointed out that the 2010 meeting of the Management Committee on Cetaceans had concluded the following:

*At its 2009 meeting, the Committee underlined the importance of finalising the updated abundance estimate for pilot whales and noted that this was expected to be dealt with by the Scientific Committee's Working Group on Abundance Estimates in October 2009, and was expected to be available for the review of the Scientific Committee at its 2010 meeting. However, the calculations presented at the above-mentioned working group meeting did not meet the requirements necessary for approval and the working group advised on a revision providing detailed guidelines for further action.*

*Noting that a new abundance estimate for pilot whales based on T-NASS data had still to be finalised, the Management Committee reiterated the importance for the Scientific Committee to complete this work, and further stressed that this should be the first priority for the next meeting of the Working Group on Abundance Estimates.*

4. The NAMMCO Scientific Committee presented the report of its May 2011 meeting to the Annual Meeting in September 2011. In addition, on the Faroese website [www.whaling.fo](http://www.whaling.fo), it says regarding abundance estimates for the pilot whales occurring in this region that "an update [...] based on more recent surveys will be presented to the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO) at its next annual meeting in Oslo in September 2011".

### Information on population structure, abundance and removal rate

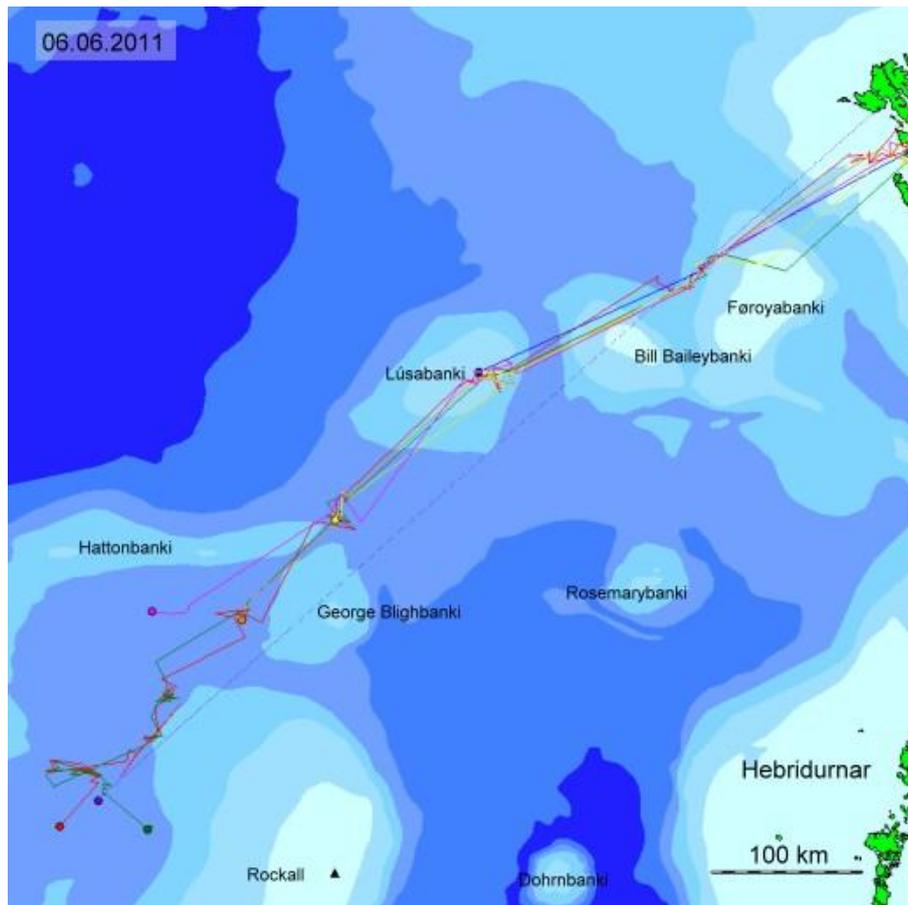
5. The Secretariat contacted both NAMMCO and the Faroese Authorities to obtain more information on the discussions and conclusions reached at the meeting in September 2011. In response, Ms Kate Sanderson of the Foreign Service of the Faroe Islands informed the Secretariat that the most recent scientific estimate of abundance for the pilot whale stock was 128,000 in the Iceland-Faroese survey area. This estimate was based on data from the latest Trans-Atlantic Sightings Survey (T-NASS) in 2007, coordinated by NAMMCO. Given the opportunistic and localized nature of pilot whale drives around the Faroes, they had never considered it necessary or appropriate to set annual catch quotas.
6. To the message, Ms Sanderson attached the full excerpt on pilot whales from the report of the NAMMCO Management Committee on Cetaceans, which met in Oslo in September last year (Annex 1). She also forwarded the most recent information

summary on whales and whaling in the Faroe Islands (Annex 2). Both documents acknowledge the poor availability of data, in respect of population structure across the North Atlantic, abundance and trends. They nevertheless insist that the hunt is sustainable and that even though the 2007 survey resulted in a much lower abundance estimate than the one conducted in 1989, this could not be interpreted as a decrease in abundance, since the survey area, methodology and season were not comparable. The percentage of the population taken by the hunt is estimated at less than 1% by both NAMMCO and the Faroese Authorities.

7. The extant Resolution No. 3 of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the Parties to ASCOBANS (2000) had defined *“unacceptable interactions” as being, in the short term, a total anthropogenic removal above 1.7 % of the best available estimate of abundance, keeping in mind that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of Parties recommended an anthropogenic removal of more than 2% is an “unacceptable interaction”*, and noted *“that in the case of species other than the harbour porpoise, or where there is significant uncertainty in parameters such as population size or by-catch levels, then “unacceptable interaction” may involve an anthropogenic removal of much less than 1.7 %”*.
8. It would therefore seem that the Faroese hunt does not meet the criteria to be considered sustainable under the ASCOBANS definition. In fact, the lack of both reliable data on abundance and any indication that other causes for anthropogenic removal are being taken into account would make it impossible to reach such a conclusion. Until much more robust data on all relevant factors have been collected and evaluated through independent mechanisms, a precautionary approach would necessitate a firm restriction of deliberate takes.
9. The Secretariat also requested the NAMMCO Secretariat to direct ASCOBANS to any peer-reviewed scientific publications dealing with the distribution and range of the pilot whales occurring around the Faroe Islands. In response, the NAMMCO Secretariat confirmed that there was very little published literature from recent years; and no articles were suggested as references on the subject. They were still hoping to be able to make a better estimate of abundance for pilot whales. Most of the recent information concerned only hunting methods.

### **Information on distribution**

10. The dedicated website on the hunt provided by the Faroes' Authorities referred to satellite tagging of eight animals in May 2011. As had already been done in 2000 and 2004, a school of whales was driven into a bay, tags were attached to selected whales, and the entire school driven back out to sea again. The tracking map reproduced below along with others from the same series and further details can be accessed on the [website](#) of the Museum of Natural History.



<http://www.ngs.fo/Default.aspx?ID=11876>

11. While these maps are not completely conclusive, given the positions of the tagged whales it seems likely that the population affected by the Faroese hunt also frequents the ASCOBANS waters. The NAMMCO Secretariat kindly provided the ASCOBANS Secretariat with contacts in order to learn more about the tagging programme and its results. Provided Parties agree with this way forward, the Secretariat would make efforts to obtain this information.
  
12. In conclusion, there seems to be sufficient indication of a direct link between the groups of pilot whales the ASCOBANS Parties are making efforts to protect, and the “stock” utilised in the drive hunts of the Faroe Islands. The average exploitation level in combination with other threats could amount to an unacceptable interaction as defined by Resolution 3.3. Given the legitimate concerns in relation to the conservation efforts made under ASCOBANS, Parties may wish to consider making a call for a much more precautionary approach and the enforcement of strict limits to annual catch numbers, and pursuing this through diplomatic channels.

From:

**REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE FOR CETACEANS (NAMMCO)**

14 September 2010, Oslo, Norway

**4.9 Long-finned pilot whales**

**Past proposals for conservation and management**

The Management Committee recalled that in 1997, the general Management Committee had concluded the following:

“The Management Committee noted the findings and conclusions of the Scientific Committee, through its review of the ICES Study Group Report and the analysis of data from NASS-95 with respect to the status of long-finned pilot whales in the North Atlantic, which also confirmed that the best available abundance estimate of pilot whales in the Central and Northeast Atlantic is 778,000. With respect to stock identity it was noted that there is more than one stock throughout the entire North Atlantic, while the two extreme hypotheses of i) a single stock across the entire North Atlantic stock, and ii) a discrete, localised stock restricted to Faroese waters, had been ruled out.

The Management Committee further noted the conclusions of the Scientific Committee that the effects of the drive hunt of pilot whales in the Faroe Islands have had a negligible effect on the population, and that an annual catch of 2,000 individuals in the eastern Atlantic corresponds to an exploitation rate of 0.26%.

Based on the comprehensive advice which had now been provided by the Scientific Committee to requests forwarded from the Council, the Management Committee concluded that the drive hunt of pilot whales in the Faroe Islands is sustainable.”

**Requests by Council for advice from the Scientific Committee**

There was one ongoing and one new request for advice from the Scientific Committee:

R-3.8.4 - NAMMCO/16-2007: to complete an updated abundance estimate for pilot whales based on new data from T-NASS as a matter of priority (ongoing).

R-3.8.5 - NAMMCO/19–2010: to assess the status of long-finned pilot whales in West Greenland waters and provide minimum estimates of sustainable yield.

**Advice from the Scientific Committee**

Abundance estimates for all areas but Norway, including a Conventional Distance Sampling abundance estimate for the Iceland-Faroese shipboard area, have been provided to, reviewed and endorsed by the Scientific Committee. There are no firm conclusions on trends, due to difficulties in inferring from the index areas and possible changes in operational biases among the surveys. It was

recommended that future surveys must have a clear and carefully designed protocol for defining pilot whale groups and estimating group sizes.

### **Conclusions by the Management Committee**

The Management Committee welcomed the new abundance estimate of 128,093 (95% CI:75,682 to 216, 802) pilot whales in the Iceland-Faroese survey area, based on data from T-NASS in 2007, noting the conclusions of the Scientific Committee that this is currently the best available estimate.

The Management Committee endorsed the recommendations for further research to improve the basis for providing more robust estimates of pilot whale abundance, which include:

- tracking animals from as many schools as possible
- additional work on trends, abundance, and stock structure
- timely implementation of a long-term monitoring programme.

The Management Committee noted that although this new estimate gives a figure much lower than the former best estimate from the 1989 survey, it cannot be interpreted as an indication of a decrease in the stock. The survey area from which the new estimate derives was much smaller and the survey was conducted earlier in the year. No firm conclusions about trends in pilot whale abundance could be inferred from a review of data from the entire series of sightings surveys since 1987. The Management Committee therefore concluded that, given this information, there was no reason to assume that the pilot whale stock utilised in the Faroe Islands is being overexploited.

### **New proposals and recommendations for scientific research**

The Management Committee agreed to request the Scientific Committee to continue work to complete a full assessment of pilot whales in the North Atlantic and provide advice on the sustainability of catches, as soon as necessary further information becomes available, with particular emphasis on the Faroese area and East and West Greenland.

The Management Committee noted that the utilization of pilot whales in the Faroe Islands continues to be an opportunistic catch, as has been the case for centuries. Total catches of pilot whales may vary from year to year and setting a total allowable annual catches is not considered appropriate for this form of utilisation. Noting that it could take some time before an updated full assessment can be completed, the Management Committee agreed to request the Scientific Committee to provide a general indication of the level of abundance of pilot whales required to sustain an annual catch equivalent to the annual average of the Faroese catch in the years since 1997.



**PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE  
FAROE ISLANDS**

January 2011

**WHALING IN THE FAROE ISLANDS – IN BRIEF**

**Introduction**

- The Faroe Islands are situated roughly half way between Scotland and Iceland and consist of 18 mountainous islands, 17 of which are inhabited by the population of around 48,600. As a self-governing nation under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Denmark, the Government of the Faroes administers independently of Denmark all areas of self-government under Faroese legislation, including the conservation and management of fish and whale stocks within the 200-mile fisheries zone. The Faroe Islands have chosen not to be a part of the EU, but maintain bilateral trade agreements and bilateral fisheries agreements with the EU and other countries.
- The Faroese economy is based largely on modern fishing and aquaculture industries, which produce high quality fish products for export. Traditional means of food production from local resources are an important supplement to the livelihoods of Faroe Islanders. These include mountain grazing sheep, coastal fishing for household use, limited catches of sea birds, and opportunistic catches of pilot whales. Dairy cattle satisfy all domestic milk needs, and potatoes and rhubarb are grown by many households for private use.
- Local agriculture, whaling and fowling have enabled the Faroe Islands as an island nation to maintain a relatively high degree of self-sufficiency in food production. In the Faroes it is considered both economic and environmental good sense to make the most of locally available natural resources, also maintaining the knowledge required to use what nature can provide in a harsh oceanic environment.
- International principles for conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources apply to all components of the marine ecosystem, including whales. As a small nation highly dependent on the resources of the sea, commitment to upholding these principles is a priority for the Faroe Islands.

**The pilot whale drive**

- Many different species of whales and dolphins occur in the waters around the Faroe Islands, most of which are protected by law. The commonly occurring pilot whales are taken in the Faroe Islands for their meat and blubber in a whale drive which is organised on the community level and regulated by national legislation. This unique and traditional form of food production in the Faroe Islands has over the years successfully adapted to modern standards of resource management and animal welfare.
- Both the meat and blubber of pilot whales have long been - and continue to be - a valued part of the national diet. Catches are shared largely without the exchange of money among the participants in a whale drive and residents of the local district where they are landed.

- Whale meat and blubber is stored, prepared and eaten in a variety of ways. When fresh, the meat is boiled or served as steaks, with blubber and potatoes. The meat and blubber can be frozen, or preserved using traditional Faroese methods such as dry-salting or storing in brine. Strips of whale meat are also hung to wind-dry for several weeks. Thin slivers of blubber are also a popular accompaniment to dried fish.

### **Sustainability of the catch**

- Annual catch records for pilot whales and other small cetaceans in the Faroe Islands date back to 1584. These provide over 400 years of nearly continuous documentation, and represent one of the most comprehensive historical records of wildlife utilisation anywhere in the world. The annual long-term average catch of pilot whales in the Faroe Islands is around 800 whales, with large fluctuations in catches from year to year. In the over 20-year period from 1991 to 2011, annual catches ranged from zero (in 2008) to 1,572 (in 1992).
- Regular international scientific sighting surveys in the North Atlantic since 1987 have provided valuable information from which to estimate and monitor the stock abundance of different whale species. The Faroe Islands participate actively in these surveys, with comprehensive coverage across the Faroe Plateau and adjacent areas.
- The most recent scientific estimate of abundance for the pilot whale stock is 128,000 in the Iceland-Faroese survey area. This estimate is based on data from the latest Trans-Atlantic Sightings Survey (T-NASS) in 2007, coordinated by the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO).
- With an average annual catch of fewer than 1000 animals, representing less than 1% of the total estimated pilot whale stock, it is widely recognised that pilot whale catches in the Faroe Islands are sustainable.

### **Methods used to kill whales**

- Whale drives are only initiated when whales are sighted by chance close to land. A crucial factor in ensuring an effective whale drive is the organisation of participants, both in boats and on shore. Prevailing weather and tidal conditions will also have a major bearing on whether and where a group of whales can be driven and beached. The spontaneous nature of a whale drive requires swift mobilisation of manpower to drive and kill a group of large wild animals quickly.
- Faroese animal welfare legislation, which also applies to whaling, stipulates that animals are killed as quickly and with as little suffering as possible. Whales are killed on the shore and in the shallows of bays especially authorised for the purpose. A special whaling knife is used to sever the spinal cord, which also severs the major blood supply to the brain, ensuring both loss of consciousness and death within seconds. This is the most efficient and humane method for killing beached pilot whales safely, with many participants involved at the same time.
- Two new types of equipment have been developed in recent years. The blow-hole hook used to secure beached whales causes no injury prior to slaughter and is now widely used. Plans are under way to introduce a new, especially designed spinal lance to sever the spinal cord of pilot whales. Trial use of this innovative device has demonstrated that it can reduce killing time to 1-2 seconds, while also improving accuracy and safety.

## **Environmental & health concerns**

- Pilot whales, like other small toothed whales and seals, are known to accumulate high levels of heavy metals such as mercury (in the meat and organs) and organochlorines (in the blubber). These contaminants are deposited in the marine environment through airborne pollution and waste from industrial processes, bio-accumulating up through the food chain where they are often found in high levels in top marine predators.
- This is a matter of considerable concern to Faroe Islanders, who are so dependent on the sea and its resources for their livelihood. Over the past two decades, extensive international research has focussed on the health effects of contaminants from whale meat and blubber in the diet of Faroese people. In 1998, public health, food and environmental authorities in the Faroe Islands issued comprehensive, precautionary recommendations for the safe consumption of pilot whale meat and blubber.
- In response to more recent research, and based on the latest internationally applied standards for precautionary limits, a recent review of these recommendations has resulted in revised recommendations issued by the Faroese Food and Veterinary Authority in June 2011. The new recommendations advise that consumption should be limited to one meal of whale meat and blubber per month. Women of child-bearing age are advised, as in 1998, not to consume blubber at all until they have had their children. Women are also advised to refrain from eating whale meat three months prior to, and during, pregnancy and while breast feeding.
- These limits are intended to safeguard against the risks associated with heavy metals and PCBs. At the same time, the nutritional benefits of whale meat and blubber, which is rich in poly-unsaturated fats and essential vitamins and minerals, should also be acknowledged.
- It is the view of the Faroese Government that the major focus of international efforts by governments, international bodies and environmental organisations must be to protect and promote the rights of coastal nations to the sustainable use of their marine resources. This is best achieved by adopting effective measures to reduce and eliminate, at its source, global industrial pollution, which can end up in the valuable food provided by the sea.

## **International cooperation**

- The Faroe Islands cooperate internationally through NAMMCO – the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission - on the conservation of whales and the management of whaling. NAMMCO provides for valuable inter-governmental scientific and technical cooperation on marine mammal conservation and management in the North Atlantic.

## **For further information:**

- Whales and whaling in the Faroe Islands: [www.whaling.fo](http://www.whaling.fo)
- NAMMCO: North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission: [www.nammco.no](http://www.nammco.no)