

Which way – whaling or whale watching? A brief summary of tourism in Iceland

- In 2002, over 275,000 visitors went to Iceland; over 42,000 of these were from the UK.
- Tourism is the second largest generator of foreign income for Iceland, earning 13% of the total.
- In summer, around 40% of visitors to Iceland go whale-watching.
- The Icelandic whale-watching industry is growing:
 - in 1998 it was estimated to have earned over US\$ 6million, rising to over US\$ 16million in 2002, and is forecast to pull in between US\$ 23million and US\$ 36million in 2007;
 - the number of whale-watchers has risen from 2,200 in 1995 to almost 63,000 in 2002, and estimates predict more than 100,000 in 2007;
 - the number of operators taking visitors whale-watching in Iceland rose by 900% between 1991 and 1999.
- Whale-watching is more lucrative for Iceland than whaling. Between 1985 and 1989, until recently the last time whalers put to sea, the annual value of scientific whaling was estimated to be around US\$ 3-4million (source: AP). In 2002, whale-watching generated more than US\$ 16million.
- In 1999, the Icelandic Tourist Industry Association, whose members account for around 80-90% of Iceland's turnover from tourism, said that a resumption of whaling in opposition to the agreements of the International Whaling Commission "would cause great damage to the Icelandic tourist industry."
- Many species can be seen in Icelandic waters, including minke whales, blue whales, humpback whales, orcas, killer whales, white beaked dolphins, Atlantic white-sided dolphins and porpoises.
- Nationalities of tourists with overnight stays in Iceland: 13 % Germany, 11 % US, 10 % UK, 7% Sweden and 5 % Denmark (source AP).

Sources:

Icelandic tourist board.

'Whale watching 2001, worldwide tourism, numbers, expenditures and expanding economic benefits'. A report produced for IFAW 2001.

'Economic perspectives of whale watching' by Geir Oddsson for Landmat International (2003) Associated Press.

WHAT THE WHALE WATCHERS SAY:

Whale watching has become a major industry in Iceland and understandably the industry are opposed to a resumption of whaling by Iceland.

The Icelandic Tourism Industry Association:

The association, whose members include the country's main airline, Icelandair, represents probably 80-90% of Iceland's turnover from tourism.

It commented at its April 2003 meeting "Whale-watching has become one of the most popular tourist activities in Iceland, providing considerable income for the economy, as well as creating a very positive image for Iceland."

The meeting also repeated an ITIA statement in 1999, which issued a strong warning against any plans to resume whaling. The 1999 statement said: "There is a general opposition [to whaling] among the public in Iceland's most important markets for the tourist industry. Governments of these countries do not recognise Iceland's rights to resume whaling without full acceptance by the Whaling Commission (IWC).

"To resume whaling in opposition to the agreements of the IWC would immediately be interpreted as an act of pirate whaling, and would cause great damage to the Icelandic tourist industry."

The statement ended with a warning of "dire consequences" if Iceland resumed whaling without international agreement.

The Husavik Whale Centre:

Husavik is one of the centres for whale watching in Iceland. When they heard of the government's plans to resume 'scientific whaling' they reportedly flew their flag at half mast.

Asbjorn Bjorgvinsson runs the Husavik Whale Centre on Iceland's north coast, which offers whale-watching trips to visitors said any move to start hunting minke whales again would be very harmful to tourism.

He said: "There is no evidence that whaling and whale-watching can co-exist. The friendly minke whales would be the first to be killed as they often approach the whale-watching boats and so would also approach the whaling boats. Whaling could therefore damage many years of friendly encounters with minke whales around Iceland." (Source BBC online)

Fridrik Sigurdsson, Chair of the Husavik Marketing Council, said: 'I want to send a short message to the government: Stop whaling and don't start again. Whale watching is extremely important to us but it is impossible to expand when we do such a wrong thing as whale hunting. For us in Husavik it could be a disaster.'

ENDS

For more information contact the Greenpeace press office on 0207 865 8255.