Iceland’s lone whaling crusader attempts to ship around 1,700 tonnes of fin whale meat to Japan

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Iceland's lone whaling crusader, Kristjan Loftsson, is attempting to ship an estimated 1,700 tonnes of fin whale meat out of the country.

Despite limited market for the meat and opposition at home and abroad to the bloody trade in the endangered whale species, the shipment, believed to be the entire stock from last summer's fin whaling season, has been loaded onto a cargo vessel believed to be bound for Japan.

According to Icelandic media reports, the vessel Winter Bay, which is registered in Saint Kitts and Nevis, has been in Hafnarfjordur harbour for several weeks but its departure is said to be delayed due to serious technical problems.

The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) opposes all commercial whaling as it is inherently cruel; there is no humane way to kill a whale.

Patrick Ramage, Global Whale Programme Director for IFAW, said: "Icelanders don't even eat fin whale meat yet these endangered whales continue to be killed because of the actions of one businessman intent on resuscitating the whale meat trade.

"Mr Loftsson seems determined to go ahead despite the huge cost to him and the reputation of his beautiful country. When there is still a huge unused and unwanted stock of whale meat from last year, we urge him to abandon plans to harpoon more whales this summer."

In partnership with Icelandic whale watching coalition Icewhale, IFAW promotes responsible whale watching as an alternative to the cruelty of whaling, encourages tourists to avoid eating whale meat and works with Icelandic restaurants, promoting those that choose not to serve whale meat through a 'whale friendly' restaurants campaign.

Last year, the freighter Alma made the same voyage to Japan carrying 2,000 tonnes of whale meat, sailing south of the Cape of Good Hope, rather than through the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, which is a much shorter route. This was to avoid docking anywhere along the way following earlier shipments of whale meat being returned after international ports rejected their cargos.

Recent Gallup polling found only around 3% of Icelanders claim to regularly eat whale meat. The percentage of tourists who say they have tasted whale meat has more than halved over the last five years from 40% in 2009 to 18% in 2014.

The 2015 minke whaling season has already begun with unconfirmed reports that the first two minke whales have been killed. Fin whaling is expected to start around June 15 this year.

Reykjavik City Council recently passed a cross-party resolution calling on the minister of fisheries to create an enlarged sanctuary for whales in Faxafloi Bay. IFAW supports this resolution and urges the Icelandic government to bring about a permanent end to the country's commercial whaling.

Iceland's self-allocated kill quotas allow whalers to harpoon up to 229 minke whales this summer. A quota of 239 was issued for last year but only around 10% of the catch limit, 24 minkes, were killed. This year's catch limit for fin whaling is 154. Last year Iceland's whalers took 137 fin whales.

Whale watching is now one of the top tourist attractions in Iceland, generating around £10 million annually and attracting more than 200,000 tourists each year, proving that whales are worth far more to the Icelandic economy alive than dead.

Last September, the 28 member states of the European Union led a coalition including the US, Australia, Brazil, Israel and New Zealand in a political demarche stating their "strong opposition to Iceland's continuing and increased harvest of whales…and to its ongoing international trade in whale products."

Ends

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About IFAW (International Fund for Animal Welfare)

Founded in 1969, IFAW saves animals in crisis around the world. With projects in more than 40 countries, IFAW rescues individual animals, works to prevent cruelty to animals and advocates for the protection of wildlife and habitats.www.ifaw.org

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