

# Faroes PM pledges dolphin hunt review amid outcry at carnage

**Faroese have been killing whales since Viking times but many islanders now oppose annual slaughter**



Carcasses of white-sided dolphins lie on a beach after the slaughter of more than 1,400 of the animals in the Faroe Islands this week. Photograph: AP

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*Regin Winther Poulsen in Tórshavn, Faroe Islands*

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In a parked car overlooking the ocean sit two of the biggest whale killers in the Faroe Islands. They look exhausted, but not from hunting. Ólavur Sjúrdaberg, 75, and Hans J Hermansen, 73, have been on the phone constantly since a mass killing of 1,428 white-sided dolphins in the Faroe Islands on Sunday sparked

international outrage and led the Faroes prime minister to announce on Thursday that the government would **review the dolphin hunt**.

Neither Sjørðaberg nor Hermansen participated in the killing, but they are the current and former chairman of the Faroese Whalers Association, founded in 1992 to explain and defend the traditional killing of whales in the islands, known as the “grind”, and ensure it is as efficient and respectful as possible.

But while more than 83% of the 53,000 islanders still support the killing of pilot whales – which are also a species of dolphin – 53% are opposed to killing the white-sided dolphin, according to a poll published on Monday by the broadcaster Kringvarp Føroya.

“We’re fighting on one more front now,” said Sjørðaberg as Hermansen fields another call, referring to the fact that so many Faroese are against the killing of white-sided dolphins. “We have to evaluate the killing every time, including when it may not go according to plan.”

Faroese people have been killing whales and dolphins since Viking times, and the practice was even regulated in the **oldest preserved Faroese law, dating from 1298**. Practically all whaling in the modern era has involved pilot whales. Pilot whales are the **second largest species of oceanic dolphin**, surpassed in size only by the orca. All killings of pilot whales have been officially recorded since 1584, and **since 2000, an average** of about 660 pilot whales and 211 white-sided dolphins have been killed every year in the islands.



Sea Shepherd released this image of a white-sided dolphin lying dead in blood-stained shallows after Sunday's slaughter in the Faroe Islands. Photograph: AP

The hunt has been adapted in recent years, including a special tool designed to make the killing as humane as possible, and a law that requires everyone who kills an animal to take a course on how to do it properly and be licensed.

But in essence it remains the same: if a group of pilot whales is spotted, a flotilla of boats sails out and herds them into one of 28 legally approved bays. Then, any islander who wants to can help get the whales on land. For pilot whales they use the special harpoon-shaped tool, which severs the spinal cord, killing the animal immediately. Afterwards, the meat is shared between the hunters and the local community.

Sunday's hunt, however, shocked many Faroese: the scale of the kill – 1,428 in one day – is more than six times the number usually killed in an entire year.

Some locals have criticised the slaughter because there were too few people to handle the dolphins, and say it took too long.

Also, the more humane harpoon used to kill pilot whales was not used as it is too big for the smaller white-sided dolphin. Instead, they slaughtered the creatures with knives.

Eyðstein Zachariassen was one of the hunters. He said the pod was estimated at 600 dolphins, and claimed the killing would not have gone ahead had the

hunters known there were more than 1,400 animals. “I don’t think we will stop killing white-sided dolphins because of this,” Zachariassen said. “But I also think this killing will go into history as the biggest one. I don’t think that many will be killed again.”

Even if they did underestimate the numbers, it remains unclear why the hunters made the decision to kill such a large group. Some Faroese argue the leaders of the hunt showed poor judgment, perhaps out of inexperience.

Regardless, the outcry has crystallised a growing debate in the islands about whether to kill the smaller dolphin at all. On Thursday, **the Faroes government said** it would “start an evaluation of the regulations on the catching of Atlantic white-sided dolphins”, noting that white-sided dolphin hunts “have not been a part of Faroese tradition to the same degree” as pilot whales.

The prime minister, Bárður á Steig Nielsen, said: “We take this matter very seriously. Although these hunts are considered sustainable, we will be looking closely at the dolphin hunts, and what part they should play in Faroese society.”



A picture released by Sea Shepherd of some of the white-sided dolphins slaughtered on Sunday. Fewer Faroese people eat these dolphins, raising questions about the practice. Photograph: AP

Jóan Pauli Joensen, a professor of cultural history and author of several books on Faroese culinary traditions, said: “The tradition for killing pilot whales in the Faroes doesn’t include killing white-sided dolphins. Although the killing of

white-sided dolphins was registered in 1872, the numbers have never been comparable with pilot whale hunting – and it happened usually only when a stray got mixed in with the pilot whales.

“The white-sided dolphin is smaller and faster, and it isn’t until modern times with speedboats that it has been killed in greater numbers,” said Joensen. Because only a fraction of Faroese eat the smaller dolphins, few support or have a relationship with the hunt, he said.

Most people don’t eat the blubber of the smaller dolphins either. Blubber is one of the most essential parts of the pilot whale. “People eat blubber with both dried and fermented fish,” said Joensen, referring to two key parts of traditional Faroese cuisine.

Criticism of Sunday’s slaughter has been fierce, both locally and internationally. The conservation group **Sea Shepherd** said Sunday’s hunt was “the largest single killing of dolphins or pilot whales in the islands’ history”. It noted that more animals died on Sunday than in an entire season at Taiji, Japan, which is notorious for its dolphin hunt.

The largest company in the Faroe Islands, the salmon-farming firm Bakkafrost, issued a **statement** decrying the “slaughter”, saying the company “condemn this episode and find it totally unacceptable”. The chief executive, Regin Jacobsen, told Faroese radio that the company had fielded complaints from customers around the world.

Some locals took to social media to express their displeasure, including one commentator on the Kringvarp Føroya Facebook page saying: “**I’m embarrassed to be Faroese.**”

Schendorff Vang, 63, a retired policeman, witnessed the massacre. “There were not enough people on land for the killing,” he said. “Some whales were stranded for too long before they were killed.”

He also questioned the white-dolphin hunt. “I have nothing against killing pilot whales, but I don’t think there has been any tradition for killing dolphins, and I don’t like the fact that much of the blubber is not eaten,” he said.



### Cod almighty: how a 'mythical' Faroes delicacy has vanished

Although the hunters are used to criticism, the reaction seems to have taken some by surprise. Zacariasen said he was baffled by the debate. “I understand that foreigners have a more special relationship with the dolphin than with the pilot whale,” he said. “But to Faroese people, the two animals should have the same value.

“To me, the only difference is that the white-sided dolphin meat tastes better.” He argues that although the white-sided dolphin population is less well understood than that of the pilot whale, the killing is still sustainable in terms of numbers.

Sjúrðaberg and Hermansen think Sunday’s kill went poorly. Sjúrðaberg grew up in Klaksvík, where he says that hunters only killed white-sided dolphins when they were caught in a group of pilot whales; Hermansen is from Hvalvík, where he remembers some dolphins being killed when he was a boy. But they both agree that as long as the hunt is done correctly, all parts of the animal are eaten and the numbers are sustainable, then killing white-sided dolphins is fine.

But they are also aware that, although Sunday’s massacre is unlikely to stop the dolphin hunt, the writing may be on the wall. “We’re killing both whales for food consumption,” Sjúrðaberg said. “But if a majority of the population turns

against killing the white-sided dolphins, it will stop naturally as people won't want to eat it.”

# Faroe Islands: Anger over killing of 1,400 dolphins in one day

By Joshua Nevett  
BBC News  
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The hunting of whales is a traditional practice in the Faroe Islands (file image)

**The practice of dolphin hunting in the Faroe Islands has come under scrutiny after more than 1,400 of the mammals were killed in what was believed to be a record catch.**

The pod of white-sided dolphins was driven into the largest fjord in the North Atlantic territory on Sunday.

Boats herded them into shallow waters at Skalabotnur beach in Eysturoy, where they were killed with knives.

The carcasses were pulled ashore and distributed to locals for consumption.

**Warning: This article contains graphic details and images some may find distressing.**

Footage of the hunt shows dolphins thrashing around in waters turned red with blood as hundreds of people watch on from the beach.

Known as the grind (or Grindadrap in Faroese), the hunting of sea mammals - primarily whales - is a tradition that has been practised for hundreds of years on the remote Faroe Islands.

**The Faroese government says** about 600 pilot whales are caught every year on average. White-sided dolphins are caught in lower numbers, such as 35 in 2020 and 10 in 2019.

Supporters say whaling is a sustainable way of gathering food from nature and an important part of their cultural identity.

Animal rights activists have long disagreed, deeming the slaughter cruel and unnecessary.

- **The BBC's Stacey Dooley investigates whale hunting**

Sunday's hunt was no different, as international conservation groups rounded on the hunters to condemn the killing.

But the scale of the killing at Skalabotnur beach has shocked many locals and even drawn criticism from groups involved in the practice.

Bjarni Mikkelsen, a marine biologist from the Faroe Islands, put the reported death toll into perspective.

He said records showed that this was the largest number of dolphins ever killed on one day in the Faroe Islands, a autonomous territory of Denmark.

He said the previous record was 1,200 in 1940. The next-largest catches were 900 in 1879, 856 in 1873, and 854 in 1938, Mr Mikkelsen said.

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In an interview with the BBC, the chairman of the Faroese Whalers Association, Olavur Sjurdarberg, acknowledged that killing was excessive.

Why were that many dolphins killed, then?

## 'People are in shock'

"It was a big mistake," said Mr Sjurdarberg, who did not participate in the hunt. "When the pod was found, they estimated it to be only 200 dolphins."

Only when the killing process started did they find out the true size of the pod, he said.

"Somebody should have known better," he said. "Most people are in shock about what happened."

Even so, according to Mr Sjurdarberg, the catch was approved by the local authorities and no laws were broken.

Such hunts are regulated in the Faroe Islands. They are non-commercial and are organised on a community level, often spontaneously when someone spots a pod of the mammals. To take part, hunters must have an official training certificate that qualifies them to kill the animals.

## 'Legal but not popular'

Killing white-sided dolphins is "legal but it's not popular", said Sjurdur Skaale, a Danish MP for the Faroe Islands.

He visited Skalabotnur beach to speak to locals on Monday.

"People were furious," he said.

Still, he defended the hunt, which he said was "humane" if done in the right way.

That involves a specially designed lance, which is used to cut the spinal cord of the whale or dolphin before the neck is cut.

Using this method, it should take "less than a second to kill a whale", Mr Skaale said.



Whale hunts - such as the one pictured here in Torshavn in 2019 - are organised by communities

"From an animal welfare point of view, it's a good way of killing meat - far better than keeping cows and pigs imprisoned," he said.

**Campaign group Sea Shepherd has disputed this**, arguing that "the killing of the dolphins and pilot whales is rarely as quick as Faroese government" makes out.

"Grindadrap hunts can turn into drawn-out, often disorganised massacres," the group says.

"The pilot whales and dolphins can be killed over long periods in front of their relatives while beached on sand, rocks or just struggling in shallow water."

## Braced for 'a big backlash'

Surveys suggest that most people are opposed to the mass slaughter of dolphins in the Faroe Islands.

On Sunday, the national reaction was "one of bewilderment and shock because of the extraordinarily big number", said Trondur Olsen, a journalist for Faroese public broadcaster Kringvarp Foroya.

"We did a quick poll yesterday asking whether we should continue to kill these dolphins. Just over 50% said no, and just over 30% said yes," he said.

In contrast, he said, a separate poll suggested that 80% said they wanted to continue with the killing of pilot whales. The polls provide a snapshot of public opinion towards the killing of sea mammals.



Animal rights activists have long criticised whaling in the Faroe Islands (file image)

Criticism of the Faroese hunt has ebbed and flowed over the years. The hunt is brought to wider attention from time to time, as it was by the popular Seaspiracy documentary on Netflix earlier this year.

This time, though, locals say the reaction - especially within the whaling community - has been unusually damning.

"There's been a lot of international attention. My suspicion is that people are bracing themselves for a big backlash," Olsen said.

"This is a good time for campaigners to put even more pressure on. It will be different this time because the numbers are very big."