# The North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission

NAMMCO

Post 1995

1995

# NAMMCO

NAMMCO - THE NORTH ATLANTIC MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION - is an international body for cooperation on the conservation, management and study of marine mammals in the North Atlantic. The NAMMCO Agreement focuses on modern approaches to the study of the marine ecosystem as a whole, and to understanding better the role of marine mammals in this system. Through regional cooperation, the member countries of NAMMCO aim to strengthen and further develop effective conservation and management measures for marine mammals, based on the best available scientific evidence, and taking into account both the complexity and vulnerability of the marine ecosystem, and the rights and needs of coastal communities to make a sustainable living from what the sea can provide.

NAMMCO provides a mechanism for cooperation on conservation and management for all species of cetaceans (whales) and pinnipeds (seals and walruses) in the region, many of which have not before been covered by such an international agreement.

The Agreement to establish NAMMCO was signed in Nuuk, Greenland on 9 April 1992 by the current members of the Commission - the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland and Norway. NAMMCO had its beginnings in an earlier international conference on marine mammals, first held in Reykjavik in 1988 and also attended by Canada, Japan and Russia. At the 1990 meeting of the conference in Tromsø, a memorandum of understanding was signed by the four Nordic North Atlantic countries to establish an informal North Atlantic Committee for Cooperation on Research on Marine Mammals (NAC). The Parties to NAC agreed to work towards the development of mechanisms to ensure the conservation and management of marine mammals. From this process evolved NAMMCO.

**THE NORTH ATLANTIC MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION IS MADE UP OF FOUR MAJOR ELEMENTS:**

- **THE COUNCIL** is the highest authority of the Commission. Member countries meet annually to exchange information, discuss matters of mutual interest and make decisions related to the aims of the organisation. Council meetings are also regularly attended by observers from the Governments of Canada, Denmark, Japan and Russia.

- **THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE** is responsible for providing the scientific advice, in response to requests from Council members, which forms the basis for conservation and management decisions.

- **MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES** propose measures for conservation and management and make recommendations to the Council concerning scientific research.

- **THE SECRETARIAT**, which serves the Council and its Committees in their general work and meetings, is hosted by Norway at the University of Tromsø in the north of Norway. The Secretariat also compiles data on species relevant to the specific conservation and management interests of the organisation, and provides information for the general public on the work of NAMMCO.

As well as these fundamental elements, working groups are also set up on an ad hoc basis to deal with specific matters of mutual interest, such as, for example, the exchange of technical advice on hunting methods, and the development of a reciprocal observer scheme for coastal whaling.

The Scientific Committee establishes its own specialist working groups, where appropriate, to deal with requests for advice, in particular where these are not already dealt with by other bodies.

The NAMMCO Fund provides financial support for projects which contribute to the knowledge and understanding of marine mammal conservation and sustainable use of marine mammal resources. The Fund is operated by a Board consisting of a representative from each NAMMCO member country, and is administered by the Secretariat.

FROM THE PREAMBLE TO THE NAMMCO AGREEMENT:

The Parties:

*"Having regard to their common concerns for the rational management, conservation and optimum utilization of the living resources of the sea in accordance with generally accepted principles of international law as reflected in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea"*

...

*"Recalling the general principles of conservation and sustainable use of natural resources as reflected in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development"*

...

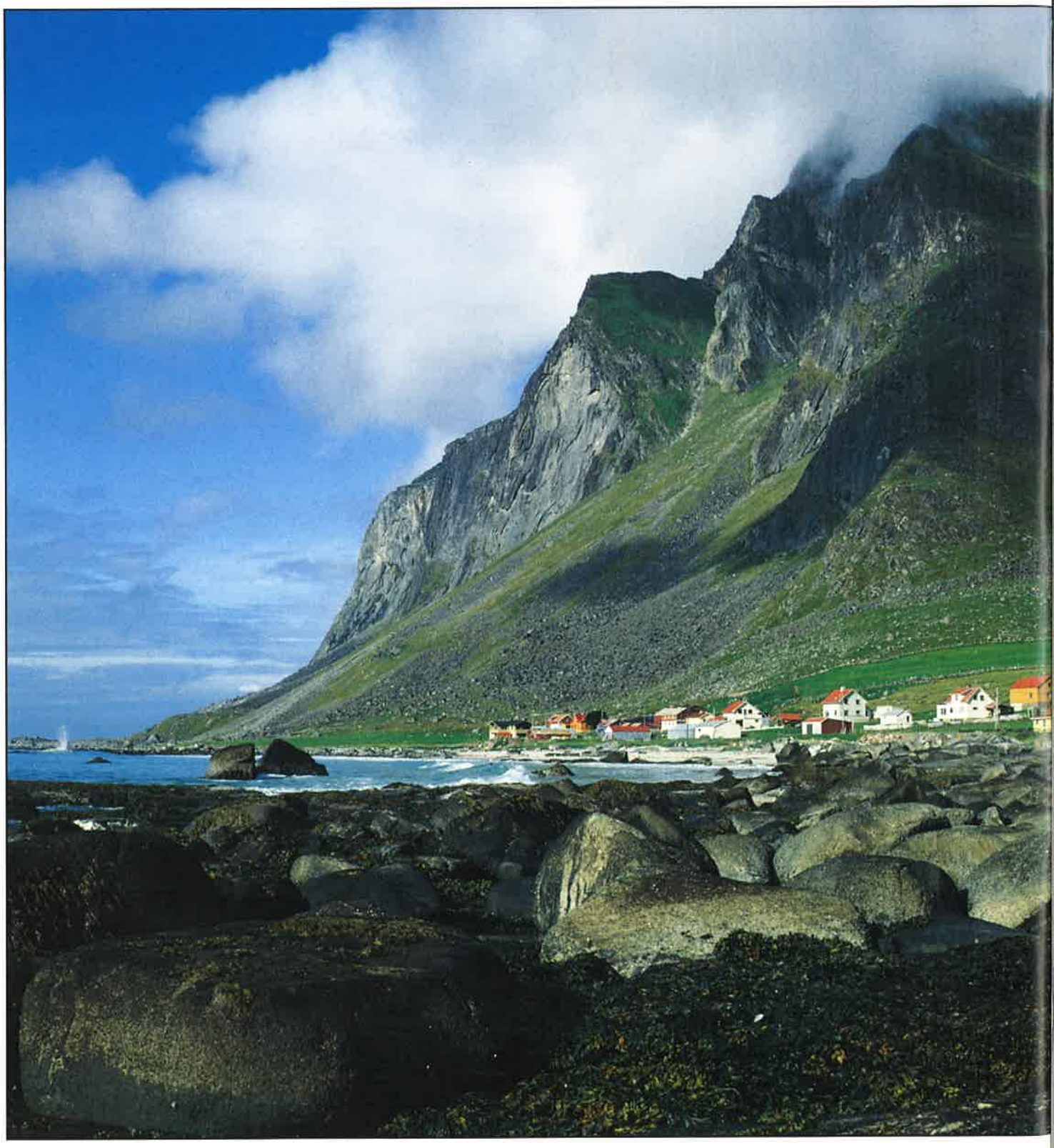
*"Convinced that regional bodies in the North Atlantic can ensure effective conservation, sustainable marine resource utilization and development with due regard to the needs of coastal communities and indigenous people"*

Marine mammals are an important part of the livelihoods of many people in coastal communities across the North Atlantic, such as in Uummannaq Fjord, West Greenland, where ringed seals are prepared for their meat, blubber and skins.

*Photo: Ivars Silis*

# Cooperation

INTERNATIONAL LAW AND AGREEMENTS have recognised that marine mammals may migrate over vast distances, and that states should therefore cooperate on their conservation and management through the appropriate international organisations. Concerns for the continued viability of marine mammal resources, coupled with past examples of unsustainable exploitation, have led us to recognise that we share a responsibility to maintain the health and biological diversity of these species and their environment, whether they are confined to the coastal waters of one nation, or range through the waters of several.



**International cooperation on the conservation of living marine resources is necessary to ensure a sustainable future for coastal communities whose immediate environment makes them naturally dependent on the sea.**

Norwegian coastal minke whaling vessel.
*Photo: Morten Ecker*

The fishing village of Vikten in Lofoten, northern Norway.
*Photo: Morten Ecker*

Such international cooperation is best realised through the exchange of scientific information and research competence, and through consultation and advice on appropriate conservation and management measures.

The NAMMCO Agreement has its basis in widely recognised principles of international law, especially as reflected in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the international principles and plans for future conservation and environmental management which were agreed upon in the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21 at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.

UNCLOS, which came into effect in November 1994, has in particular served to codify the desire for effective international cooperation on conservation of living marine resources, outlining the responsibility of coastal states to ensure that the living resources in their waters are not endangered by over-exploitation. This should be done with proper conservation and management measures, based on the best available scientific evidence, and through the appropriate international organisations - whether subregional, regional or global in scope.

NAMMCO ensures regional cooperation in an area where ecosystems and resources cross the boundaries of several states and the high seas. International cooperation is witnessed both in the structure of NAMMCO itself, as well as in its relations with external parties on governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental levels. Only through such cooperation can NAMMCO members fulfill their commitment to effective conservation and management of marine mammals in the North Atlantic.

NAMMCO exchanges information with, and follows the activities of, a number of other relevant international organisations. Of particular importance is the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), with which NAMMCO has a close working relationship. Apart from ICES, NAMMCO exchanges observers and information with the International Whaling Commission (IWC), the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) and the Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans in the Baltic and North Seas (ASCOBANS). NAMMCO has also established contacts with a range of other relevant international organisations, including the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Conservation Union (IUCN), and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

# Research

ALTHOUGH STILL LIMITED, OUR KNOWLEDGE OF MARINE MAMMALS and their environment has been greatly enhanced through modern science in recent decades. Centuries of close contact between humans and marine mammals in the North Atlantic have, not least, provided a firm historical basis for contemporary scientific research on cetaceans and pinnipeds.

The NAMMCO Scientific Committee is responsible for providing scientific advice on species of relevance for conservation and management through NAMMCO. One of these is the killer whale.
*Photo: Fernando Ugarte*

As human populations continue to exert increasing pressure on the world's living resources to meet their needs, new approaches to the study of the marine ecosystem and the relationships between the different species in their environment are being developed. These pose new challenges for marine science to help ensure a healthy marine environment and sustainable fisheries and wildlife use in the future. The scientific groundwork for NAMMCO was defined with such developments in mind.

The Scientific Committee, the central element in the structure and work of the organisation, was formally established at the second meeting of the Council in Tromsø, January 1993 and is made up of scientific experts appointed by each member country. It meets regularly to deal with requests made by Council members for advice on both general and specific matters, using, to the extent possible, existing scientific information on the marine mammal species in question and drawing on relevant external expertise.

One of the first tasks of the Scientific Committee has been to develop a list of marine mammal species in the North Atlantic which are, or may become, relevant to the conservation and management objectives of NAMMCO member countries. This list summarises the current knowledge of distribution, stock identity, population and management status of each species, and is updated regularly by the Scientific Committee.

To gain a thorough understanding of the status of marine mammal populations and their role in the marine ecosystem, detailed research is required on such aspects as distribution, stock identity, reproductive parameters and feeding ecology.

Scientists collecting data for an international research project on the long-finned pilot whale in the Faroe Islands.
*Photo: Ole Jensen, Natural History Museum, Tórshavn*

### Advice on priority species

Scientific advice has been requested through the Council on the following species: long-finned pilot whale; killer whale; northern bottlenose whale; harp seal; hooded seal; ringed seal; grey seal and Atlantic walrus. There is also a long-term interest in a number of other species, which include beluga (white whale), narwhal, harbour porpoise and harbour seal.

### Multi-species approaches

From the Preamble to the NAMMCO Agreement:

*"Desiring to enhance their cooperation in research on marine mammals and their role in the ecosystem, including, where appropriate, multi-species approaches, and on the effects of marine pollution and other human activities."*

Scientific assessments of the dependence of marine mammals on other living marine resources, and the interrelations between the various components of the marine ecosystem, have also been requested within NAMMCO, both in general and in relation to research on particular species. As a basis for monitoring progress in this field, the Scientific Committee evaluates all available information on stock levels and trends in stock levels of marine mammals in the North Atlantic.

### Environmental impacts

Pollution of the marine environment and its effects on marine mammals and the ecosystem at large is also an area of increasing focus for scientific research and collaboration. Of particular interest and concern are the sources, levels and effects of organochlorines and heavy metals in the marine ecosystem, as well as the possible pathways and effects of radioactive contamination in the event of leakages, dumping or accidents associated with nuclear installations. The consequences of such contamination for the health of those who consume marine mammals is also the subject of ongoing international medical research.

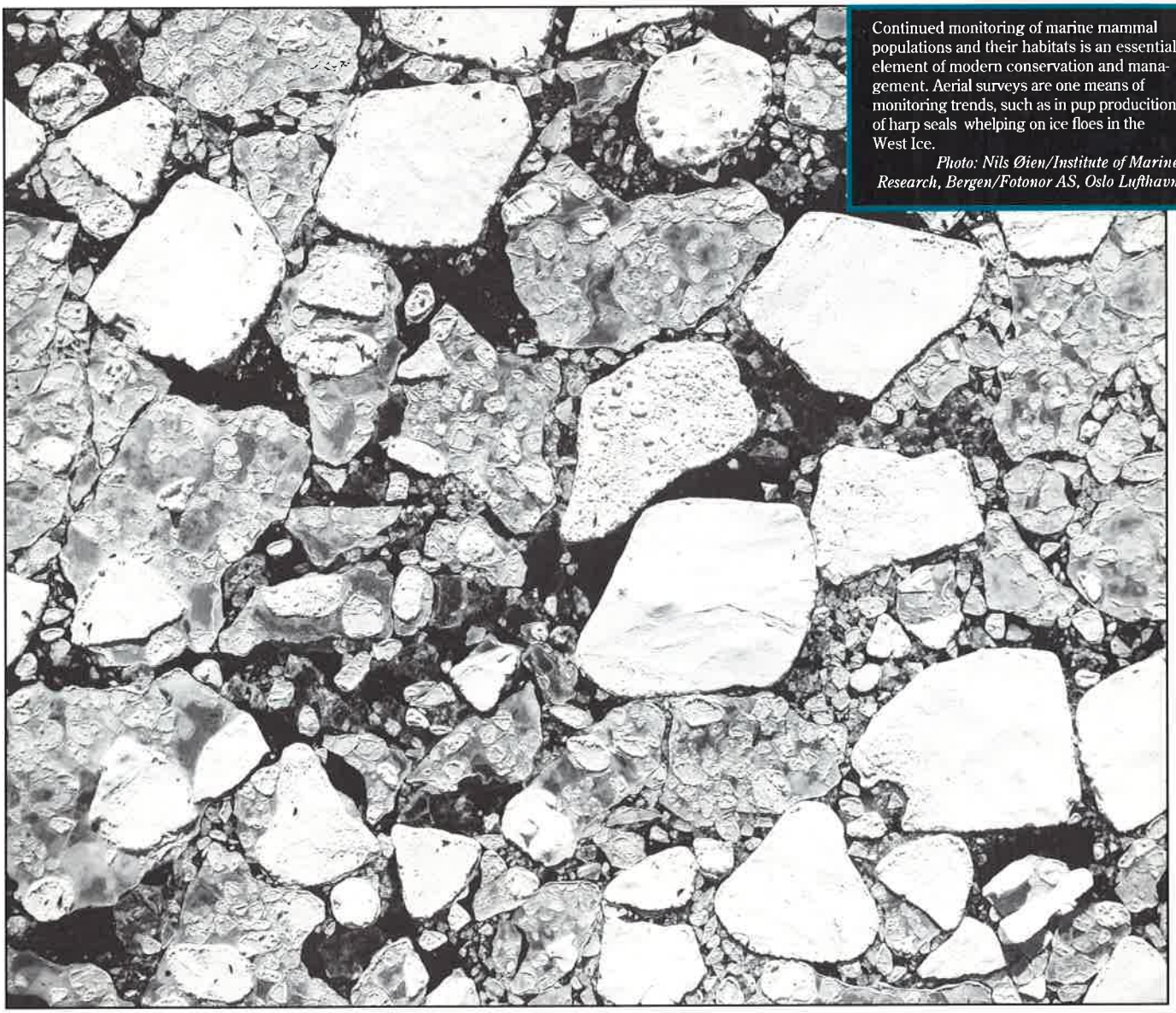
**NAMMCO took the initiative to organise the International Conference on Marine Mammals and the Marine Environment in Lerwick, Shetland in April 1995, with a focus on the levels and effects of pollutants in marine mammals, as well as the social, economic and health consequences of marine pollution for coastal communities.**

### NASS - North Atlantic Sightings Survey for cetaceans

The joint North Atlantic cetacean sightings surveys in the summer of 1995 - known as NASS-95 - were coordinated through a planning group under the NAMMCO Scientific Committee. NASS-95 represents an important follow-on from similar NASS surveys carried out in the region in 1987 and 1989. With the participation of national vessels and aircraft covering as wide an area as possible, NASS-95 was designed to provide updated data for use in the continued monitoring and assessment of the distribution and abundance of whale stocks and species in the North Atlantic. The Scientific Committee will evaluate the results of the joint surveys in the light of recent assessments of North Atlantic whale stocks.

# Conservation and Management

WHALES, SEALS AND OTHER MARINE MAMMALS have long been a significant part of the life and culture of coastal people all over the globe. The human relationship with these animals differs greatly from country to country and from culture to culture, as indeed does the human/nature relationship in general. In modern times, the extent and effects of man's exploitation of wildlife - including marine wildlife - has become an increasing focus of concern. A wide range of initiatives has been taken on both national and international levels to conserve the natural environment and biological diversity for the benefit of both present and future generations.



Continued monitoring of marine mammal populations and their habitats is an essential element of modern conservation and management. Aerial surveys are one means of monitoring trends, such as in pup producition of harp seals whelping on ice floes in the West Ice.

*Photo: Nils Øien/Institute of Marine Research, Bergen/Fotonor AS, Oslo Lufthavn*

The goal - in today's conservation terms - is to ensure that nature can, in the long term, sustain continued direct and indirect human impacts on its biological processes and the resources it produces. This applies as much to marine mammals in the North Atlantic as it does to other renewable natural resources on which human societies depend for their existence.

Marine mammals fulfill a wide range of economic, cultural and social needs for coastal communities in the North Atlantic and elsewhere. If the livelihoods provided by these resources are to be maintained on a sustainable basis, it is essential to make management decisions based on sound science, to enhance our understanding of the interrelations between marine mammals and other components of the marine ecosystem, and to ensure that the impacts of human activities, whether at sea or from land, are not detrimental to the continued viability of marine mammal habitats.

Killer whales breaching in Tysfjord, Norway
*Photo : Fernendo Ugarte*

**Maintaining biodiversity is the common goal of international conservation today.**
**For centuries, marine mammals have been a valuable source of commodities in the form of food, clothing and other products, sustaining the economies of coastal communities in the North Atlantic and elsewhere. A conscious and informed approach to conservation and management is the key to the future viability of marine mammal populations.**

Within NAMMCO, member governments seek advice on the best approaches to conservation in the context of Management Committees, whose role is to make recommendations to the Council concerning scientific research, and to propose to its members specific management measures. Basic to all modern management is the regular monitoring of the abundance and distribution of resources, as well as systems of control of human activities to ensure that management measures are respected and resources are maintained at productive levels. NAMMCO provides a useful forum for the exchange of advice and regional cooperation on these essential aspects of management.

Recent international scientific collaboration through NAMMCO on two species in particular - the Atlantic walrus and the northern bottlenose whale - illustrates the role of the organisation in filling gaps in conservation and research on species of cetaceans and pinnipeds for which comprehensive assessments have not before been carried out through other international bodies.

Cutting up a whale. An initial from the 14th century Icelandic manuscript *Jónsók* Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, Reykjavik
*Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir*

Seal skin fashion: Coat by Davinor, boots by Rieber & co A/S, Norway
*Photo: Johs. Boe*

Meal of pilot whale meat and blubber, Faroe Islands
*Photo : Alan Brockie*

Educating the future generation of hunters, Greenland
*Photo: Ivars Silis*

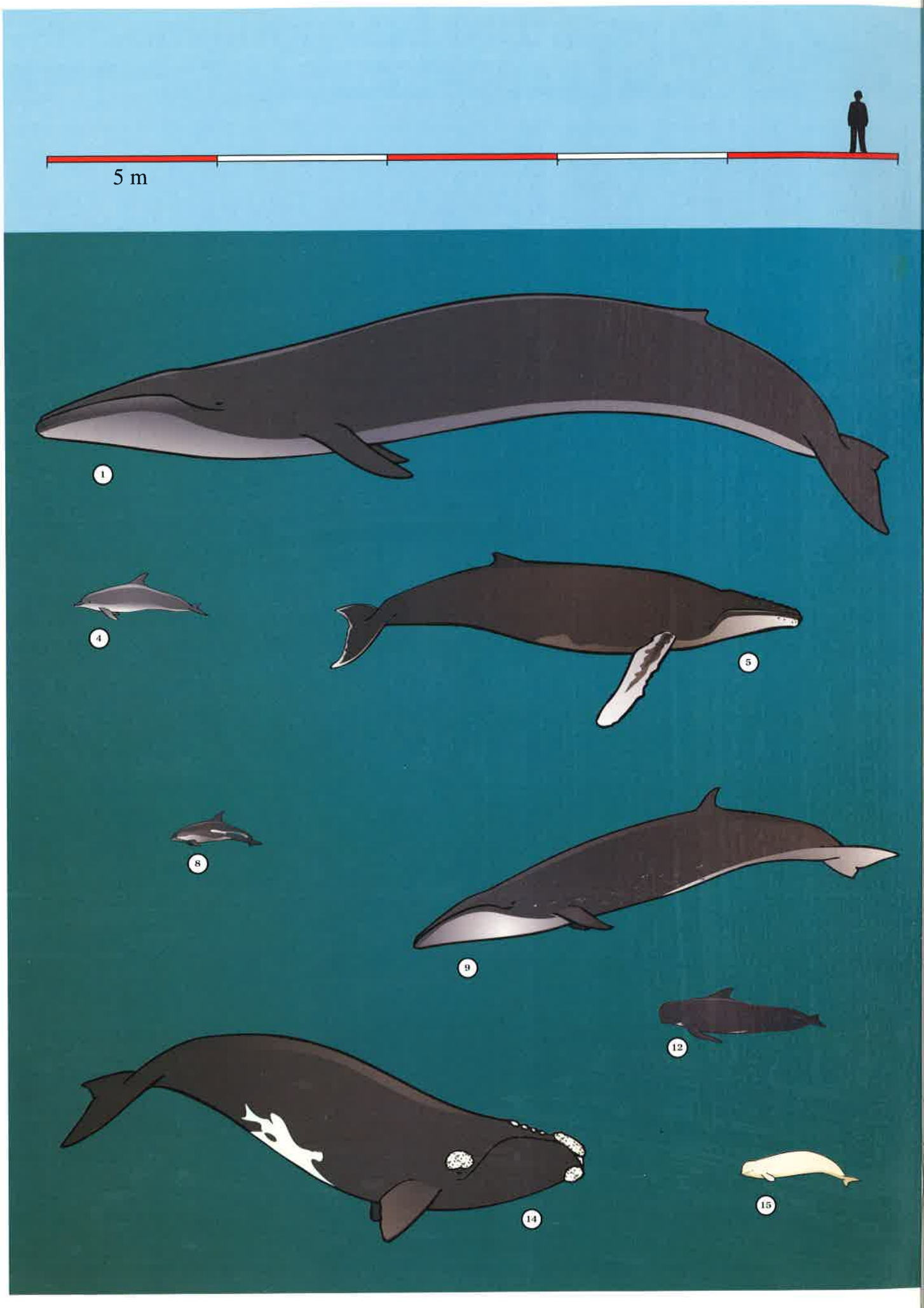
### ATLANTIC WALRUS
(*Odobenus rosmarus rosmarus*)

In 1995, the Scientific Committee initiated the collaboration of a group of international experts from Canada, Greenland and Norway, who prepared, for the first time, an assessment of this species throughout its range. With its basis in this review and the conclusions of an *ad hoc* working group on the Atlantic walrus, the Scientific Committee made specific recommendations for future research on this species, particularly with regard to stocks in parts of its Northwest Atlantic range which are believed to be declining. Based on the Scientific Committee's international review of this species, the Management Committee recommended that Greenland take steps to arrest the decline of Atlantic walrus along its west coast.

### NORTHERN BOTTLENOSE WHALE
(*Hyperoodon ampullatus*)

The Scientific Committee established a working group to address the request from the Council to assess the status of the northern bottlenose whale in the North Atlantic. After preliminary assessments were carried out, modelling of the bottlenose whale population was conducted, using historical catch data and data from recent sightings surveys.

Based on this assessment, it was confirmed that the northern bottlenose whale population can sustain a limited catch such as the small-scale hunt of this species which has occurred for centuries in the Faroe Islands.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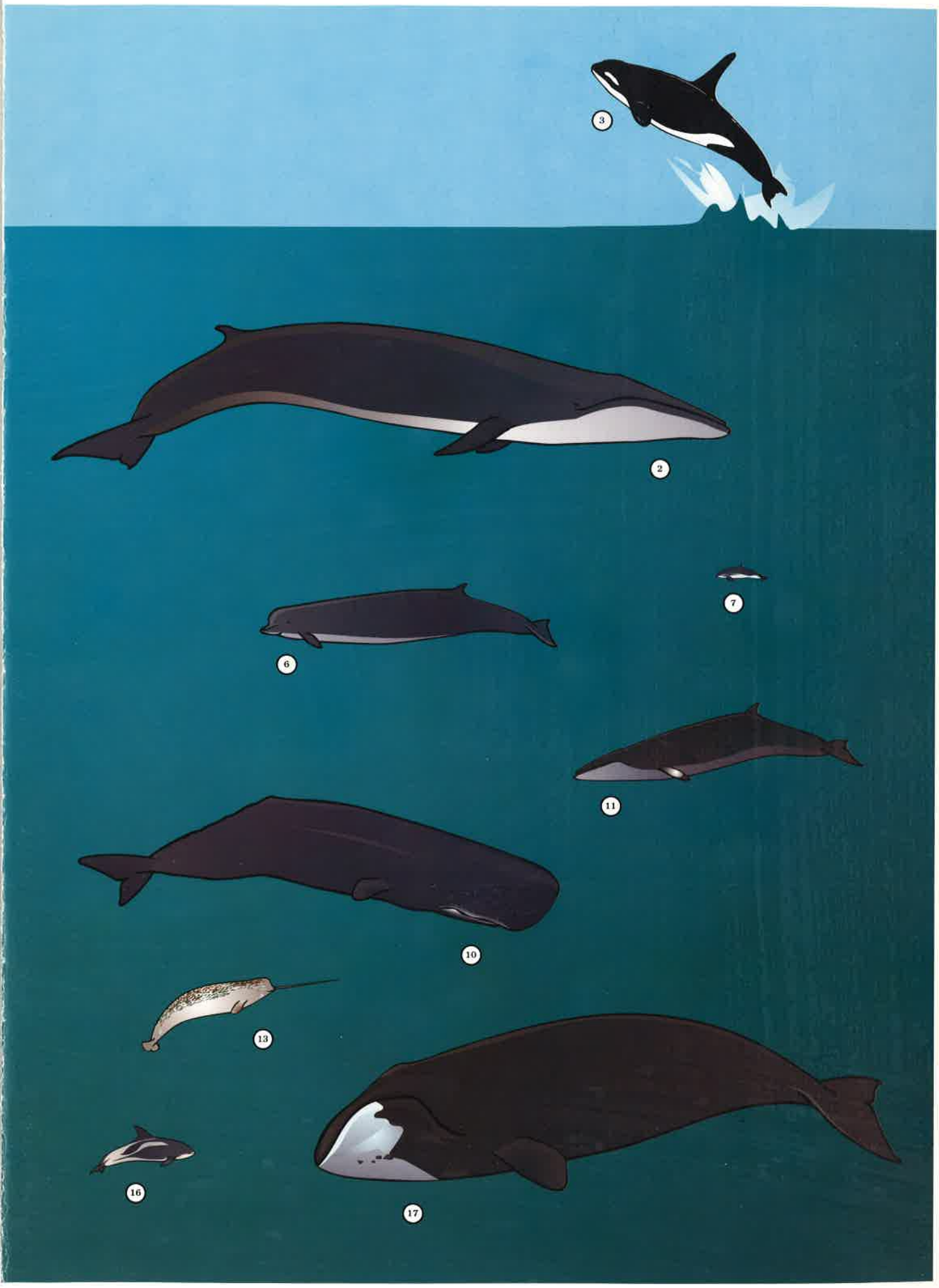
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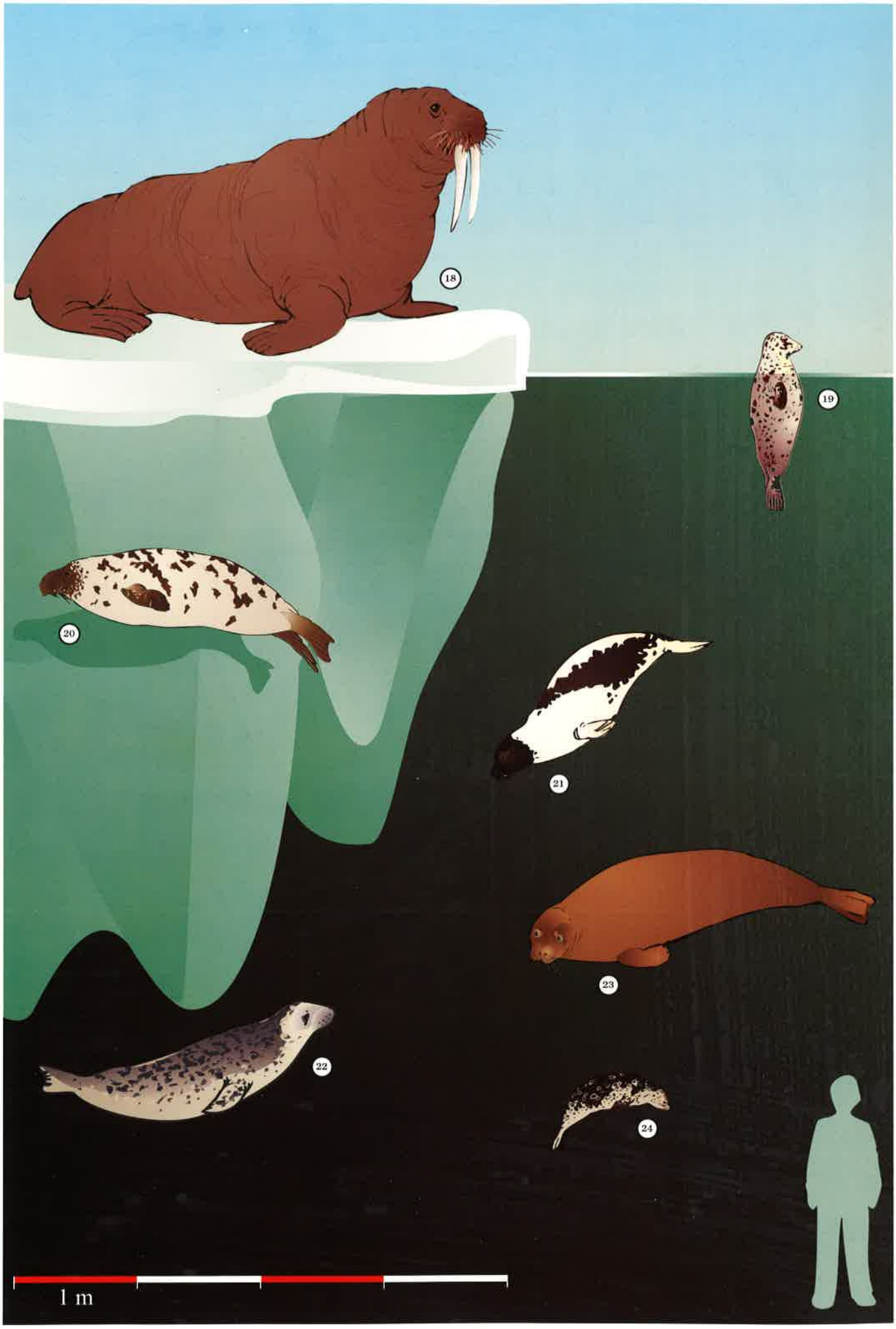
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# Marine Mammals in the North Atlantic

## Cetaceans *

**1. Blue whale**
*Balaenoptera musculus*
Distribution: Across the North Atlantic in subtropical to subartic waters.

**2. Fin whale**
*Balaenoptera physalus*
Distribution: Across the North Atlantic. Most common in the East Greenland-Iceland-Jan Mayen area and west of the Iberian Peninsula during summer.

**3. Killer whale**
*Orcinus orca*
Distribution: Across the North Atlantic both in coastal and oceanic waters.

**4. Bottlenose dolphin**
*Tursiops truncatus*
Distribution: Across the North Atlantic in tropic to temperate waters.

**5. Humpback whale**
*Megaptera novaeangliae*
Distribution: Breeds in the Carribean; feeding aggregations in Gulf of Maine, Newfoundland, West Greenland, Denmark Strait, Icelandic waters and Barents Sea.

**6. Northern bottlenose whale**
*Hyperoodon ampullatus*
Distribution: Across the North Atlantic with concentrations west and east of Iceland and west of the Faroes.

**7. Harbour porpoise**
*Phocoena phocoena*
Distribution: Temperate and sub-arctic waters of the North Atlantic.

**8. Atlantic white-sided dolphin**
*Lagenorhynchus acutus*
Distribution: Temperate and sub-arctic waters of the North Atlantic.

**9. Sei whale**
*Balaenoptera borealis*
Distribution: Temperate and sub-arctic regions in the North Atlantic.

**10. Sperm whale**
*Physeter macrocephalus*
Distribution: Across the North Atlantic in tropical to subarctic waters.

**11. Minke whale**
*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*
Distribution: Across the North Atlantic in tropical to Arctic waters. Most common in coastal and shelf areas in temperate to Arctic waters.

**12. Long-finned pilot whale**
*Globicephala melas*
Distribution: Temperate and sub-arctic waters of the North Atlantic.

**13. Narwhal**
*Monodon monoceros*
Distribution: Arctic waters of the North Atlantic.

**14. Right whale**
*Eubalaena glacialis*
Distribution: Northwest Atlantic.

**15. Beluga**
*Delphinapterus leucas*
Distribution: Arctic and northern subarctic waters in the North Atlantic, especially in the Davis Strait - Baffin Bay area.

**16. White-beaked dolphin**
*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*
Distribution: Cold temperate and subarctic waters of the North Atlantic.

**17. Bowhead whale**
*Balaena mysticetus*
Distribution: Davis Strait, Hudson Bay, Svalbard/Northern Barents Sea.

## Pinnipeds

**18. Atlantic walrus**
*Odobenus rosmarus rosmarus*
Distribution: In the Arctic from Bathurst Island (Canada) to the Kara Sea (Russia). Confined to coastal waters.

**19. Harbour seal**
*Phoca vitulina vitulina and Phoca vitulina concolor*
Distribution: Coasts of Europe and North America in subarctic and temperate waters.

**20. Hooded seal**
*Cystophora cristata*
Distribution: Arctic and northern subarctic waters of the North Atlantic north of Newfoundland-Iceland-Faroe Islands-Norway, west of Bear Island-Spitsbergen.

**21. Harp seal**
*Phoca groenlandica*
Distribution: Arctic and northern subarctic waters across the North Atlantic north of Newfoundland-Iceland-North Norway-Russia.

**22. Grey seal**
*Halichoerus grypus*
Distribution: Baltic Sea, Northwest Atlantic and East Atlantic.

**23. Bearded seal**
*Erignathus barbatus*
Distribution: Arctic waters across the North Atlantic north of northern Newfoundland/Labrador-South Greenland-North Iceland-Spitsbergen-Barents Sea.

**24. Ringed seal**
*Phoca hispida*
Distribution: Arctic coasts of North America, Greenland, Northern Europe and Russia; the Baltic Sea.

* There are a number of other cetacean species not illustrated here, most of which have a more southerly distribution in the North Atlantic.

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Front cover: Atlantic walrus eating a ringed seal, Spitsbergen.
*Photo: Mats Forsberg*

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