

Mink whale re-established in Iceland

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Hunting of mink whales was initiated in 1914 and conducted in Iceland throughout most of the 20th century. These were small-type operations conducted by fishermen in coastal waters mainly in West and North Iceland. The moratorium imposed by the IWC in 1962 and taking effect 1966 led to a stop in these operations. After that no mink whaling was conducted in Icelandic waters until 2003 when a research program was initiated including a take of a total of 200 mink whales during 2003-2007.

Official catch statistics are not available prior to 1974, but catches were low, estimated to be less than 50 per year prior to 1960. After that catches gradually increased and annual catches were around 200 animals after IWC regulations took effect in 1977 (Table 1).

Catch		Catch	
Year	Commercial	Year	Commercial
1974	30	1984	178
1975	181	1985	145
1976	195	1986-2002	0
1977	194	2003	37
1978	198	2004	25
1979	202	2005	39
1980	201	2006	1
1981	200	2007	6
1982	212	2008	36
1983	204	2009	81

Table 1. Mink whale catches by Iceland 1974-2009.

Mink whaling for commercial purposes was re-introduced in 2006. Catches were low in 2006-2007 as the mink whalers were occupied in the scientific program that sampled 90 mink whales in these two years (Table 1). The first year after the completion of the scientific program (2008) 36 mink whales were taken out of a quota of 40 animals. In the beginning of 2009, the minister of fisheries issues a regulation stating that quotas for the next 5 years (2009-2013) should be according to the scientific advice given by the Marine Research Institute (MRI) every year. The latest advice is 200 mink whales, which was the quota in 2009. The advice given by the MRI has been primarily based on the work of the Scientific Committee of NAMMCO.

In 2008-2009 the mink whaling was mostly conducted from single vessels each year (a larger vessel hired in 2009) operated by the Icelandic Association of Mink Whalers. The crew was composed of mink whalers with experience from the pre-moratorium years (before 1966) and during the scientific sampling program 2003-2007. In 2009, three new companies took part in the whaling. Of a total of 81 mink whales caught that year, 68 were taken by the vessel operated by the Icelandic Association of Mink Whalers. The products were sold on the Icelandic market.

The equipments used in the hunting, are very similar to those used in Norway, i.e. 50mm explosive harpoon and 450 calibre efforts as a back up for re-shooting if needed. The harpoon is connected to an elastic line tied to an underline that is connected to an effort-sensitive hydrolic winch. Traditionally 40g of gunpowder have been used to launch the harpoon. In the summer the amount was increased to 52g. This increased the success surprisingly much, you could use the word revolution. After this change not a single incidence of line breakage occurred while previously it was not uncommon that the harpoon