FAROE ISLANDS
PROGRESS REPORT ON MARINE MAMMALS 2025

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I. INTRODUCTION

This report summarises research on cetaceans and pinnipeds conducted in the Faroe Islands in 2025, by the Faroe Marine Research Institute (FAMRI), University of the Faroe Islands and the Faroese Environment Agency (FEA).

II. RESEARCH BY SPECIES 2025

II.a Species/Stocks studied

- Pilot whale (*Globicephala melas*) – landed animals
- White-sided dolphin (*Leucopleurus acutus*) – landed animals
- White-beaked dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*) – landed animals Greenland
- Striped dolphin (*Stenella coeruleoalba*) – stranded animal
- Northern bottlenose whale (*Hyperoodon ampullatus*) – stranded animal
- Sperm whale (*Phyceter macrocephalus*) – stranded animal
- Grey seal (Halichoreus grypus) – observation

II.b Field work

In 2025, biological samples for age and reproductive analysis were collected from 163 **pilot whales**, by FAMRI, in 4 drives. In addition, 28 stomach content samples and 163 necropsies were stored for diet, genetic and ecological studies.

In 2025, FEA took samples of **pilot whales** in connection with grinds in Leynar on 12 June, Tjørnuvík 20 July, and Tórshavn 26 August. In all, 38 individual samples of muscle and blubber, and approximately same number of liver and kidney tissue, were taken.

Biological samples (teeth, reproductive organs, stomachs, tissues) were collected from 51 **white-sided dolphins**, by FAMRI, during a drive in Skálabotnur on 25. August.

Samples (if possible, teeth, reproductive organs, stomach, tissue, eye) were collected, by FAMRI, from
a **striped dolphin,** stranded in Leynar, on 26. April,
a **northern bottlenose whale**, stranded in Hvalvík, on 10. August,
a **sperm whale**, stranded in Sørvágur, on 7. October.

A partly hairless **grey seal** was observed in Hoyvík on 8. March. The seal was lacking hair on the ventral part of the body, but had full hair cover on the back. This partly hair loss could be due to the autoimmune condition alopecia.

II.c Laboratory work

The biological material collected by FAMRI of **pilot whales** in 2025 was analysed and the results presented for the NAMMCO pilot whale assessment working group in November 2025. The results on diet will be part of the TOPLINK project, while the complete data will be used for long-term monitoring of pilot whales, and for use in assessments. Marine mammals age estimation is now implemented at FAMRI.

Available samples of **white-sided dolphins**, including a drive in 2025, will be analysed when time allow, and well in advance of any upcoming assessments.

FEA are regularly collecting **pilot whale** samples for a tissue bank, where the aim is to take samples from three schools a year, with generally 25 individuals from each. The samples are analysed in a pollution monitoring program, as outlined in Table 1. In addition, research activities are done as projects and when funding allows. Such projects could be to investigate the presence of chemicals of emerging environmental concern and elucidate potential negative impact of pollutants on pilot whales.

Table 1. Pollutants in the pilot whale monitoring program of the Environment Agency.

Matrix (tissue)	blubber & muscle	kidney	liver	blubber / liver*,**	blubber*
Frequency of sampling	yearly, pref. from 3 schools, focus incr. on juv. males for timetrend				
number of samples analysed per year	25	15	15	5	5
Tissue analysed for:	Blubber:Legacy persistent organic pollutants$, polybrominated diethyl ethers. Muscle:metals£	Cadmium, dry mass	Mercury, selenium, cadmium, dry mass	Perfluoroalkyl substances	hexabromo cyclo-dodecane, Dechlorane plus

*Time trends
** PFAS is analysed in liver
$ PCB, HCH, HCB, DDT, DDE, o,p-isomer DDT and metabolites, CHL, Mirex, Toxaphene.
£ Mercury, selenium, dry mass and stable N and C isotopes

The DolphinUnit project, which is a collaboration between the University of the Faroe Islands, FAMRI, the Greenland Institute of Natural Resources and the Globe Institute at the University of Copenhagen, started in 2025. The project postdoc is based at the University of the Faroe Islands. DNA was extracted and sent for sequencing, resulting in whole-genome resequencing data from 172 **pilot whales**, 133 **white-beaked dolphins** and 59 **white-sided dolphins**. Bio-informatics processing of the data has been completed, and population genomics analyses are on-going.

II.d Other studies

FAMRI plan to have boat-based counts of **grey seals** along the shoreline during summer in 2026 and 2027. Also, tagging will continue, both with ARGOS and GPS tags. Available tracking data will be analysed to correct for availability bias during the summer counts.

The TOPLINK project is a cooperation between FAMRI and Greenland Institute of Natural Resources, for studying the ecological role of **killer whales**, **pilot whales** and **dolphins** along the Greenland-Shetland Ridge. In 2025, one paper was published, while a second manuscript has also been prepared. The project finish by summer 2026.

The MINTAG project, with participation by FAMRI, is a cooperation between the NAMMCO member countries (Faroes, Greenland, Iceland and Norway) and Japan, and the tag manufacturer Wildlife Computers Inc. The scope is to develop a small trans-dermal satellite tag, that is deployed from distance, by an air-gun (www.mintag-project.com). Target species are **baleen whales** and **pilot whales**. No fieldwork has been performed by FAMRI so far, but the plan is to start tagging effort in 2026.

FAMRI will continue the effort to tag **pilot whales** in the Faroe Islands. Further tagging activities will potentially harmonize with the MINITAG project, and will integrate also advanced tags for feeding behaviour and physical parameters.

FAMRI keeps records of incidental sightings of marine mammals in Faroese waters, including live observations and stranded animals, taken from both direct and indirect sources. A group of **killer whales**, six animals identified as group 27s, including bull 34, were observed in late September. They seemed to stay longer in the area, because re-sightings were made in both November and December. **Risso's dolphins** have been more frequently observed in recent years, with observations in May, September, October and December 2025. **Humpback whales** were observed in May and July.

The University of the Faroe Islands is a member of the NAMMCO genetics working group and participated in the working group meeting on the 28th of October 2025, and participated in writing the working group report, that was presented to the Scientific Committee of NAMMCO.

II.e Research results

The **pilot whale** abundance, corrected for perception bias, was for the Icelandic and Faroese component of NASS 2024 estimated to 240.710 (cv: 0.34, 95% CI: 122.418-473.306) animals. This approved estimate was presented for, and used by, the pilot whale assessment working group meeting in November 2025.

De Clerck et at (2025) tracked 23 **white-sided dolphins** in the Faroe Islands by satellite telemetry, to investigate their movement patterns, habitat use, and diving behaviour. The findings show a strong association with the shelf edge and identify the Irminger Sea and the Faroe-Shetland Channel as important habitats. The observed movements align with

oceanographic features that enhance productivity and prey availability, including strong mixing zones and the Irminger Gyre with deep mixed layers. Three dolphins independently undertook trans-Atlantic migrations to the Irminger Sea, where two remained for extended periods (26 and 63 days). Together with dive records and lower move persistence, this suggests that the Irminger Sea functions as an important autumn feeding ground. Dive data (n = 4) revealed a wide depth range (3–616 m) and diel diving patterns consistent with exploitation of vertically migrating mesopelagic prey. Identifying critical habitats and understanding trans-Atlantic connectivity are essential for effective conservation and management of this species, particularly given ongoing environmental changes in the North Atlantic. The post-release separation of tagged dolphins reflects their fluid social structure, suggesting a panmictic stock in the central and eastern North Atlantic. The study highlights the value of movement data for understanding habitat use, distribution, effect of ocean dynamics, and population structure in pelagic predators.

Result by FEA from analyses of heavy metals, PCBs and PFASs in **pilot whale** foetuses and their mothers from 2018 and 2019 were presented at SETAC Europe 35th Annual Meeting in Vienna, Austria 11. – 15. May 2025. The results show that mercury is transported from the mother to the fetus, and the transfer is correlated to the gestation time, whereas cadmium was not transferred to the fetus during gestation. The transfer of PFASs was also correlated with gestation time, but varied with the congeners, whereas the PCBs were less dependent on gestation time. Some of the PFASs showed higher concentrations in the foetus than in the mother with the highest relative concentrations in the largest foetuses.

Preliminary results from the DolphinUnit project reveal contrasting patterns of population structure among the studied cetacean species. In **pilot whales**, genetic analyses identified two clearly distinct populations in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, with the Mediterranean group showing reduced genetic diversity consistent with historical bottlenecks and genetic drift. In contrast, **white-sided dolphins** showed no detectable population structure, a finding that aligns with their wide-ranging movement patterns and high connectivity across regions. Preliminary analyses of **white-beaked dolphins**, however, revealed population structuring within the North Atlantic, distinguishing groups from (i) the Baltic and North Seas and the eastern North Atlantic, (ii) Norway and Iceland, and (iii) Canada and Greenland. Ongoing analyses aim to further resolve potential substructure and reconstruct the demographic history underlying these patterns.

III. ONGOING (CURRENT) RESEARCH

FAMRI will reintroduce the summer monitoring census of the **grey seal** population, with planned surveys in 2026 and 2027. Seal research will include more animals tagging and camera-trap monitoring at important haul-out locations, for investigating haul-out behaviour and to induce an availability correction factor, in order to have a corrected population estimate.

FEA will continue to sample **pilot whales** for pollution monitoring in 2024. FEA and FAMRI have collaborated with researchers from Harvard University on PFAS contamination in pilot

whale and collaboration between FEA and researchers from the University in Bergen regarding analyses of effects of pollutants on pilot whales are in progress.

Biological sampling from drive hunts and marine mammal standings by FAMRI continues as a standard monitoring routine, in order to have long-term data series.

The University of the Faroe Islands will continue the analyses for the DolphinUnit project, which is due to finish at the end of 2026, and participate in the genetics working group.

IV. ADVICE GIVEN AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES TAKEN

The NAMMCO Scientific Committee Working Group on Pilot Whales provided, at its meeting in Copenhagen in November 2025, management advice for **pilot whales**, valid for the hunting areas West Greenland, East Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The advice was reviewed and approved by the NAMMCO Scientific Committee at its January 2026 meeting, and will be presented to the NAMMCO Council in March 2026. After this, FAMRI will deliver an advice on sustainable harvest levels to the Ministry of Fisheries, Industry and Trade.

Law no. 65, from 14. May 2020, bans all culling of marine mammals in connection with fish farming activities. Prior to this, aquaculture farms were allowed to cull **grey seals** interacting with the farms, but the new law enforcement stop this cull completely. Recreational hunting of grey seals has no tradition, and is not practiced. The Ministry of Fisheries, Industry and Trade has requested FAMRI to continue the population abundance surveys and to provide a management plan for grey seals in the Faroes.

V. PUBLICATIONS AND DOCUMENTS

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