



Trade Strategy: priorities for cetacean welfare and conservation

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This briefing is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)) and sets out why and how dolphin, porpoise and whale (cetacean) welfare and conservation needs to be considered as a priority in the UK Trade Strategy.

Background

Despite a longstanding global moratorium on commercial whaling through the International Whaling Commission (IWC), and a prohibition on international commercial trade in whale products under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) three nations continue to kill whales in commercial operations and trade their products with each other and with non-parties to CITES. Japan left the IWC in 2019 and continues to hunt in its own waters, and Norway and Iceland hunt under their respective objection and reservation to the moratorium. Furthermore, other jurisdictions, such as the Faroe Islands, continue to hunt small cetaceans as part of practices that are not regulated by the IWC.

The UK Trade and Agriculture Commission recommended in March 2021 that “the UK should draw on its strengths in animal welfare to show world leadership in embedding it into trade policy”.¹ The UK is a world leader in cetacean conservation and welfare, hosting the IWC secretariat and playing a central role in the IWC’s Scientific and Conservation Committees, as well as promoting cetacean conservation at CITES. It has also led the expansion of the IWC’s welfare agenda to keep pace with expanding scientific understanding of wild cetacean physiology, sentience and pain. In line with this tradition of global leadership for cetacean welfare and conservation, the UK should use trade policy to encourage nations that hunt cetaceans to end these practices.

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1116669/trade-and-agriculture-commission-final-report-march-2021.pdf



Ending these practices is essential to protect the welfare and conservation of cetaceans and preserve the important ecosystem services they provide. These include the cycling of nutrients through the ocean,² and carbon sequestration.³ Protecting cetaceans through trade policy could contribute towards the Paris Agreement goal of limiting average temperature increases to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework target to halt species extinction, protect genetic diversity, and manage human-wildlife conflicts.

Advancing cetacean conservation and welfare through trade policy

There are several avenues through which trade policy can be used to tackle the continued hunting and trade of cetaceans and advance cetacean welfare and conservation. First, considerations around cetacean welfare and conservation should be a part of all new trade treaties. The UK New Zealand Free Trade Agreement and the UK Australia Free Trade Agreement, contain explicit references to promoting “the long-term conservation of ... marine mammals”.^{4,5} However, existing agreements with Japan, and with Norway and Iceland, do not contain similar references. Furthermore, after Brexit the previous trading relationship the UK had with the Faroe Islands through the EU was effectively continued, without any provisions relating to marine mammal conservation and welfare. These agreements constitute opportunities missed to demonstrate the UK’s world-leading position on cetacean welfare and conservation and promote the protection of cetaceans. As recommended by the 2023 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee Report *Protecting Marine Mammals in the UK and Abroad*, any future trade agreements, or revisions of existing trade agreements, should include commitments to promoting cetacean welfare and conservation.⁶ This should form part of the UK Trade Strategy.

Where trade agreements are already in place and not being revised, the government should use the diplomatic leverage provided by trade agreements to call on nations that hunt and trade cetaceans to cease these activities. For example, the Faroe Islands exported goods and services worth £504 million to the UK in the four quarters to the end of Q2 2024, whereas the

² <https://wwfint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/naturestechnicians.pdf>

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0169534722002798>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/105767/1/uk-new-zealand-free-trade-agreement-chapter-22-environment.pdf

⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/104057/4/uk-australia-free-trade-agreement-fta-chapter-22-environment.pdf

⁶ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40588/documents/197985/default/>



UK only exported goods and services worth £19 million to the Faroe Islands.⁷ The leverage provided by this trade surplus should be used to raise the importance of cetacean welfare and conservation in diplomatic discussions with the Faroe Islands. Similarly, diplomatic discussions with other whaling nations with which the UK has trade agreements should include discussions of ceasing hunting and trade of cetaceans. This should form part of the UK Trade Strategy.

A strong example of the use of trade policy to enhance cetacean welfare and conservation is the US Marine Mammal Protection Act, which was recently amended such that nations exporting fish and fish products to the US are held to the same standards as US fishing operations with regards to marine mammal bycatch (the unintentional catching of marine mammals in commercial fishing operations). Nations exporting fish products to the US must have their regulatory programmes for marine mammal bycatch receive a Comparability Finding to show they are equally effective at preventing bycatch as US regulatory programmes.⁸ The UK Government should introduce similar policies as part of the UK Trade Strategy, requiring trade partners to mirror the UK's high standards in cetacean welfare and conservation.

Whale meat transiting through UK ports

A separate but related issue is the passage of whale meat through UK ports. Although it is illegal for whale meat to be sold in the UK, or for whale meat to be possessed or transported for the purpose of sale, ships carrying whale meat are docking at UK ports. The law on transit of whale meat through UK ports is currently unclear. Part of a UK Trade Strategy should be clarifying the law to prevent vessels carrying whale meat from using UK ports. Closing this loophole was also recommended by the 2023 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee Report *Protecting Marine Mammals in the UK and Abroad*.⁹ More information on how this could be affected can be found [here](#).

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 86 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals.

⁷ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/673e52c1b3f0df6d2ebaefb8/faroe-islands-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2024-11-22.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/foreign/marine-mammal-protection/international-marine-mammal-bycatch-criteria-us-imports>

⁹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40588/documents/197985/default/>



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The following organisations have inputted into this briefing and support the prioritisation of cetacean welfare and conservation in the UK Trade Strategy:

Seal Research Trust

Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA)

International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)

The Animal Welfare Institute

ORCA

Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC)