

An aerial photograph of a vast, snow-covered mountain range. The terrain is rugged, with numerous ridges and valleys covered in a thick layer of white snow. Some dark, rocky outcrops are visible through the snow. The image is framed by a large, semi-transparent circular overlay that serves as a background for the text.

# NORTHEAST ICELAND HOPE SPOT

OCEAN MISSIONS - MISSION BLUE





# WHY A HOPE SPOT?

The Northeast of Iceland is **no ordinary place.**

It involves **biologically critical areas** such as a sub-arctic deep-water bay, a fjord, and **several islands** surrounded by majestic **1,200 meter high mountain ranges** and **pristine marine environments.**

It is home to **diverse marine and bird life**, includes **cultural and historic sites**, working industrial harbors, and picturesque coastal communities. At **66 degrees north**, this area has traditionally marked the boundary waters for crossing into the **Arctic Circle** between the **North Atlantic Ocean and the Greenland Sea.**



## WHAT GOES BEYOND

Just beneath the surface, a vibrant world of **geothermal vents**, **upwelling currents**, **nutrient-rich waters** and **marine biodiversity** proliferate in a dynamic environment. From unique **hydrothermal vent** cluster formations found at **only 15 meters deep**, to **upwelling** points such as underwater hills and steep slopes, to powerful **glacier-fed rivers** converging on its shores, this region hosts **deep-water ecosystems** with complex bathymetry profiles ranging from 230 meters in the deepest points to shallow sandy and rocky shores where the **kelp forests** thrive. It provides habitats for **resident species** and **migratory pathways** for others.

In all, there are **twenty cetacean** species, **seven pinniped** species, nearly **forty nesting bird** species (of which sixteen are **seabirds**), a **hundred an twenty six fish** species, as well as at least **forty-seven species** of invertebrates.





# A PLACE FULL OF HOPE

This area serves as important **feeding and breeding grounds** to a myriad of fish, bird and marine mammal species.

**Seasonal upwelling** in this area provides **nutrient-rich waters** in the warmer months which attract numerous species of fish, including species of high commercial interest such as the **Atlantic cod** (*Gadus morhua*), **haddock** (*Melanogrammus aeglefinus*), **halibut** (*Hippoglossus hippoglossus*), **lumpfish** (*Cyclopterus lumpus*), and **capelin** (*Mallotus villosus*) as well as other smaller key species such as **Atlantic herring** (*Clupea harengus*) and **sand eels** (*Ammodytes tobianus*, *Ammodytes marinus* and *Hyperoplus lanceolatus*).

Additionally, **Atlantic salmon** (*Salmo salar*) spawning occurs in the adjacent Laxá River, as it has for centuries.



**Skjálfandi Bay** is considered one of the best places to **see whales in Europe** - Húsavík is, in fact, known as the **Whale Capital**.

Some whales are migratory and come here to feed such as the **minke whales** (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) and **humpback whales** (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). Other cetaceans are resident in Icelandic waters such as **white beaked dolphins** (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*) and the **harbour porpoises** (*Phocoena phocoena*). **Endangered species** such as the massive **blue whales** (*Balaenoptera musculus*), remarkable deep divers such as **Northern bottlenose whales** (*Hyperoodon ampullatus*), and **orcas** (*Orcinus orca*) and **pilot whales** (*Globicephala melas*) also common visitors of these waters.

# AND BURSTING WITH LIFE





A puffin is shown in flight, with its wings fully extended. The bird has a white head and neck, a large, dark, hooked beak, and a small red patch around its eye. Its body is dark, and its wings show a mix of dark and light feathers. The background is a dark, textured gradient, possibly representing a sky or a cave. The overall tone is dramatic and focused on the bird.

# THE PERFECT COMBINATION

At the same time, coastal habitats on **Lundey, Flatey, Grímsey, and Hrísey Islands**, as well as **Mánárey Islands** (Háey and Lágey), and cliffs along the mainland (Tjörnesláginn and Voladalstorfa) provide **shelter and food** sources for some of the **largest populations of sea birds in Europe**, including the endangered **Atlantic puffin** (*Fratercula arctica*) and **Arctic terns** (*Sterna paradisaea*).

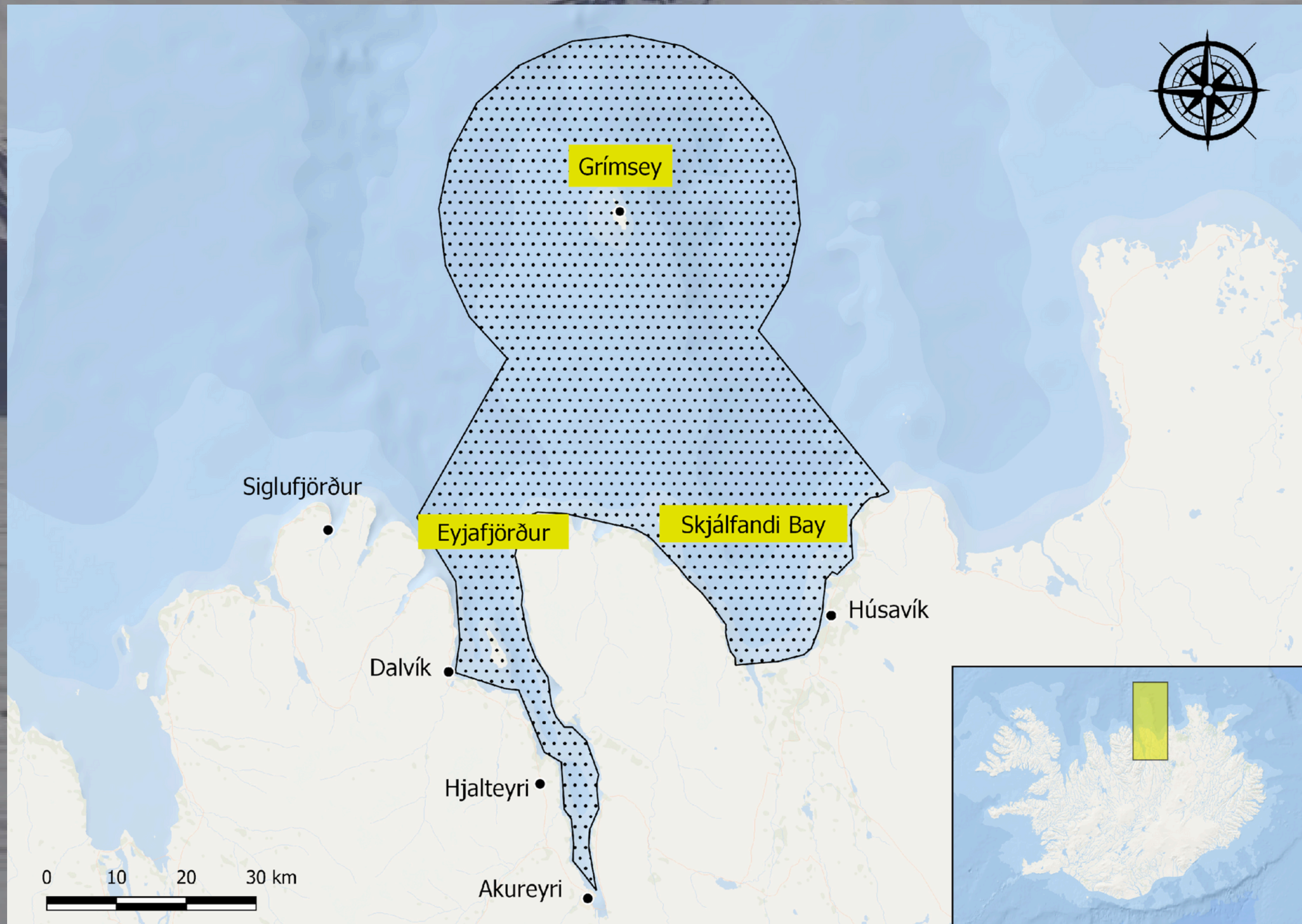
These places, exposed to the local currents and complex geography, also host **diverse sea-bottom life** (fish and invertebrates), which serves as **feeding grounds** for larger aquatic and coastal inhabitants.



# TO BECOME THE FIRST HOPE SPOT IN ICELAND











In addition to the area's **rich biodiversity and pristine conditions**, the adjacent coastal communities of **Húsavík and Akureyri** are known for **scientific research and a vibrant tourist economy**. Akureyri is **Iceland's second largest city** (pop. 20,000) and is home to the **Stefansson Arctic Institute** and the **University of Akureyri**. Húsavík (population 2,307) sees more than **300,000 visitors** each year, and is home to **three whale watching companies**, seeing more than **100,000 tourists** whale watching per year.

Húsavík and Skjálfandi Bay hold **cultural significance for the nation**, as these were the **first areas in Iceland** visited and permanently settled by **Swedish Viking Gardar Svavarsson** and his entourage in 870 AD. Traditionally, the region's coastal communities **depended on fishing**, but with the decline of the fishing industry in recent decades, these communities have transitioned to a **tourism-based economy**.



A whale breaching the ocean surface, creating a large splash. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains under a clear sky. The text 'A COMMUNITY OF HOPE' is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters.

# A COMMUNITY OF HOPE

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In **Húsavík**, the **Whale Museum**, **Academic Center**, **STEM Húsavík**, **The Northeast Iceland Nature Center**, the **University of Iceland Research Center** and **Ocean Missions** non-profit organization attract researchers and experts from **around the world** each year to the region. The organizations found in both Akureyri and Húsavík provide a **rich collaborative network** of organizations and institutions undertaking **scientific research, education, promotion of sustainable tourism** and expansion of **conservation efforts**. Many of these organizations are tied to larger **Arctic networks** (ARCNET, ARCPATH, Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network, JUSTNORTH), and the participation of individuals from these organizations in our efforts will form a strong foundation and platform, creating the **Hope Community**.



# GOALS OF THE CREATION OF THE HOPE SPOT:

- To identify critical threats to, and raise public awareness about, the value of the area and the need for conservation, protection, and management.
- To provide a sustained and effective spotlight on the region to highlight the need for community-based marine planning, conservation, and tourism management and lobby the government of Iceland to begin the process of designating the region a Marine Protected Area by 2025.
- Through community-based conservation planning and communications efforts, serve as a model for other coastal communities in Iceland and the Arctic.
- To bring together whale watching companies operating across the region to commit to an plan for a sustainable eco-tourism Code of Ethics already under development for implementation by December 2023, and in doing so, serve as a model for other communities.
- Form a Community of Practice with other Arctic and Sub-Arctic Hope Spots to share information and resources through regular meetings and conventions.

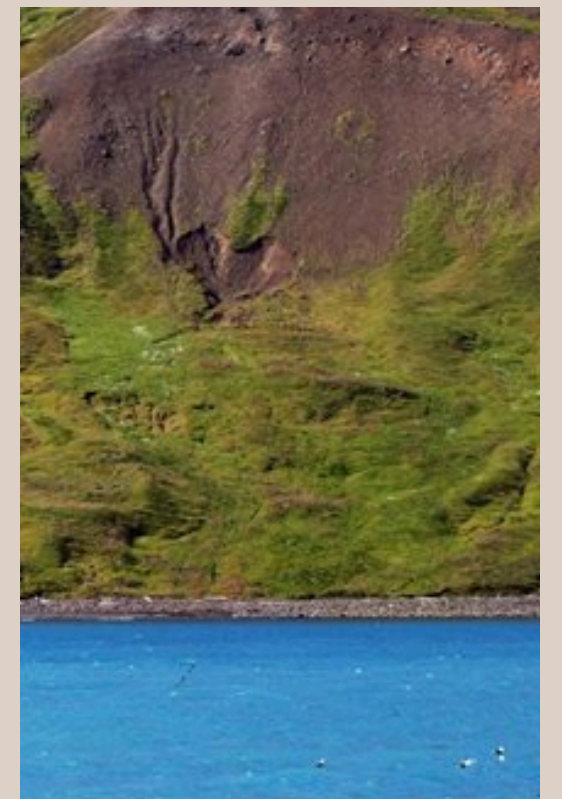
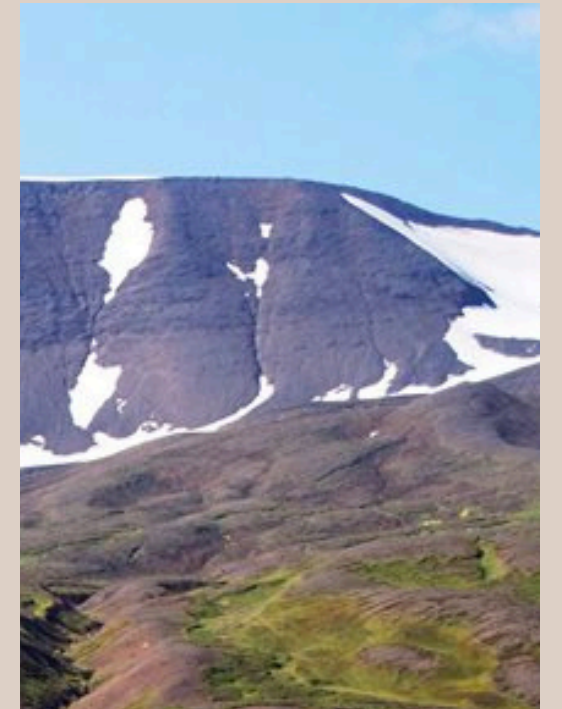
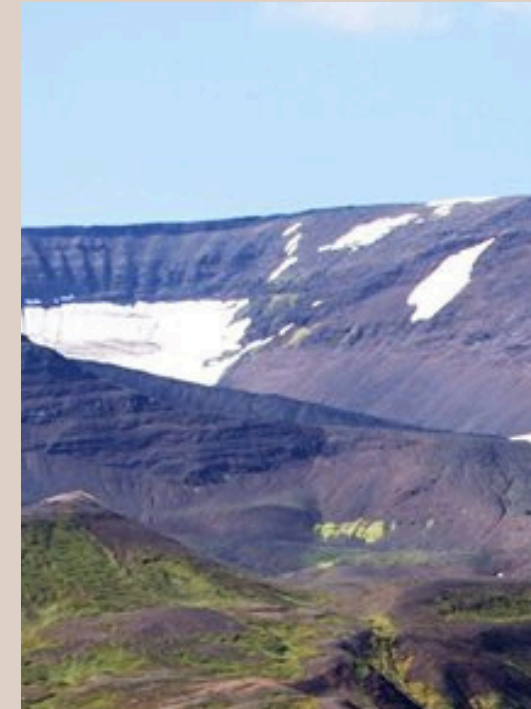




# GOVERNMENTAL INTEREST ON THE HOPE SPOT

Already in 2012, the local community stated their interest in nominating part of the Hope Spot (Skjálfandi Bay) as a marine protected area and it was recognized by international experts in marine planning. In 2020 The Icelandic National Planning Policy 2015–2026 set the first guiding principles that guide all planning decision-making in ocean and coastal areas. The principles are:

- That planning contributes to sustainable development.
- That organization is flexible and promotes resilience towards society and environmental changes.
- That planning contributes to people's quality of life.
- That organization supports the competitiveness of the country as a whole and individual parts of the country.





# HOW IT IS GOING?

The Northeast regional government municipality, Norðurþing, has proposed that the region be included in the **next round of marine and coastal planning**.

In December 2020, upon request from the local government, The Icelandic Planning Agency proposed to the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources to include Eyjafjörður and Skjálfandi Bay in this plan. However, due to a change in administration, **Eyjafjörður and Skjálfandi Bay were ultimately left out of the planning process** that began in 2022.

In October 2022, community leaders in Húsavík met again and proposed to the Ministry of Environment to reconsider the **proposal of creating an MPA in the region**, arguing that Iceland is far behind on the global goal to **protect 30% of oceans by 2030**.

The goal is to **limit the human activities in the area that threaten biodiversity and the welfare of the community**. To support this cause, key representatives of Húsavík community formed the group “Skjálfandi Planning and Protection Group” (SVIVS), which aims to represent the community on the decision-making for further development in the area and to provide knowledge in order to convert Skjálfandi Bay into a MPA.

in 2023, OM gathered 106 surveys from locals living in the Hope Spot area to assess the interest and the insights of the local community regarding the Hope Spot initiative and the future of these coastal spaces.

Currently the data is being analysed



# THE HOPE THAT THE HOPE SPOT PROVIDES

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**Rural communities in the Arctic** are often isolated, lack access to information and material resources, and are limited geographically by the environment itself and their population numbers. Constant pressures from economic development threaten these small communities, and both **large and small-scale utilization of natural resources requires significant organization and information**. By launching the first Icelandic Hope Spot in rural Northeast Iceland, we will take **a bold step to organize a collective effort in our community and shine a spotlight on the region and the collective work we are doing to sustainably manage and preserve our ocean and coastal resources**. In doing so, this will serve as a model for other Icelandic and coastal communities across the sub-Arctic to organize, connect and work together to protect what remains. This effort will bring hope to many sectors in concrete, tangible ways:




A large, multi-masted sailing ship with blue and white sails is on the water. The ship is seen from a side-on perspective, moving towards the right. The background is a sunset sky with orange and blue clouds. The water is dark and calm.

# FROM WHALING TO WHALE WATCHING

Despite the **moratorium by the International Whaling Commission in 1984** Iceland has been intermittently hunting minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) and fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*) for both local consumption (~20%) and exporting the meat, mainly to the Japanese market (~80%).

Hvalur ehf, **the last whaling company in Iceland** and one of the largest investors in the country, still holds on to acquire a licence a year to catch more **than a hundred fin whales per season** - against the overwhelming international pressure against this practice. We will use our Hope Spot to **highlight the increasing interest in eco-tourism and real conservation** over profit made by exploiting in unsustainable ways this majestic animals.



The background image shows a coastal town in Iceland. In the foreground, several fishing boats are docked in a harbor, their reflections visible in the calm water. The town's buildings, mostly white with dark roofs, are nestled along the waterfront. In the background, a large, rugged mountain with patches of snow rises against a cloudy sky. The overall scene is a typical Icelandic coastal landscape.

Despite the **immense value of the oceanic and coastal ecosystems here at the edge of the Arctic**, and the dependency of the Icelandic communities on healthy oceans, there is a scarcity of effort in regard to ocean education and conservation driven by a **lack of awareness about the critical value of ocean ecosystems.**

The introduction of the first Hope Spot in Iceland will certainly **attract the attention of the public and the government to address environmental issues** more deeply and spark action to expand conservation efforts in the coastal landscapes and implement MPAs with the support and the knowledge of the local stakeholders.

# A COASTAL COMMUNITY FOR OCEAN PROTECTION



A person is shown from the waist down, climbing a thick rope. They are barefoot and wearing a dark harness. The background is a soft-focus sunset or sunrise over water, with warm orange and yellow tones. The person's legs are spread wide as they ascend the rope.

# A ROADMAP TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Iceland has shifted from being a fishing nation to a country **where tourism is the main driver of the economy**. The country has incredible potential to become a **leader in eco-tourism and “slow travel”**. Tourists come to Iceland to experience nature, and has earned a reputation for being a safe and clean-energy-using country, due to **geothermal energy**.

Ocean-related activities such as **sailing or whale watching** activities are very important for the tourism sector in the Hope Spot. Scientists and local stakeholders agree that **limiting the number of whales watching boats, the number of boat operators, and boat traffic** (such as cargo ships and cruise ships) **is essential to maintaining a healthy interaction with nature**, preserving marine resources and maintaining the quality of nature tourism.



While whale watching has become one of the main tourist attractions in the proposed Hope Spot area, there **have been concerns about the possible negative effects that it can have on the animals and the ecosystem.** Too many boats can impair vital functions such as feeding, resting or communication. Loud engines close to bird colonies **may also disturb the nesting sites.**

The implementation of Hope Spot will serve to highlight the need to convert the current voluntary **Icelandic Whale Watching Code of Conduct into mandatory guidelines.**

Furthermore, this area deserves to have an official and operative Icelandic Whale Stranding Network (IWSN), as well as **stricter regulations on local hunting of vulnerable or endangered species such as the Atlantic puffins.** Putting a **sales ban on puffins** could also reduce the existing pressure on the threatened birds while still respecting the local, cultural hunting traditions.

# PROTECTION FOR CETACEAN AND SEA BIRD SPECIES







# NORTHEAST ICELAND HOPE SPOT

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