

# Blackfish Scandanavian Style [Pt 1.]

by RUSSELL FIELDING

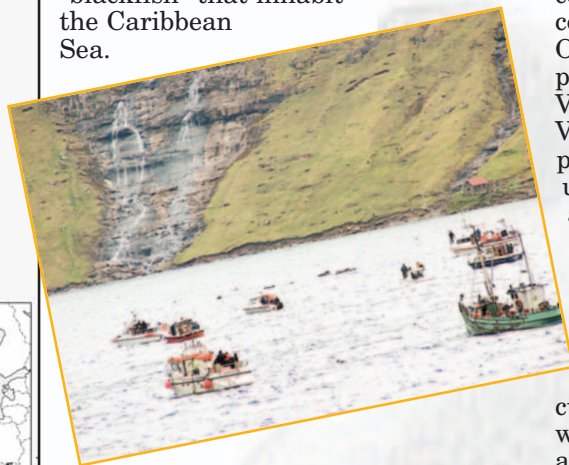


## Introduction

As I descend the steep green hill on the island of Suðuroy, following the sheep's path with grass growing knee high on either side, the village of Øravík comes into view. Ordinarily, small villages like this one in the Faroe Islands are quiet and calm places. Solidly built houses of stone and wood, painted in single primary colours or black, with grass growing on the roofs for insulation, cluster around a small harbour where a dozen or so fishing boats are tied at the quay. Here in the North Atlantic Ocean, the sea is central to life. Every Faroese village is built within sight of the sea except one, and it is on the shores of the islands' biggest lake.

But today, the village and the sea are anything but calm. Twenty-five boats are slowly but steadily moving toward the beach in a broad semi-circle. One boat, at the centre of the group, flies the white, blue, and red Faroese flag. Men and boys lean forward over the bows, slapping the hulls of the boats and shouting into the sea. Some of them throw stones into the water ahead of the boats. A line of perhaps fifty or sixty men stands along the beach; some are squeezing into wetsuits; others coil long thick ropes, each with a foot long hook attached to the end. Everyone present has a ten-inch knife in a wooden sheath tied around his waist. Between the men in the boats and the men on the shore is the object of both groups' attention: a school of long-

finned pilot whales—cousins to the short-finned pilot whales known as “blackfish” that inhabit the Caribbean Sea.



Driven forward by the flotilla of advancing boats, the whales swim in the only direction that is open to them: straight toward the men on the beach. The most palpable feeling in the air is one of tense impatience. Men on shore paw at the ground like racehorses behind their gates. Finally the whales advance to a depth where they begin to strand in the shallow water. The captain of the flag boat announces something in the Faroese language and the tension is broken. With shouts reminiscent of their Viking ancestors' battle cries, the men on shore leap into the water amid the thrashing and panicking whales. When a man with a hook reaches a whale that is stranded, he drives the bluntpipped instrument into the whale's blowhole and gives the signal to the men holding the rope to pull. Rope teams of ten or more men drag two? to three?tonne whales to the shoreline where other men use their knives to slice through thick skin, blubber, and muscle to expose and then break the whales' spinal cords. Amid all of this, the sea takes on the red colour of the whales' spilt blood. As the entire school is killed, whales are hauled completely ashore and placed in a line where they can be assessed and processed into food for the inhabitants of the nearby villages. The atmosphere is like a carnival. People are happily exhausted from their work, drinks are being passed around, and children are already imagining the taste of tonight's dinner: fresh pilot whale meat.



## Two Blackfish

The pilot whale is known by many names. People in the English-speaking Caribbean call it blackfish, a name also used along the New England coast. Fishermen from the east coast of Newfoundland, in Canada, call it pothead in reference to the shape of the whale's forehead. On the other side of the Atlantic, in Scotland's Shetland Islands, the common name is caa'ing whale, a reference in the local dialect to the ability of

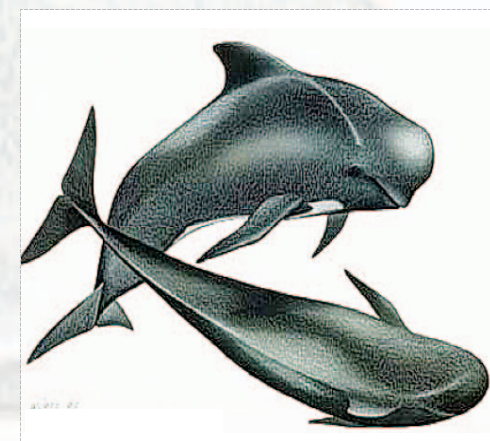
fishermen to drive entire schools ashore, as described above. In the Faroe Islands pilot whales are called grind (with a short i sound, like the English word grinned). Scientists call the whale by two names, *Globicephala melas* in the extreme north and south, and *Globicephala macrorhynchus* in temperate and tropical waters like the Caribbean. These two scientific names indicate two separate species—long-finned and short-finned pilot whales. The differences between the two species are minor, but it is important to know that both are whales—mammals—and not fish, despite the names given them by

Caribbean and New England fishermen.



Pilot whales travel in groups of a few dozen to several hundred individuals. For food, they chase schools of fish or squid, their main prey. Because of the whales' strong family bonds, they often stay together even when the group has become endangered. This is why one occasionally reads of mass 'strandings', events where a hundred or more whales beach themselves on a deserted coastline for no apparent reason. This is also the reason why Faroese whalers are able to drive hundreds of whales ashore, and Vincentian blackfish men can often harpoon several whales from a single group. When one whale is in trouble, the others stay right alongside it.

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# Blackfish Scandanavian Style [Pt 2.]

## Pilot Whaling – Faroese and Vincentian

IN ST. VINCENT, pilot whales are found offshore, often many miles from land. To hunt them, blackfishermen must go to where the whales are. Six days a week, men from Barrouallie set out in small, open boats early in the morning. Each boat is equipped with a modified shotgun that is mounted on the bow and built to fire harpoons. When a school of whales is sighted, the harpooner and the stern man align the gun, boat, and whale until a clear line of sight is possible. At the right moment, the harpooner squeezes the trigger, the shot rings out, the harpoon is sent flying, and, if his aim was true, the harpooner feels the line attached to the harpoon tighten, meaning that the harpoon has hit its mark and the whale is now fast on the end of the line.



The black fish meat is hung out to dry in Barrouallie.

shore, he alerts the authorities who quickly decide whether the whales will be pursued or not. If the ocean currents are agreeable, the whales seem like they can be driven, and there is a need in the local villages for meat and blubber, the authorities declare that a whale drive will be attempted. Word is quickly sent out and people stop

what they are doing and go quickly to the harbour.

Those who go in boats sail to the far side of the school of whales to keep them from swimming out to sea. The Faroe Islands—all eighteen of them—are tightly clustered with deep fjords (flooded valleys with a beach at one end and open sea at the other). If the boats can be positioned correctly, the whales will be hemmed in on three sides: two by the steep walls of the fjord and one by the boats themselves. This leaves only one direction to swim: toward the beach.

The men waiting on the beach have all left whatever work they were doing when the announcement was made.



Above: A man kills a pilot whale by severing its spinal cord with a knife.

Left: Men haul ashore a pilot whale that has been secured with a hook.

Photographs by Joen Remmer and Katja Dyhr Remmer.

Stories abound in the Faroe Islands of whaling announcements being made and churches being emptied mid-sermon; barbers and their customers aproned and the other half-shaven, from the shop to the shore; and surgeons leaving their patients on the operating table to join a whale drive. (A more extreme version of this last story has the patient rising from the

table, his belly still open, and running to join the doctor at the beach.) Whaling is a community event and it requires the help of everyone who is available. The more skilled hands present, the more likely a successful whale drive will be.

After the driving, the killing, and the dragging ashore of the whales, men appointed by the authorities measure each whale carefully and record its size on their list. There are often hundreds of whales, lying dead on the beach, all needing to be counted and measured by these men. Once all the whales have been accounted for, the district sheriff works out the calculations of how much meat and blubber will be given to each household in the local district. Whale meat and blubber are given for free in the Faroe Islands—it is illegal for whaling to become a commercial enterprise.

At the appointed time, a large crowd gathers to hear the sheriff's announcement regarding how much meat and blubber each family will receive. Representatives from each group of families collect tickets stating which whales they are to divide and proceed to the beach to collect their food. The person who first sighted the pod of whales is given a special reward: the largest whale of the school, in its entirety. Just as there are no professional whalers in the Faroe Islands, there are no professional processors either. It falls to each family to cut its own meat and blubber from the whales lying dead on the shore. Men, women, and children descend to the beach with knives and plastic buckets in hand. In the killing and in the processing, those who do not know what to do are expected to watch those who do know carefully so they can learn.



A crowd works to process meat and blubber from dolphins killed in the Faroe Islands.

After the meat and blubber has been cut, it must be processed. Some meat is eaten right away, cooked like beef or mutton. Most meat, however, is hung to dry inside specially built rooms that allow the cold, salty North Atlantic wind to blow through gaps in the walls. Without the benefit of the hot Caribbean sun, it can take weeks or even months for the whale meat to dry sufficiently. Blubber is usually dried in buckets of salt for several months before it is ready to eat. Dried whale meat and blubber, considered by many to be the Faroese national dish, is often eaten together with boiled potatoes and dried fish.

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The Black Fish is beached at Barrouallie bay for cut and drying.

After a successful day blackfishing, the boats return to Barrouallie where the day's catch is sold to onshore vendors who handle the cutting, processing, and sales of the products made from the whales: meat, crisps, and oil. Meat is hung to dry on racks built of wood and bamboo. It usually takes only a few days in the bright Caribbean sun for the meat to dry sufficiently. Crisps are made by frying cubes of the whale's skin and blubber in its own oil. The oil itself is produced by heating the blubber over fire.

In the Faroe Islands, there are no professional whalers, no full time processors, and no vendors. No one knows when whaling will take place, although it is much more common in the summertime than in the winter. Sometimes years go by without any whales at all; occasionally several schools have been caught within just a few days. Because of this unpredictability and the tremendous amount of food that comes from the killing of an entire school of whales at once, it is not surprising that the Faroese people consider the whales to be "a gift from God."

When someone sees a school of whales swimming near the islands, either from a fishing boat or from the



# Blackfish Scandinavian Style [Pt 3.]

## Histories, Cultures, and Science

**T**HE FAROESE have been driving pilot whales ashore for a long time. Catch records date back to the year 1587, but the activity is thought to be much older than that. Throughout this long history, the average number of whales taken per year is about 700. Catches increased during the recent decades. The average annual catch of pilot whales and a few other species of small whales and dolphins since 1960 is about 1300; however, some years, 2008 most recently, have seen no whales at all.

By comparison, Vincentian blackfishermen have taken, on average since the 1960s, just over 300 pilot whales and dolphins per year. The population of the Faroe Islands is much smaller than St. Vincent—just under 50,000 people—so that means a lot more whale meat and blubber is available per person in the Faroes than in St. Vincent. Because of this relatively abundant, yet unpredictable food supply, pilot whales have become an important element of Faroese culture. Songs and dances have been composed to celebrate the whale drive. Some houses and boats are decorated with images of pilot whales. In recent years, the pilot whale has been used as the logo of Faroese sports teams, businesses, and a jazz festival. Anti-whaling organizations have mobilised to put an end to Faroese whaling with protests, letter-writing campaigns, and threats of boycotts, but have not found much success.

meat and blubber, it can have harmful effects on their health. The whales then serve as indicators of the health of the ocean in general. The long history and scientifically informed management of Faroese whaling indicate that whaling itself is not the environmental issue that anti-whaling groups have claimed it to be. Rather, there is an actual environmental problem—the increasing pollution of the world's oceans—that poses the greatest threat to the continuation of this longstanding Faroese cultural tradition.

## Protecting the Ocean

It is important for all people—including Faroese, Vincentians, North Americans, and Europeans—to protect the ocean environment. Simple steps such as the appropriate disposal of household and industrial waste, good sanitation in towns and villages, and a reduction of the dependency on fossil fuels can help tremendously. For example, plastic bags thrown into the sea may seem to disappear into the vastness, but in reality they travel long distances, carried by ocean currents to faraway places where they endanger the lives of seabirds, turtles, fish, and whales that might consume them accidentally.

Fishing nations like the Faroe Islands and St. Vincent and the Grenadines have the most to lose if the marine environment continues to be degraded, and therefore a greater responsibility to lead other nations as examples of good environmental stewardship. Fishing and whaling must be managed well so they are conducted sustainably. The mesh of fishing nets must not be so small that juvenile fish are taken. Coral reefs must be



What an experience it would be for Faroese children (left) to meet their Barrouallie counterparts (right)!



## Faroe Islands and St. Vincent

Last year, I spent several months each in the Faroe Islands and St. Vincent. In the Faroe Islands, I spoke to a group of 300 post-secondary students. The topic of my presentation was the blackfishing industry of Barrouallie, St. Vincent. I showed photographs on a large screen, taken from aboard Samuel Hazelwood's boat as blackfish were caught, then from the shore as the whales were processed into food by the skilled vendors of Barrouallie. The Faroese students sat with rapt attention, many learning for the first time that they are not the only pilot whalers in the world. These students felt an instant brotherhood with the Vincentians. Many students told me that they would feel at home aboard a blackfish boat, and expressed their desire to visit St. Vincent one day. They asked intelligent questions about blackfishing and Vincentian culture in general. They were especially interested in the

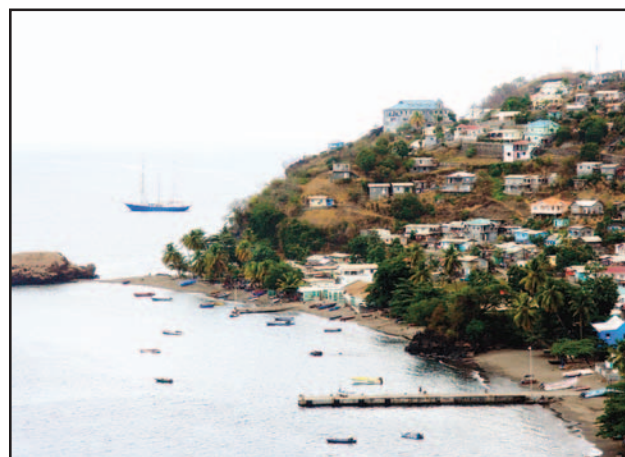
Vincentian recipes for cooking blackfish and preparing crisps. I left with the feeling that there must be some way to introduce young men and women from the Faroe Islands to their counterparts in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. I welcome ideas and suggestions from all of THE VINCENTIAN's readers.

Perhaps an exchange program of some sort could be arranged, funded jointly by Faroese and Vincentian institutions—both private and government. People of two nations with this much to teach and learn from one another should surely have the opportunity to meet.

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protected, not destroyed by dynamite, poison, pollution, boat anchors, or coral collectors. And toxic, polluting waste must never be dumped into the sea.

Since whaling is practised only by a few scattered nations, it may seem to many throughout the world that it is an unimportant issue, a relic of a past time. But this is not the case. When a large catch of blackfish is landed at Barrouallie, the happy atmosphere is the same as after a successful whale



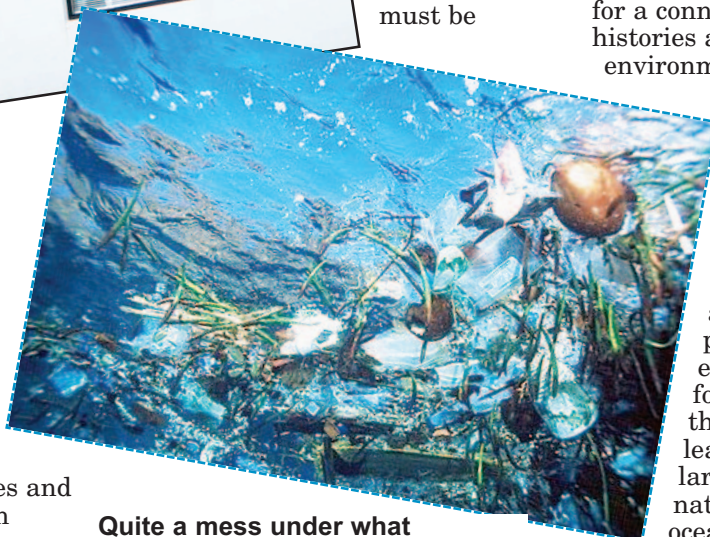
The town of Barrouallie, typically quiet for most of the day, takes on an air of heightened activity whenever blackfish is caught.

drive in the Faroe Islands. People rely on whaling not only for food but also for a connection to their cultural histories and their local natural environments. I hope that the readers of this article will take pride in Vincentian blackfishing and will be encouraged to learn more about whaling in other parts of the world, in the Faroe Islands and beyond. This cultural pride produces action—real steps toward protecting the world's marine environment. Now is the time for the small island nations of the world to stand up as leaders, to be examples to the large industrial continental nations in the protection of our oceans so that the sea, and those who rely upon it for food, can survive.



A Faroese house decorated with the image of a pilot whale.

Today, pilot whaling in the Faroe Islands is threatened only by the presence of pollution in the ocean. Toxins that are produced by heavy industry are found in the smallest marine creatures and work their way up the food chain until they are concentrated in the muscle tissues and blubber of the pilot whales. When people in the Faroe Islands consume large quantities of polluted whale



Quite a mess under what otherwise appears to be crystal waters of the ocean.



# Blackfish: Representing Vincy [Pt 1.]

**WHEN I AM in the Faroe Islands, I am often asked to talk about St. Vincent. To the Faroese people, the sunshine, the music, the food, the festivals, and the culture of the Caribbean seem exciting and exotic. The vast majority have never visited this part of the world. I have spent a lot of time in St. Vincent; I have been to the top of Soufrière and to the bottom of the Grenadines chain, but still, my home is the USA. I know that I can only describe the Vincy culture, cuisine, and landscape as a visitor. I have always felt welcome in St. Vincent and I have come away with many beautiful memories and lasting friendships.**

boats drawn up onto the black sand beach; galvanized aluminum roofs; trees bearing breadfruit, plum, and mango; and a few goats grazing on the football and cricket pitch. I turn left down a small lane between two houses and glimpse the sea. The insistent metallic beat of soca music blares from a stereo system that has been turned up beyond its threshold volume. It is before noon but already hot and broad-leaved almond trees cast shade for the dozen or so men sipping rum on benches or leaning against beached fishing boats. A few are cleaning fish, and one old man sits on the sand repairing a fishing net that he holds stretched on his lap with his toes. Women sit on overturned buckets feeding babies, and a few stand by bamboo racks, hanging thin sheets of dark red meat to dry in the sun.

is carried on a much different wind. This scent reminds me of what connects St. Vincent to the Faroe Islands, at least in my own memory — pilot whale meat.

Called blackfish in the Caribbean and grid og spik in the Faroe Islands, this unique cuisine is found in few other places around the world. My work, for the past five years, has been to understand how people of these two cultures acquire their pilot whale meat and what it means to them.

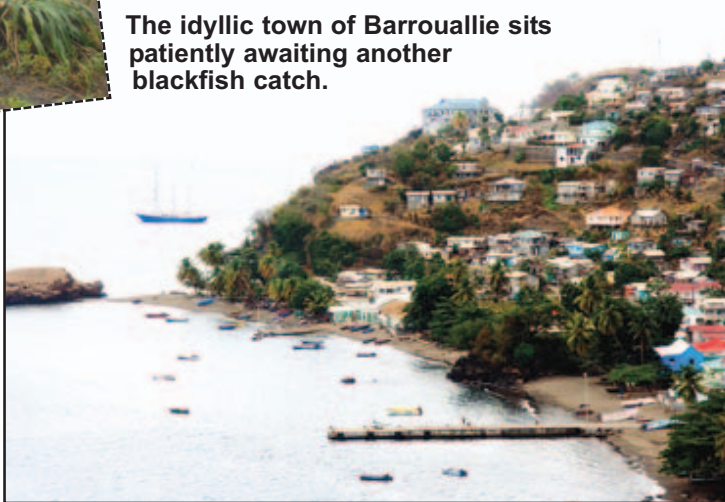


**Barrouallie fishermen are involved more regularly in seine fishing.**



**The author's brother hiking near the top of the volcano, La Soufriere.**

In the following paragraphs, I will give an example of how I describe St. Vincent and Caribbean blackfishing to my Faroese friends. As for the accuracy of my view, I'll let the readers of THE VINCENTIAN be the judge...



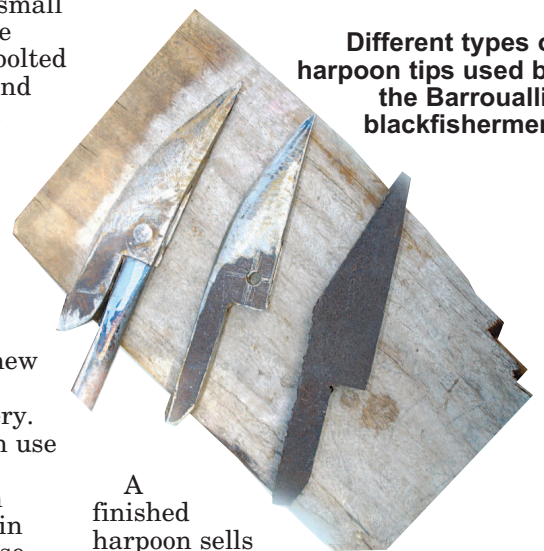
**The idyllic town of Barrouallie sits patiently awaiting another blackfish catch.**

## The Equipment

In an otherwise empty lot in the middle of Barrouallie, a square blue tarpaulin provides shelter for the blacksmith. A wood fire heats the steel so it can be worked on an anvil with a hammer. A small wooden table with a vice bolted to one end and tools strewn about is the only work

about one meter long and are fired from a modified 12-gauge shotgun mounted at the bow of the whaleboat.

The blacksmith cuts a rough wedge shape that will become the harpoon's head. The harpoon's foreshaft is built from scrap steel rods and the main shaft of the harpoon is made from heavy, hard wood. The blacksmith pounds the foreshaft onto the main shaft and attaches a length of nylon rope so the harpoon can be retrieved after a miss, or so that the whale can be tethered to the boat after a strike.



**Different types of harpoon tips used by the Barrouallie blackfishermen.**

A finished harpoon sells for EC\$200, so whalers can reduce their costs by learning to make their own harpoons rather than hiring the services of someone else. Diversity of skills is essential to the Caribbean blackfisherman.

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**Left: Blackfishman Samuel Hazelwood grinding the tip of a harpoon.**

Then my nose detects a familiar scent, carried by the sea breeze, one that stands out from the other Caribbean smells—charcoal fires, ripe fruit, the dust of volcanic soil, diesel smoke, and the sea. This new smell recalls a much different scene: the Faroe Islands, steep and green at the opposite end of the Gulf Stream from where I now stand. The same dark meat, but cut into strips the length and thickness of my arm, hangs to dry in the salty air. The same scent

surface. This humble lot is the center of tool manufacture for the Caribbean pilot whaling industry. Samuel Hazelwood — boat builder, whaler, and now Blacksmith — is at work.

Today's task is to build three new harpoons with scraps of steel salvaged from discarded machinery. There are two types of harpoon in use by the Caribbean pilot whaling industry: hand harpoons and gun harpoons. These differ primarily in length and method of use. Hand harpoons are about three meters in total length and are thrown by hand; gun harpoons are



**Strips of the dark meat of the pilot whale (blackfish) are hung out to dry in the salty air.**



**The author conducting interviews on the windward side of St. Vincent. (Photo by Ann Cryster)**

## Introduction

As I descend the hill into the village of Barrouallie, on the island of St. Vincent, the main island in the multi-island nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, there is nothing to distinguish this from any other small fishing community in the Caribbean.

From my vantage I can see colourful



# Blackfish: Representing Vincy [Pt 2.]

## The Crew and Their Duties

**A VINCENTIAN BLACKFISH** boat is typically 21 feet long, locally made by hand, and carries a crew of three: harpooner, sternman, and centerman. The harpooner's role is that of captain. He stands at the bow, watches for whales and dolphins, and directs the sternman where to steer. The harpooner calls for the centerman to pass harpoons to him, loads and fires the gun, and throws the hand harpoons. The sternman steers the boat according to the harpooner's directions. The centerman assists by passing gear between the sternman and harpooner, straightening bent harpoons, hauling whales and dolphins aboard, and cutting harpoons from their flesh.



Blackfisherman Samuel Hazelwood keeps a sharp eye out for any sign of a whale or dolphin.

When whales or dolphins are sighted, the harpooner directs the sternman to his preferred position for harpooning. Based upon the seas and the whales' or dolphins' behaviour, the harpooner decides whether to use the hand or gun harpoon. He readies the chosen

implement, waits until the target animal rises to breathe, and fires the harpoon.

If it is a miss, he quickly reels in the line and readies the harpoon for another try, keeping an eye on the target. If it is a hit, the crew pulls the animal in on the harpoon line and either hauls it aboard the boat if it is small enough, or ties it alongside. After a catch, the whalers continue hunting until either the boat is full, the whales or dolphins escape, or the sun sets.



The sight is made and the harpooner prepares to fire.

## After the Hunt

When the hunt is complete, the harpooner signals the sternman to return to port. The harpooner usually remains at his post, standing upright in the bow of the boat, a harpoon loaded in the gun, until the boat is very near the

dock. The purpose of this continued watch is to be ready if any whales or dolphins are sighted on the journey home. Finally, as the boat approaches the shore, the sternman cuts the engine, the harpooner unloads the gun, and the crowd gathered on the dock peers anxiously to see what was caught.



The harpooner takes aim and fires. Another catch is recorded.

The boat owner has usually made arrangements with one or more of Barrouallie's local vendors for the wholesale of the catch. Vendors are often already sharpening their knives on the dock's concrete



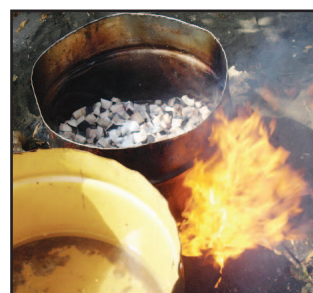
A Barouallie man chops the blubber into small cubes.

pillings as the sternman ties the boat. When the boat owner and vendor have agreed upon a wholesale price for the catch, the vendor pays in cash and assumes ownership. The vendor now owns one more whale or dolphin, a potential source of a large income. She (90% of the vendors are women) enlists the help of her family and friends to butcher the carcasses and prepare the meat.

Some is sold fresh but most is hung to dry on bamboo racks, built on the beach to absorb as much sunshine and sea breeze as possible. The meat is dry in two or three days depending on the weather, and ready to be bundled and sold. Blubber is chopped into small cubes and cooked in its own oil to make "crisps," a popular food for

which people line up on the beach in order to be given a share. The blubber that remains after this initial distribution will be packaged and sold in Kingstown or throughout the other villages.

## Conclusion



Cooking crisps from blackfish blubber.

On a successful whaling day, the meat, blubber, and excitement spread throughout the island. Crowds gather on the pier to watch the whalers unload their catch. Volunteers hurry to help the vendors process the meat and blubber. Villagers throughout the island get the opportunity to enjoy their favourite meal. In total, the St. Vincent whalers take just more than 300 pilot whales and dolphins of a variety of species each year. For a population of about 100,000 people on the island of St. Vincent, these few hundred whales and dolphins provide a special meal, a dish to be enjoyed when it is available,

and to some, a way of making a living from the sea. "Everything I own is from seawater," says Samuel, the harpooner.

In small island nations like St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the Faroe Islands, the sea can be the source of living for many people. There are many ways in which the Vincentians and Faroese are different. One place is warm, the other is cold; one is Caribbean, the other European. However the Vincentians and Faroese have more in common than may be obvious. Both are seafarers, both are whalers, and, perhaps above all, both are islanders. It has been my pleasure and my honor to work among the Vincentian and Faroese people. I hope for many more opportunities in both of these beautiful places.



Two future blackfishermen in Barrouallie (Photo by Andrew Fielding).

In St. Vincent, I am especially thankful for the help and friendship of Vincent Reid, Samuel Hazelwood, Darwin and Clare John, and Carlita Jones. Also the Peace Corps Volunteers stationed on St. Vincent—these generous, cheerful, and knowledgeable folks have helped me as they continue to help all of St. Vincent. They serve as an example of what true international goodwill is all about.

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A typical Barrouallie Blackfish boat, seen here off the coast of Barrouallie, is manned by a crew of three.

On the whaling voyages in which I participated, I was the centerman. All three men watch for pilot whales or dolphins breaking the surface to breathe, but it is usually the harpooner who sights them owing to his trained eye and elevated position on the raised deck. Vincentian blackfishermen need sunlight and a clear view to see the sprays from the pilot whales' blowholes and the dorsal fins breaking the surface of the water. Thus, the boat sets out between 7:00 and 8:00 in the morning, a full 1-2 hours past sunrise. Once underway, the harpooner signals the sternman regarding the direction the boat should initially take. All eyes on board begin scanning the surface of the sea for signs of whales or dolphins. Often the harpooner also watches for flocks of seabirds diving — an indicator of a school of fish, which in turn may indicate pilot whales or dolphins feeding on the fish.