

IN MEMORIAM: GÍSLI ARNÓR VÍKINGSSON — 1956 - 2022

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INTRODUCTION

On 18 July, the Scientific Committee and the whole community of the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO) unexpectedly and very sadly lost a valued long-term member, Gísli Arnór Víkingsson. Head of Cetacean Research at the Marine and Freshwater Research Institute of Iceland, Gísli was an outstanding and internationally esteemed whale expert, a dearly loved member of the Committee and the wider NAMMCO network, but above all a fantastic, funny, musical, supportive, kind, and gentle human being and friend, who is deeply missed. It has been a privilege for all of us to have known Gísli .

This volume 12 of NAMMCO Scientific Publications is dedicated to him, in acknowledgement of his contribution to the work of the Scientific Committee and in thanks for how much he gave, professionally but above all personally, to the NAMMCO

Community. The following contributions show us a few glimpses of Gísli's rich, varied, and intense personality.

LEADER OF GEESE, TRACKER OF WHALES

Mads Peter Heide-Jørgensen

I met Gísli when we studied biology at the University of Copenhagen in the early 1980's. Gísli was very interested in animal behaviour and took a course in that subject. The lecturer quickly recognised Gísli's rare combination of a strong interest in biology and great musicality, and since Gísli had learned about the stereotypic behaviour of tame geese, he was offered a job with Billedstofteatret, a Danish alternative theatre group that made non-verbal performances at specific places outside the traditional theatre stage. Gísli's role was to lead the 24 live but tame geese around a number of stuffed geese while playing his accordion. Playing children symbolized wild geese and rows

of young men symbolized tame geese, all the while whispering 'If you take this, I will take that'. The show was performed at the art school in Copenhagen, and it was filled with symbolism and ancient mythology. I believe Gísli liked the combination of symbolism, wild animals, and exposure of human idiosyncrasy. And I think he carried this dualism into his later engagement as a whale scientist dealing with the endless issues around whaling.



Gísli with the geese at Billedstofteatret performance at Charlottenborg in 1985 (© Kristine Theilgaard)

Later, back in Iceland, Gísli was one of the first North Atlantic whale scientists who realised the value and importance of satellite tracking of baleen whales. That led to more than two decades collaboration with many new achievements and interesting results.

A CAREER AT THE MARINE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Jóhann Sigurjónsson

In the winter of 1985, authorities in Iceland decided to initiate a large-scale scientific programme to investigate the whale stocks in Icelandic and adjacent waters, under the auspices of the Marine Research Institute (MRI) in Reykjavik. In order to implement the ambitious research plan, there was a strong need for competent scientists, and Gísli was among the first to join this programme. Gísli was a godsend for our team and his contribution was crucial. With his degree in Biology from the University of Iceland and a degree in Behavioural Ecology from Copenhagen University, Gísli gradually became one of the world's leading experts on large cetacean.

Gísli was one of my closest collaborators at the MRI for decades, both during the early days of our careers, but also after he became head of the Marine Mammal Unit at the Institute. His extensive knowledge in cetacean biology and great scientific skills were extremely valuable for the MRI and his colleagues at the institute. His responsible attitude in managing projects while not compromising scientific standards was an invaluable asset.

All of Gísli's friends and colleagues will remember his pleasant companionship, warmth, great sense of humour and musical skills, characteristics that made him everyone's favourite co-worker. He was also known for sharing his knowledge generously with his colleagues, particularly with the younger and less experienced ones. Apart from having Gísli as a solid

professional associate, I also had the privilege of enjoying his personal friendship. Among other things we shared was an 8m long motor vessel that we used for sailing and fishing for more than 15 years, to our great pleasure. He was the perfect companion in such activities and made us not only great co-workers but also very dear friends.

Gísli's untimely death leaves an empty space in Iceland where he had been in a leading role for more than two decades. His impressive scientific contribution will keep his name alive for years to come and will provide a strong basis for future cetacean research.



Gísli (right) with colleagues (Jóhann (left), Þorvaldur Gunnlaugson, Atli Konráðsson and Sverrir D. Halldórsson) at the MRI laboratory in 1986

COUNTING WHALES

Daniel Pike

I first met Gísli when I joined NAMMCO as Scientific Secretary in 1999. We worked together on the Scientific Committee, and he was always soft-spoken, kind, and constructive with his contributions. He was also friendly and patient with me, and we soon became good friends, sharing many dinners and drinks in the off-hours of NAMMCO and other meetings.

From 2000, Gísli led the organisation of the Icelandic component of the North Atlantic Sightings Surveys (NASS). He was himself cruise leader and observer in the long series of NASS ship-board surveys in 1987, 1989, 1995, 2001, 2007 and 2015, each one lasting a month or more. In 2001, he asked me to lead the large-scale aerial whale survey around Iceland. While I had some experience with aerial surveys, I had done nothing on this scale, and had actually never seen a minke whale, which was the main target of the survey! I accepted the challenge, but I will admit now that I was terrified as the survey time grew near. But Gísli had more confidence in me than I had in myself, and he provided all the help and guidance I needed to mount what became a very successful survey.

Over the ensuing years, I led several other aerial surveys in Iceland, and Gísli was always there to provide organisational and logistic support, and also to give encouragement when the weather turned sour for days at a time, as it so often does in Iceland.



Gísli 'tracking' during the 2007 T-NASS survey

Gísli also encouraged me to become more involved in the analysis of survey data from both aerial and ship surveys. Once again, he had more confidence in me than I had in myself. Along with other co-workers, we worked together to analyse and publish the results of the Icelandic and Faroese components of the NASS. We were a strong team, with 66 working papers, conference papers and primary publications on the NASS written together with other co-workers (e.g., Desportes, Guldborg Hansen and Pike, 2019; Lockyer and Pike, 2013). Gísli was an excellent writer, concise in his presentation, and able to summarize the essence of an idea clearly and simply. Our work in publishing the primary results from the NASS is now complete, something that we were very proud of (Desportes et al., 2019). Gísli played a huge role in making that happen.

Whenever I interacted with Gísli, whether personally or virtually, I always had the sense that I was his top priority. I think he was that way with everyone. Gísli's job kept him very busy, and he had a very active social life with his many friends and colleagues. Even so, he always made time for me, responding promptly to my often naive queries with respect and, often, gentle humour. I always felt better after being with Gísli.

I can honestly and sincerely say that Gísli changed my life, both professionally and personally. The opportunity to do interesting and difficult fieldwork and analyse strong and valuable datasets utterly changed my position at NAMMCO from one that was largely administrative to something much more interesting. Our

working relationship continued long after I left NAMMCO in 2007, with our last papers published in 2020. Through my work with him, I gained tremendous experience as a data analyst and writer, something that would not have happened without his help. I will be forever grateful to him for that.

But ours was so much more than a professional relationship. Gísli was a true friend, always going out of his way to host me

when I was in Iceland, and great company when we met at other places. I will truly miss him.

A DEAR MEMBER OF THE NAMMCO SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

Geneviève Desportes

Gísli, like me, joined the Scientific Committee of NAMMCO at its first meeting ever, in January 1993. Some of us knew him long before that through study, work at the whaling station in Iceland, sightings surveys, or other whale-related activities. After Jóhann Sigurjónsson, he became the head of the Icelandic Scientific Delegation to NAMMCO in 1999 and chaired the Scientific Committee from 2001–2003.

Gísli was an important contributor to the work of the Scientific Committee. He was also a kind of moderator, always gentle and polite, ever respectful and attentive to others' opinions. He brought to the Committee his early belief in the value and importance of satellite tracking in understanding baleen whale movements and ecology. He was very enthusiastic about the [MINTAG](#) project for the design of a smaller long-lived satellite tag for fast-swimming rorquals, such as fin, sei and minke whales, understanding the gaps in our knowledge of animal movements, stock mixing and population structure the project could address for these common but lesser-known species. He was looking forward to the exciting field work and analyses the project would entail.



Gísli and his wife Gunna in the hall of the Department of Marine Biology, UiT, after the defence in January 2016

Gísli also brought to the Committee his particular interest in the effects of climate and environmental changes on whale distribution and ecology. In January 2016, Gísli received a doctorate from the Department of Marine Biology at the University of Tromsø, Norway. The research presented in his thesis "Decadal changes in distribution, abundance and feeding ecology of baleen whales in Icelandic and adjacent waters. A consequence of climate change?" indeed closely examined how recent environmental changes have had an impact on baleen

whales. Gísli's research indicated that the effects of warming on cetacean distribution and abundance were already evident in Icelandic and adjacent waters. It stressed that continued monitoring of the distribution and abundance of cetaceans, as well as further studies into their feeding ecology, were essential for a better understanding of the recent and ongoing changes. Gísli's research and dedication to cetaceans will continue to inspire biologists to carry on his work in this field.

Gísli was an extraordinary well-liked member of the NAMMCO community, and indeed of the whole whale research community. He was an internationally respected whale expert. But, above all, Gísli was appreciated, I should say cherished, for the fantastic and beautiful soul he was, caring and supportive, inclusive, helpful, deeply generous and kind, rather quiet but still with a fantastic sense of humour and self-irony.

Gísli was one of the entertainers of the Scientific Committee, never hesitating to charm with a concert if by chance he encountered a piano after long meeting days, bringing fun and happiness with his beautiful and generous piano-playing and his humour. Gísli was a great fan of the Rolling Stones, a passion that he shared with some other members of the Scientific Committee.



Gísli and colleague&friend Tore Haug at a Rolling Stones' concert in California in May 2015

A calm and profound, funny, and artistic personality; a wide, warm, and beautiful smile. Gísli with his three types of nicotine, alone or together. Gísli with his wild, curly black hair and his beard not always shaven from the days before, giving him his typical "mad scientist" look. Gísli with his music and his passion for the Rolling Stones. Gísli and his love and admiration for his kids, grandkids and family. Gísli and his beloved Gunna and their warm hospitality and memorable dinners and parties when meetings were held in Iceland.

There are a few people in one's life that, although not necessarily being very close, represent a cornerstone. Gísli was one of them for many of us, certainly for me, someone you just don't forget and always meet with great pleasure. What a privilege to have walked along the path with Gísli. I can safely say that Gísli has left an indelible mark on NAMMCO and the cetacean science community. He is gone and we mourn him, but the surf of the waves will not erase the warm memories of all of us who knew and loved him. I



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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