THE ABUNDANCE OF BREIÐAFJÖRÐUR

INTRODUCTION

The islands of Breiðafjörður have often been referred to as the bread basket of Iceland due to the abundance of natural resources found in the region, and many of these resources are still utilised today. The wealth of foods and resources available made the area especially appealing to the many people who moved to Breiðafjörður during periods of hardship in Iceland, as such variety ensured survival.

FISHING

Breiðafjörður continues to be a rich fishing ground. The boats of Breiðafjörður were made in the so-called Breiðafjörður style, which suited both fishing and rowing between the islands. Fish was, along with other resources and traditional farming produce, among the variety of riches that island communities generated, and fish was abundant in the ocean. Lumpfish and halibut were caught in the shallows around the islands of Bjarneyjar, Oddbjarnarsker and Flatey. In later times, local fisheries moved their activities to areas on the Snæfellsnes peninsula and even to in the Westfjords. According to ancient opinion, important fishing grounds contributed to an island's value – half of the island Bjarneyjar's worth, for example, was to be found in its waters.

CONVENTIONAL FARMING

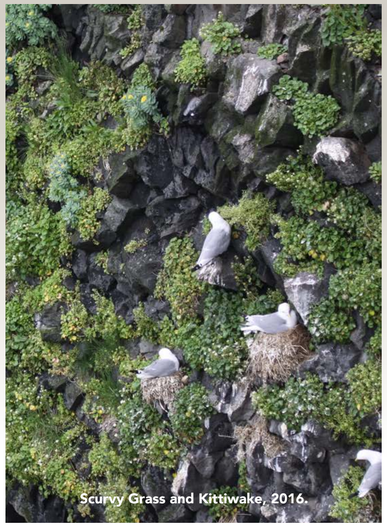
In addition to the utilization of natural resources and fishing, the islands were also used for traditional farming, following similar practices as in mainland agriculture. Sheep were kept on the islands and islets, and grazed on seaweed found on the beaches, in addition to grass on the islands. The sheep were often moved to the mainland during the summer. Cattle were kept on all inhabited islands, but horses were rare.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Natural resources on land and along the coast were gathered seasonally. Eggs were historically collected during spring, while the gathering of eiderdown began in June, practices that are still enjoyed today. In former times, harbour seal pups were hunted at the beginning of June and grey seal pups in the autumn. Chicks were collected in early August, and dulse was harvested both in spring and late summer.


Puffing hunting in Breiðafjörður Islands, 1974.


Sealskinning 1956 at Staðarfell farm.


Scurvy Grass and Kittiwake, 2016.

EGGS

Egg-collecting has long been common practice in Breiðafjörður, and the old tradition of searching for eggs in the springtime carries on today. Although eggs of the great black-backed gulls were traditionally most popular, eggs from cormorants, kittiwakes, eiders, arctic terns, ducks, black guillemots and glaucous gulls were also collected. The eggs of the great black-backed gull and the glaucous gull are the biggest and provided the most food, while the eggs of the arctic tern are the smallest. Today, the eggs of the great black-backed gull and the kittiwake are most popular, while eggs from the eider, lesser black-backed gull and the greylag goose are less sought after. Bear in mind that only landowners are permitted to collect eggs and egg-collecting from some species is completely banned. The collection of eggs was an important part of procuring food in Breiðafjörður, and eggs were called "vitamins of spring" as they were highly nutritious. Eggs were shadow-inspected upon collection or water-tested to discern whether or not they were fertilized – eggs were considered to be fertilized once the chick had started to form. In general, fertilized eggs were not taken for food, especially if they were from valuable eider ducks. According to the law, only landowners were permitted to collect eider eggs. Most eider farmers have now ceased to collect these eggs, considering it damaging to the colony.


Eggs from great black-backed gull, 2017.

SEALS

Seals comprised a large part of the material reserves on many farms in Breiðafjörður. Harbour seals and grey seals were the main species hunted, while occasionally harp seals were also pursued when large groups of them came into the fjords. Harbour seals and grey seals differ mainly in size. Grey seals are the bigger of the two, and are generally about 2.5 m long and over 300 kg, while harbour seals tend to be around 2 m and weigh about 100 kg. The males are known as bulls and are bigger than the females which are called cows, while their young are called pups. Seals often gather together in groups on reefs, with harbour seals calving in the spring, and grey seals in the autumn.

SEAL HUNTING

There was once a great deal of seal hunting in Breiðafjörður both in the spring and autumn, when only pups were taken. Most all farms hunted harbour seal pups to varying degrees, and the most intensive hunting occurred around Fellsströnd, Skarðsströnd, in Reykhólahreppur and in the western islands. Grey seal pup hunting took place mainly around the western islands. Nowadays, there is very little seal hunting in Breiðafjörður.

PROCESSING AND USE

When seal hunting was at its height, the entire seal would be processed, but in later times only the skin and meat were used. The meat of harbour seal pups and young harp seals was usually eaten fresh. Flippers and heads were singed, boiled and pickled, and most of the internal organs were also used. Before the availability of chemical preservatives, seal blood was sometimes used to protect the doors of turf houses against rot. Sealskins were the most valuable of all seal products – the skin of the spring pup was considered more beautiful than that of the autumn pup and was therefore more valuable. Sealskin was also used to make shoes and protective clothing. Apart from sealskin, the most sought-after product was seal blubber. Seal blubber was used in cooking, and as oil for lamps.

SEALSKIN

Methods for processing sealskin differed according to region. In Breiðafjörður, the skin was flayed neatly from the fat layer and left to soak in fresh or sea water for 24 hours. The residual fat was then scraped off of the skin, which was washed. After cleaning the skin, ash was rubbed into it to get rid of any excess traces of fat. Finally, the skin was panned and stretched over a structure or frame. When the stretching period was over, the well-processed sealskin was ready for sale.

BREIÐAFJARÐARNEFND

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EIDERDOWN COLLECTION

Eiderdown has always been an important source of income for the people of Breiðafjörður and continues as such today. Eiderdown is a luxury product used as filling for duvets and many other items. The amount of eiderdown collected differs from year to year, and the majority of it is exported. The eider duck was made a semi-protected species in 1786, and has been fully-protected since 1847. Eider conservation and the care with which eider farmers tend this species has been the main reason for the success of eider farming in Breiðafjörður and elsewhere in Iceland. Eiders allow the presence of humans, as this interaction ensures their protection and care. Eiders nest on most islands and islets in Breiðafjörður.

SEARCHING FOR EIDERDOWN

The search for eiderdown involves walking through the nesting area of the eider. Down is produced during the egg-laying period when the female eider sheds soft down into its full nest. In doing this, the duck creates a bare, swollen spot on its breast which maintains warmth for the eggs when the duck sits on them. The down which is shed is used by the duck to line its nest, and it is this down that farmers collect. Each nest contains between 14 to 16g of down. Once the down has been taken from the nest, it is customary to place hay over the eggs to protect them from other birds and to keep them warm until the duck returns. The eiderdown is then cleaned before it is sold.

The frequency of gathering eiderdown from a nesting area varies. In the middle of the 18th century, it was common for down to be gathered seven times, but nowadays, gathering takes place only once or twice during the season. Methods of collecting eiderdown have changed very little over the years, as friends and family continue to assist eider farmers by walking between nests to gather the down. Often, children are allowed to join in, to learn this ancient method. Eiderdown is one of the resources that is in as much demand today as in the past, when farming was still practiced on the islands

CLEANING EIDERDOWN

The cleaning and export of down did not begin in earnest until the 18th century and there has been considerable development in cleaning methods since then. Initially, down was sun-dried outdoors and hand-cleaned, which was very time consuming. Later, new methods were developed which made the cleaning process considerably more efficient. Historically, it was common for the down to be heated in a large pot in the barn. The hot down was then placed on a stringed frame and specialized tools used to crush the dirt out of the down. This debris then fell through the stringed frame while the clean down was left behind. Today, these cleaning processes are mainly mechanised. Ovens heat the down, machines remove any dirt or feathers, and then finally, the down is checked by hand. About 1 to 1.25 kg of clean down can be obtained from 5 kg of unworked down.

Eiderducks in a nest, 2011.

CHICK COLLECTION

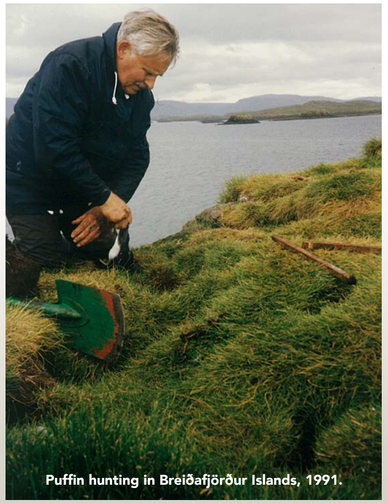
Collecting chicks was once very common in Breiðafjörður, but the practice has almost completely died out. By far the most sought-after chicks were puffin chicks, but black-backed gull and cormorant chicks were also somewhat hunted. Guillemot and kittiwake nests were rarely harvested.

PUFFIN HUNTING

The puffin is a common nesting bird native to Iceland. It nests on rocky cliffs or in burrows dug into the ground. Puffin colonies are widespread over Breiðafjörður, but there has been a marked decrease in their numbers since 1948, when the mink established itself in the fjords. For farmers in the area, the ability to access puffin colonies was considered a great advantage. The most widespread hunting of pufflings took place between 1880 – 1900 on the island of Flatey, when the annual catch was around 36,000 pufflings.
During the puffin season, pufflings were the main catch, but adult birds were also used if they could be caught. Hunting usually began in mid-August and lasted from morning to night, since the pufflings were in such abundance. Good puffin hunters were in great demand, and were sought after far and wide. These hunters would have been able to capture around 400 pufflings in one day, and there was often informal competition to see who could catch the most birds. Puffin hunters would dress in old, worn-out clothes and use flour or sugar sacks to protect their knees and elbows as they crawled along the grassy banks. This was dirty work, and in the rain, these men would be muddy up to their necks. As some burrows could be more than 3m deep, it wasn't always possible to reach the birds by hand. In those cases, tools were used to catch the pufflings, as the hunters did their best to gather as many pufflings as they could. In more difficult situations, the best hunter in the group would be called upon to capture the puffling.
Puffin hunting was eventually replaced by catching the puffins using a special net. With a long-handled net, it was possible to capture many puffins in a short span of time in favourable weather conditions, ideally in a light breeze. Today, net hunting is not common practice, and pufflings are no longer taken from their nests.

PRODUCTS AND USE OF PUFFLINGS

In former times, women and children saw to the plucking and carving of puffin chicks, and a good plucker was in just as much demand as a good puffin hunter. Before the puffling was carved, its throat would be tied off so that none of its vomit would soil its feathers. These feathers were used in duvets and pillows and were excellent as products for export. Immediately after being caught, some pufflings would be eaten fresh, but the majority would be salted in barrels and preserved for later consumption. Puffling soup was also common in Breiðafjörður.



Puffin hunting in Breiðafjörður Islands, 1991.

CORMORANT HUNTING

Two types of cormorants are common in Iceland, the greater cormorant and the European shag. The largest nesting areas for these two species are in the west of Iceland, where young chicks were exploited. It is imperative to process the meat of the chick as soon as possible, as the bird's fat can create starches within the meat.

OTHER HUNTED BIRDS

The chicks of great black-backed gulls were also collected for food, and although the meat was usually eaten fresh, it was also sometimes salted. Guillemot chicks were almost exclusively hunted in Breiðafjörður, though adult birds were never killed. Guillemot chicks were also typically prepared fresh and very rarely salted. Kittiwake chicks were hunted on those islands where nesting sites were accessible.

Seaweed in Breiðafjörður Islands, 2010.

OTHER PRODUCTS

SEAWEED

The shallows of Breiðafjörður are lined with thick seaweed, which was historically used as fertilizer, fuel for fire, as well as fodder for sheep. It is well known in Iceland that sheep have a preference for dulse, a red seaweed. Varieties of brown seaweed such as kelp and oarweed have begun to be harvested in recent years, and are processed for use in various industries.
Dulse is found in the mid-tide zone between sheltered and exposed shores. Dulse was used for human consumption and was often eaten as an accompaniment to fish. Access to fresh water was necessary when harvesting dulse, as the salt had to be rinsed off, and this rinsing resulted in an even sweeter flavour. At the peak of dulse harvesting, boats were piled with the seaweed, dragged to land, and then filled with water to rinse away the salt. Dulse harvesting in the area took place mainly on Saurbær beach, as rivers running to the sea washed the dulse at the ebbing of the tide. A lack of fresh water was the main reason that some island farms could not harvest dulse as food. Dulse is still harvested in Breiðafjörður today, but on a small scale.

SCURVY GRASS

Scurvy grass was another common plant in the islands and gathered by people in Breiðafjörður. It was especially abundant near puffin burrows. Scurvy grass is rich in vitamin C and was thought to ward off scurvy. The people of Breiðafjörður used the plant frequently in porridges and particularly in puffin soup.

FEATHER COLLECTING

Swans are known to flock together in certain areas of Breiðafjörður. As the swans moult in late summer, their flight feathers would be gathered then. In earlier times, collectors would walk along the beaches after the swans, gathering the feathers that had been left by the birds. These feathers were cleaned, dried, sorted and sold for use as quill pens. At Gilsfjarðarbrekka in Gilsfjörður, feathers were actively collected and it was said that farm's operations were largely funded by this practice.