

Progress or Mistake? The Introduction of Reindeer to Iceland

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Abstract: This article focuses on the ideas behind the introduction of reindeer to Iceland, how the Danish authorities played a role and the attitudes that prevailed among Icelanders towards this new species in Icelandic nature. The Danish authorities had reindeer exported from Finnmark in Norway to Iceland in the late eighteenth century. They adapted to the Icelandic environment and grew in numbers, except for the first imported little flock, which seems to have died out soon. The idea of bringing reindeer to Iceland came from a few Icelandic officials, who asked the Danish authorities for support. The reindeer kept themselves in the remote heaths and highlands in the districts where they roamed free from the beginning. Nevertheless, in harsh winters, they fled the highlands and came down to the lowlands to graze. This caused frustration among farmers, who complained to the authorities and demanded permission to hunt reindeer to defend their grazing land and obtain reindeer meat for their households.

Keywords: Reindeer; reindeer herding; reindeer husbandry; Iceland; Finnmark; Norway; Enlightenment; Sámi; moss; lichen.

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Introduction

This article aims to analyse the ideas behind reindeer exporting from Norway to Iceland in the 1700s and the general conclusion on the matter a few years later, around 1800. The focus will be on the following questions: Was there an agreement between the authorities and local people? Was the undertaking supported

after reindeer had arrived in Iceland? In hindsight, was the introduction of reindeer to Iceland considered progress for the society or a mistake?

These questions have hitherto not been the focal point in writings about reindeer in Iceland. The history of the introduction of reindeer in Iceland has not been among the topics of earlier eighteenth-century history research. Historians in Iceland have not paid any attention to this subject until the author of this article got the opportunity to do such research in 2015–2019 and publish the results in Icelandic in a peer-reviewed book.¹ This article is an addition to that study.

The Danish authorities had some semi-domestic² reindeer brought from Norway to Iceland between 1771 and 1787. The existence of the reindeer in Iceland is a part of a familiar story in Man's relation to Nature, i.e. Man controls and changes

¹ The first detailed secondary sources on reindeer history in Iceland were written and published around the middle of the twentieth century, including short narratives about the introduction of reindeer in Iceland, see Helgi Valtýsson, *Á hreindýraslóðum: Örafatöftrar Íslands* (Akureyri: Norðri, 1945); Ólafur Þorvaldsson, *Hreindýr á Íslandi 1771–1960* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1960). However, the complete history of reindeer in Iceland from the beginning until the recent years has not been a subject of academic history research until very recently, hitherto only available in Icelandic, see Unnur B. Karlsdóttir, *Örafahjörðin: Saga hreindýra á Íslandi* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2019). Some aspects of the reindeer import to Iceland are discussed in one English publication within the humanities, see Karen Oslund, 'Nature in League with Man: Conceptualising and Transforming the Natural World in Eighteenth-Century Scandinavia', *Environment and History*, 10:3 (2004), 305–25. [Crossref](#); also, there has been a lot of interest in reindeer in Iceland within the natural sciences, e.g. in biology research in the last few decades. Some of its results on the natural habitat of reindeer in Iceland and the animal's habits and numbers, diseases, dispersion and means of survival are available in English, see three works by Skarphéðinn G. Þórisson: 'Status of Rangifer in Iceland', in *Proceedings of the Second International Reindeer/Caribou Symposium, 17–21 September 1979, Røros, Norway*, ed. by Eigil Reimers, Eldar Gaare and Sven Skjenneneberg (Trondheim: Direktoratet for vilt og ferskvannsfisk, 1980), pp. 766–70; 'The History of Reindeer in Iceland and Reindeer Study 1979–1981', *Rangifer*, 4:2 (1984), 22–38. [Crossref](#); 'Population Dynamics and Demography of Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus* L.) on the East Iceland Highland Plateau 1940–2015: A Comparative Study of Two Herds' (master's thesis, The Agricultural University of Iceland, 2018). <http://hdl.handle.net/1946/30920>

² The terms *herding* and *husbandry* are used to describe and define the coexistence of humans and reindeer. Roughly speaking, the distinction is generally that herding refers to *semi-domesticated* daily caretaking of reindeer and moving along with the herd to its grasslands. It concerns the relationship between the herd and the herders, how they tend it, manage it, and use its produce. The herders move with their herd with the benefit and welfare of their animals in mind, as it goes hand in hand with their livelihood chances. The herd's prosperity and needs determine the herders' moves. They do not have a permanent residence but move according to the needs of the herd. *Husbandry* is a term used for the relationship between man and reindeer. The herd is a resource for its owner, as prey mainly, the animals roam free in their pastures and are seasonally hunted or gathered for slaughter and their products used. It is not a matter of following the herd to live by it on seasonal pastures, as in reindeer herding, see Bruce C. Forbes, 'The Challenges of Modernity for Reindeer Management in

the lives of animals and their habitats to serve his interests, whether it is a human life struggle or for other reasons. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, semi-domesticated reindeer were introduced in Alaska and South Georgia for reindeer herding, reindeer husbandry or as an animal of prey to hunt for food.³ However, the story that is the subject here happened over a century earlier, as the timeframe of this article is the eighteenth century.

This research builds on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are archival material from the late eighteenth century. The introduction of reindeer to Iceland is preserved in the National Archives of Iceland (Icelandic: Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands). These documents were created when Iceland was under Danish rule, and Icelanders received their higher education in Copenhagen. Some returned to Iceland for posts in the religious or secular sector, a few obtained positions in Denmark or Norway, at that time also under Danish rule.⁴ These are letters and reports sent between the officials in Iceland and the Danish authorities in Copenhagen and legal commands. Some of these documents were published in printed version in the nineteenth century.⁵

Could reindeer be the solution for Icelanders in times of difficulties?

Natural forces and their consequences hit people and livestock in Iceland hard in the eighteenth century, as the bishop Hannes Finnsson (1739–1796) describes in his late eighteenth-century essay about famine, hunger and epidemics in Iceland. He explains how the cold climate had repeatedly caused hardship, hunger and deaths of people and livestock, how eruptions poisoned grass and hay crops, add-

Northernmost Europe', in *Reindeer Management in Northernmost Europe*, ed. by Bruce C. Forbes and others, Ecological Studies, 184 (Heidelberg: Springer, 2006), pp. 14–21. [Crossref](#)

³ Several studies have dealt with the history of importation of semi-domestic reindeer from Norway and other reindeer herding areas in Eurasia, Alaska and other places in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, see e.g.: Bathseba Demuth, 'More Things on Heaven and Earth: Modernism and Reindeer in Chukotka and Alaska', *Northscapes: History, Technology, and the Making of Northern Environments*, ed. by Dolly Jørgensen and Sverker Sörlin (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), pp. 174–94; Darren Christie, 'Reindeer on South Georgia: Literature Review and Discussion of Management Options', <http://www.gov.gs/docsarchive/Environment/Invasive%20Species/South%20Georgia%20Reindeer%20Management.pdf> (accessed 16 June 2021).

⁴ On the political system and arrangements in the Nordic countries in the eighteenth century, see Harald Gustafsson, *Political Interaction in the Old Regime: Central Power and Local Society in the Eighteenth-Century Nordic States* (Lund: Lund University, 1994).

⁵ These printed publications are: *Lovsamling for Island*, ed. by Oddgeir Stephensen and Jón Sigurðsson, 21 vols. (Kjöbenhavn, 1853–89), III–VI (1854–56) and *Alþingisbækur Íslands*, 17 vols. (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1912–91), XVII: 1791–1800 (1991).

ing to the misery of humans and animals. In short, life in Iceland was a struggle for survival in a harsh environment in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean. There were frequent climate extremities; sea ice filled up fjords and bays well into spring and even into summers. Such cold and rainy summers slowed down the growth of grass and ruined hay crops, leaving the livestock – sheep, horses and cows – victims of starvation in winter.⁶

Icelandic officials started to advocate that such hardships called for new ideas and methods in the coexistence of Man and Nature in Iceland. It was evident that Icelandic farmers needed more variety in their farming to survive. They should have some animals that could survive extreme winter better than the sheep. As history had shown, the sheep starved in bad years, with devastating consequences for the rural household that depended on them. Therefore, Icelandic farmers needed an animal that could survive without shelter and hay. Thus, the focus turned towards reindeer. Could reindeer live in Iceland? The Icelandic lawyer Páll Vídalín (1667–1727) was the first to put this thought in print in 1699, after some very harsh and cold years in Iceland. He suggested the export of horses from Iceland to sell abroad and use the profit to buy and import reindeer to Iceland.⁷

This idea lived on, but the focus shifted. Icelandic officials no longer considered how Icelanders themselves could finance the transfer of reindeer to Iceland. Instead, they pleaded to the Danish authorities to permit and pay all the cost of the pioneering experiment.⁸

In a letter to the ‘Rentukammer’ (Danish: Det kongelige rentekammer) in Copenhagen in 1747, Hans Wium (1715–1788), a bailiff (Icelandic: *sýslumaður*, Danish: *sysselmand*) in east Iceland, humbly asked the Danish Crown to transport reindeer to Iceland. It would be an experiment to see if they could survive and thrive in his country. His message to the Danish authorities was that the reindeer had better natural properties than the sheep to endure the harsh climate from which Icelanders and their livestock repeatedly suffered. The reindeer could provide meat and hides in times of climate hardships when herds of sheep died of hunger.⁹

⁶ *Hannes Finnsson: Mannfækkun af hallærum*, ed. by Jón Eyþórsson and Jóhannes Nordal (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1970), pp. 68–72.

⁷ *Udtag af afgangne Lavmand Povel Vidalins Afhandling om Islands Ophkomst under Titel Deo, Regi, Patriæ* (Sorøe: Jonas Lindgren, 1768), pp. 141–42. Páll Vídalín wrote *Deo, Regi, Patriæ* in Latin in 1699 and Jón Eiríksson republished it in Danish with additions in 1768.

⁸ Jón Vídalín, ‘Bréf frá Jóni biskupi Vídalín’, *Andvari: Tímarit hins íslenska þjóðvinafélags*, 39:1 (1914), 68–77 (p. 75); Jón Oddsson Hjaltalín, ‘Lýsing Kjósarsýslu 1746: Gerð samkvæmt fyrirskipun jústitsráðs Lafrentz heitins amtmanns til mín, dags. 11. október 1743’, *Landnám Ingólfs: Safn til sögu þess*, 3 vols. (Reykjavík: Félagið Ingólfur, 1935–40), III, pp. 25–34 (p. 31).

⁹ *Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands* (ÞÍ). Rentukammer 1928 B01/11–20. Hans Wium, 7. ágúst 1747; See also Birgir Thorlacius, ‘Um íslensk hreindýr’, *Freyr*, 56:8–9 (1960), 117–34 (p. 117).

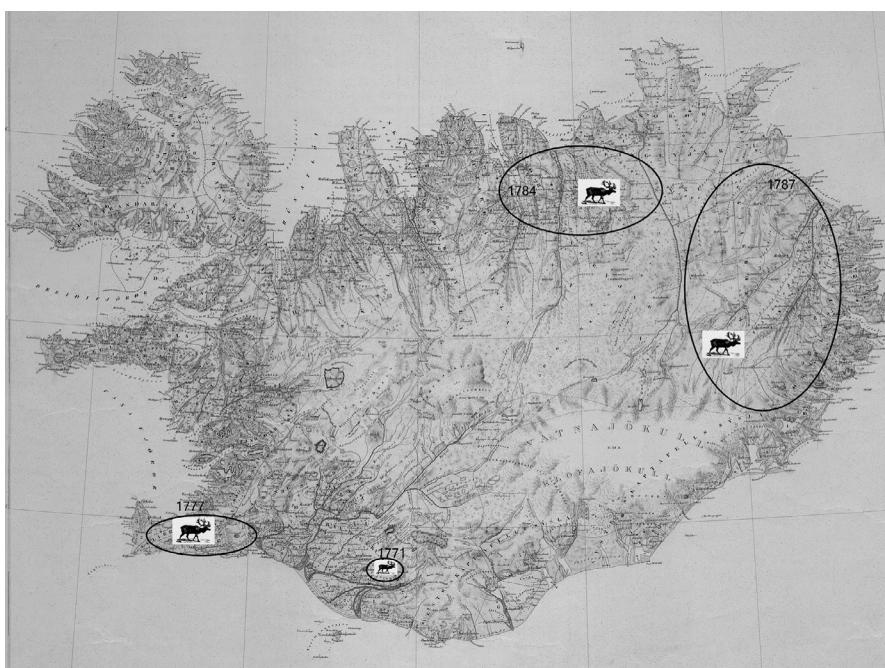


Fig. 1 Reindeer introduction to Iceland. Map of Iceland from the middle of the nineteenth century, with graphics added by the author showing the approximate habitats of imported reindeer from Norway as well as the year in which the animals were introduced. The exact dispersion of reindeer in Iceland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is unknown due to a lack of sources. Original map: 'Uppdráttir Íslands', by Björn Gunnlaugsson/Olaf Nikolas Olsen, Copenhagen 1849. Digitized by the National and University Library of Iceland. <https://landsbokasafn.is/>

Could the reindeer be a solution to Icelanders' struggle with their country's harsh environment? Some Icelandic and Danish officials believed that could be the case. The initiative to import reindeer to Iceland came from Icelandic officials, but the Danish authorities were willing to respond. The first step was a Royal Resolution (Icelandic: *Konungstilskipun*, Danish: *Kongelig Resolution*), published in 1751, announcing that the Danish king, Frederick V, permitted the export of six reindeer in Norway, four females and two males, to Iceland.¹⁰ Despite this royal permission, however, nothing happened because there was no realistic plan for how and where to get reindeer in Norway and transport them to Iceland.¹¹

¹⁰ *Lovsamling for Island*, III, p. 63.

¹¹ *BÍ*. Rentukammer 1928 B01/18–56. Lövenhielm, 22. mars 1751; See also Þorvaldsson, pp. 16–17.

Some years passed, but the interest in importing reindeer to Iceland persisted. The reason was rooted in the prevailing ideology of the period. The eighteenth century in Iceland, labelled by some twentieth-century scholars as ‘the Age of Decline and Rise’, was a period of catastrophes and hardship caused by the natural elements and educational and progressive ideas related to the Enlightenment. Icelandic and Danish followers of this ideology encouraged Icelanders to take up new methods to strengthen industries in Iceland by increasing the variety of natural resources and to experiment by importing foreign species of vegetation and animals and learning to benefit from them. The introduction of the potato was a success in this experimental chapter of Iceland’s history, to develop agriculture and add to people’s means of survival. Unfortunately, it was not all a success. An experiment with breeding sheep in Iceland had a terrible result. The import of English rams in the 1750s had catastrophic consequences because with them came the sheep scab (*Psoroptes ovis*), and this plague hit the Icelandic sheep stock very hard. It was a tough time for Icelandic farmers, who suffered a severe epidemic and a significant sheep loss.¹²

This catastrophe and other developments led to cooperation between Icelandic officials and the Danish authorities in Iceland and Denmark to improve Iceland’s socioeconomics. A step on that path was the so-called Land Commission (Icelandic: *Landsnefndin fyrri*; Danish: *første Landkommissionen*), appointed in 1770 by the Danish authorities. Its task was to examine the economics and industries in Iceland in 1770–1771.¹³

The Land Commission received only a few letters proposing reindeer import to Iceland as a gesture of improvement for farming in Iceland. The fact that so few argued for the importation of reindeer as a solution to be considered for animal husbandry shows that interest in the subject was not widespread in Iceland, and perhaps only a few were aware of the issue at all. One of those letters was from a Dane, Hans Weinwitz, an employee in a fishing enterprise in Iceland’s Westfjords. He wrote that he had lived in Finnmark in Norway and got to know reindeer husbandry there. His opinion was that reindeer, males and females, should be imported to Iceland because they could benefit Icelanders as a semi-domesticated animal, providing them with meat, skin and antlers and even carrying and pulling a sledge, as practised in Finnmark. He also suggested hiring a few Sámi reindeer

¹² Lýður Björnsson, ‘18. öldin’, in *Saga Íslands*, ed. by Sigurður Líndal, 11 vols. (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafélagið and Sögufélag, 1974–2016), VIII (2006), pp. 5–289; Árni Daníel Júlíusson and Jónas Jónsson, *Landbúnaðarsaga Íslands*, 4 vols. (Reykjavík: Skrudda, 2013), I: *Púsund ára bændasamfélag 800–1800*, pp. 219–99.

¹³ Jóhanna Þ. Guðmundsdóttir, ‘Landsnefndin fyrri og verkefni hennar’, in *Landsnefndin fyrri 1770–1771*, ed. by Hrefna Róbertsdóttir and Jóhanna Þ. Guðmundsdóttir, 6 vols. (Reykjavík: Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands, 2016–), I: *Bréf frá almenningi* (2016), pp. 77–95.

herders to take care of these animals and teach Icelanders reindeer herding and reindeer hunting. He was convinced that Iceland, because of its abundance of lichens, on which reindeer feed, would be a suitable environment for the reindeer. Additionally, Iceland has no carnivores like Norway, where wolves and bears cause a great deal of damage to reindeer herders; therefore, as a natural resource, the reindeer could be very useful in Iceland for both people and trade, he adds.¹⁴

Two letters to the Land Commission suggesting that reindeer could be beneficial for Icelanders came from Icelandic farmers. Cold seasons and the ‘sheep plague’, the death toll of the sheep stock, were stated as the reason for supporting the import of reindeer to Iceland.¹⁵ These letter writers did not elaborate on any practical matters concerning the incorporation of the reindeer in the Icelandic farming tradition. Still, the idea seems to have been that the reindeer could replace the sheep or be an addition to farmers’ livestock.

The Land Commission also received a letter from an Icelandic official in east Iceland, the bailiff Pétur Þorsteinsson. He proposed exporting a few reindeer pairs from Finnmark to two or three ports in Iceland and setting them free in nature. With luck, they would survive, thrive and multiply. Through time, the reindeer could help to improve Iceland’s human sustenance, he claimed.¹⁶ One may assume from his proposal that he predicted reindeer hunting would be one way to provide food for Icelanders.

More suggestions came about introducing reindeer in the east of Iceland. Bjarni Pálsson, the surgeon general in Iceland, wrote in his letter to the Land Commission that lichen, essential nutrition for the reindeer, did not grow on a large scale everywhere in Iceland, but plentiful in the east of Iceland. Therefore, if there is any place in Iceland suitable for reindeer, it is in Iceland’s east quarter, he stated.¹⁷

Icelanders had no experience of reindeer when some started to advocate for the import of reindeer from Norway. It is unclear how much they knew about reindeer in the eighteenth century, except that the Sámi kept reindeer herds. Icelanders who proposed the import of reindeer in Iceland, as a progressive step, emphasised the usefulness of the reindeer as an arctic animal, which could be semi-domesticated, but did not need any shelter or hay, as sheep did. The reindeer would provide meat, milk and hides, just as in the case of the Sámi in Norway.

¹⁴ ÞÍ. Rentukammer 1928 D3/5–17. Hans Weinwitz, 29. okt. 1770; see also *Landsnefndin fyrri*, III: *Bréf frá embættismönnum* (2018), pp. 605–6.

¹⁵ ÞÍ. Rentukammer 1928 D3/2–2. Bjarni Högnason, 3. des. 1770; see also *Landsnefndin fyrri*, I, p. 582.

¹⁶ ÞÍ. Rentukammer 1928 D3/4–27. Pétur Þorsteinsson, 28. júní 1771; See also *Landsnefndin fyrri*, III, pp. 497–98.

¹⁷ *Landsnefndin fyrri*, III, p. 691.

Thus, reindeer would benefit agriculture in Iceland, and therefore also the Icelandic nation. Sources also show that Icelandic officials who showed an interest in the matter presumed that reindeer could live in Iceland because of the island's location in the northern hemisphere. Thus, Iceland's environment must have similarities to Norway's environmental circumstances and other areas in the north where reindeer lived, they argued. Although reindeer live on various types of vegetation, there seems to have been a focus on lichen as a vital part of their diet in winter, thus helping them survive winters in a new environment. The Danish authorities played a crucial role in this story, as the historian Karen Oslund has also pointed out. They were willing to support the idea of introducing reindeer in Iceland. More so, they were ready to finance all its cost, i.e. to buy reindeer in Finnmark and arrange and cover the cost of their transport from Norway to Iceland with Danish ships. The Danish Chancellery (Icelandic: *Danska kanselfið*; Danish: *Det Danske Kancelli*) was at the forefront in that story, as it dealt with Icelandic matters. Oslund argues that the Danish administration was ready to act on the desire of a few Icelandic officials to introduce reindeer, inspired by progressive ideas circulating during this Age of Enlightenment. The officials in Iceland and Denmark supported proposals for improvements in Iceland's agriculture, not least because history had repeatedly shown that undeveloped farming had caused suffering and death among people and livestock.

Oslund also argues that the Danish Crown's permission and support for transporting reindeer to Iceland derived not least from the views on Nature, which started to grow in the wake of several expeditions to Iceland in the eighteenth century. The Danish Crown or scientific societies in Denmark funded most of them. The aim was to map both the geographical and the socioeconomic landscape in Iceland, i.e., to gather information on the environment, economy and society in this country. Although it was under Danish rule, there was still insufficient information on it available to its Danish rulers and Icelandic administrators as well. The result of the expeditions in Iceland was the conclusion that the natural conditions Iceland and the human relationship with it were in many ways parallel to the case in other Nordic countries. However, its utilisation was still in many ways more primitive in Iceland than in the Nordic countries. Hence, if built on science and technology, there should be an opportunity to enhance Iceland's industries and lifestyles, just as in the neighbouring countries. In this atmosphere, Icelandic and Danish officials concluded that reindeer could live in Iceland, as in Norway. Thus, the environment could be exploitable for Icelanders in a new way, with the reindeer as a new food source.¹⁸

¹⁸ Karen Oslund, 'Nature in League with Man', pp. 318–20.

The tragic fate of the first reindeer in Iceland: yet some survived

There is a printed description from 1780 of the first importation of reindeer to Iceland, written by an Icelander named Jón Eiríksson, an official in Copenhagen. The first reindeer to set foot on land in Iceland came in 1771 from the island of Sállan/Sørøya in Finnmark, the northernmost county in Norway, then a part of the Kingdom of Denmark. These reindeer were put ashore in the Westman Islands (Icelandic: Vestmannaeyjar), located a few kilometres from Iceland's south coast. Sources indicate that this transport initiative came from Lauritz Andreas Thodal (1718–1808), provincial governor in Iceland from 1770 to 1785 (Icelandic: *stiftamtmaður*, Danish: *stiftamtmand*). His goal was to introduce reindeer in Iceland, to turn its vast wilderness into use as grassland for reindeer herds and make a new branch of animal husbandry possible.¹⁹

This little herd consisted of fourteen animals. According to contemporary writings, they were suitably fed on the ship to Iceland and were well and healthy when put ashore in the Westman Islands. It is not clear why this location was chosen, but the idea was probably to use the ocean around the island as a natural fence for these few reindeer in the beginning. It would be easy to keep an eye on them. On the mainland, however, they could run away and disappear into the vast mountain areas. Perhaps it was also presumed that an island would suit these animals because they came from an island in Norway. However, it soon turned out that the Westman Island was not a suitable environment for reindeer. They did not thrive and started dying, one by one. It was clear that this little herd would not survive if kept on the island. Something had to be done and soon. Therefore, a messenger was sent to the mainland with six or seven of the reindeer still alive. His task was to take the animals to the provincial governor Thodal in Bessastaðir, close to Reykjavík, and ask him what to do with them. It turned out that the poor reindeer were by then so weak that he could not take them any further than to a farm close to the shore. He left these reindeer in the farmer's care and travelled on to Bessastaðir to meet Thodal. The farmer, of course, did not know how to handle reindeer. He was more concerned about protecting his meadow than attending to the weak reindeer. He kept them in a small enclosure or tied in a line, not long enough for them to feed correctly, helpless and miserable as they already were. One reindeer died in his custody, and soon another. The messenger came back with an order from the provincial governor that these reindeer were to be set free in a mountain area where they could find the proper nutrition. They were brought to the Fljóts- hlíð district, a rural area at the foot of a highland zone. The reindeer were set free

¹⁹ Jón Eiríksson, 'Forberedelse', in *Oeconomisk Reise igiennem de nordvestlige, nordlige, og nordstlige Kanter af Island*, 2 vols. (Kjöbenhavn: Gyldendal, 1780), I, i–ccxx (p. xciv).

there, except one reindeer cow which was too weak. She survived at a farm in the care of people the following winter. She was fed on milk, hay and lichen, and gave birth to a calf the following spring. The few reindeer left in the Westman Island all died in a short time, through sickness or accidents.

Thus, less than five of the fourteen first reindeer in Iceland survived, i.e., those brought to the Fljótshlíð district. The following story was that a few reindeer roamed there freely in the mountains for some time, and some calves were born. ‘These reindeer are not so wild yet that it should be possible to tame²⁰ them, but no one is taking care of them now’, wrote Sigurður Sigurðsson, the secretary of the regiment. He had taken the sick reindeer cow into care at his farm. So, he knew the story of the first reindeer in Iceland from personal experience. He added that the prospects for this small herd were not at all promising because it consisted of too many males, if not exclusively males, except perhaps for one animal, the youngest, whose gender was yet unknown.

The bailiff Magnús Ketilsson (1732–1803) published Sigurðsson’s account in 1775 in the journal *Islandske Maanedes Tidender*. As an enthusiast of the Enlightenment’s progressive messages, Magnús added a comment on this story, where he appraised the importation of reindeer from Norway to Iceland. He claimed that he was convinced that it would lead to considerable advancement when the reindeer would increase in number and disperse around Iceland. His appraisal was not least directed to Thodal, the provincial governor in Iceland, who had the initiative to import the first reindeer that ever set foot in Iceland. Magnús concluded with the hope that others would follow in the footsteps of Thodal.²¹

²⁰ Using the Icelandic term *wild* in this context, Sigurðsson refers to the fact that these reindeer existed without being a farmer’s property according to traditional animal husbandry. Using the Icelandic verb *temja* (tame) about these reindeer, it is unclear whether he is suggesting taming or semi-domestication. He probably did not distinguish between these two due to the understandable lack of reindeer management knowledge in Iceland. The usage of the term *tame* for a reindeer refers to the Sámi tradition of reindeer management. Among reindeer herders, tame/tamed reindeer are seen as reindeer trained to pull a sledge and carry packs or otherwise tolerate being handled by humans. All the other reindeer, according to Sámi tradition, are *semi-domesticated*. Thus, there is distinctive terminology about the difference between tame/taming and semi-domesticated/semi-domestication. The third term to describe reindeer according to the Sámi tradition is *wild* (Icelandic: *villt*; Norwegian: *vill*), a term used for the wild stock of reindeer in Norway, see e.g. Mikkel Nils Sara, ‘Siida and Traditional Sámi Reindeer Herding Knowledge’, *Northern Review*, 30 (2009), pp. 153–178 (pp. 160–61). On wild and semi-domestic reindeer see also Eigil Reimers, Dires Tsegaye, Jonathan E. Colman and Sindre Eftestøl, ‘Activity patterns in reindeer with domestic vs. wild ancestry’, *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 150 (2014), pp. 74–84. [Crossref](#)

²¹ Magnús Ketilsson, ‘Hvor læt er det ikke for en Mand som tænker fornuftig og vil vel ...’, *Islandske Maanedes Tidender*, 2:1 (1775), 54–59.

The Swedish naturalist and later archbishop of Uppsala Uno von Troil (1746–1803), who travelled with Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820) in Iceland in 1772, wrote a short comment about the reindeer in Fljótshlíð. They thrive well, he says, and have had offspring. Yet, it is not clear if Troil actually saw these reindeer or is citing second-hand information.²²

Another contemporary source mentioning these reindeer is a report to the Customs Chamber (Danish: Tollkammer) in 1777, stating that there were six reindeer at that time in Fljótshlíð, four males and two females.²³

It soon turned out that the survival of these few first reindeer in Iceland raised enough optimism in Iceland to bring more reindeer to Iceland.

*Introducing reindeer to the southwest of Iceland:
optimistic hopes about their chances to survive*

The Danish authorities were ready, as they had been around two decades earlier, to help Icelanders procure some more reindeer. They arranged for a small herd of reindeer to be exported from Finnmark to Iceland. This was a response to optimistic requests from the provincial governor Thodal and the bailiff in the county of Rangárvallasýsla in south Iceland, Þorsteinn Magnússon (1714–1785). They wanted more reindeer brought to Iceland, as the first few reindeer in Fljótshlíð were still surviving, and some calves had been born. In spring 1777, the second flock of reindeer was set ashore in Hafnarfjörður, in the southwest of Iceland. Thirty reindeer were put on a ship in Finnmark, but only twenty-three survived the journey. The explanation was that they were in poor condition when put on board because of a hard winter and cold spring in Finnmark.

Þorkell Ejdstedt (1740–1796), deputy governor in Finnmark, took care of all arrangements in Finnmark. Þorkell was Icelandic and served within the Danish governance system of that time. P.C.H. Buch (1723–1784), a Danish merchant living in Finnmark, gave these reindeer to the Danish king Christian VII as a present. The animals came from his herd that he kept on the island of Sállan/Sørøya. Additionally, Buch paid all the costs of the transport of the reindeer to the ship. This little herd of reindeer was set ashore and free close by Hafnarfjörður in southwest Iceland, apparently without anyone taking them into any care or captiv-

²² Uno von Troil, *Bref rörande en resa til Island 1772* (Uppsala: Magnus Swederhus, 1777), p. 113; Astrid Ogilvie, 'Local Knowledge and Traveller's Tales: A Selection of Climatic Observations in Iceland', in *Iceland – Modern Processes and Past Environments*, ed. by C. Caseldine, A. Russell, J. Hardardóttir and O. Knudsen, *Developments in Quaternary Science*, 5 (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005), pp. 257–88 (p. 278).

²³ *Lovsamling for Island*, IV, p. 378.

ity. They ran free to the closest mountainous area of the Reykjanes peninsula.²⁴ According to Icelandic eighteenth-century Annals, these reindeer were brought to Iceland on a Danish fishing ship.²⁵ It most likely belonged to the second Royal Trading Company (Icelandic: *Konungsverslunin síðari*; Danish: *den Kongelige Handel*, 1774–1787) fishing in Icelandic fishing waters in 1776. The town of Hafnarfjörður was the centre of this Danish fishing and trading industry.²⁶ The reindeer imported to Iceland in spring 1777 had belonged to reindeer husbandry in Finnmark, i.e. they came from a semi-domesticated herd, all with an earmark to manifest their ownership. The females, the cows, were more used to humans than the males because they were kept in the care of herders and milked during the summer and early autumn. The males, the bulls, were wilder, having roamed free, as part of the herd which served their owners as a hunting prey.²⁷

In the 1770s and 1780s, Icelanders were optimistic about the success of introducing reindeer in Iceland. Skúli Magnússon (1711–1794) says in his essay written in 1782–1785 that hopes were high that reindeer could live and breed in Iceland, as they had been imported to Iceland twice, in 1771 and 1777, and had since then lived in the heaths and mountains in the south and southwest. The number of reindeer in the southwest had grown more than in the south, he adds. He did not write further about the subject. However, he concluded that no more explanations about reindeer were necessary at that point, or not until more evidence was established about whether they would thrive in Iceland. There were nevertheless high hopes about that, he stated.²⁸

Reindeer to the northeast: a gift to the Danish king

Jón Eiríksson, an Icelandic official at the Exchequer in Copenhagen, wrote in 1780 that there was no doubt that the type of lichen that reindeer feed on grows in most heaths and mountainous areas. One could only wish that soon some reindeer were imported in the east and northeast of Iceland, he said. He added that there was a good chance that a herd of reindeer in this part of Iceland would disperse more quickly in Iceland than from any other part of the country, along the vast highland wilderness, stretching from there to all the different districts of Iceland.²⁹

²⁴ *Lovsamling for Island*, IV, pp. 378–79; Eiríksson, xciv–xcv.

²⁵ *Annálar 1400–1800*, 8 vols. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1922–2002), IV, p. 559 and V, pp. 243, 246.

²⁶ Björnsson, p. 193.

²⁷ Ólafur J. Hjort, 'Um hreindýr', *Rit þess íslenska lærdómslistafélags*, 8 (1787), 77–104 (p. 78).

²⁸ Skúli Magnússon, 'Lýsing Gullbringu- og Kjósarsýslu: Verðlaunaritgerð eftir Skúla Magnússon landfógeta', in *Landnám Ingólfs*, I, pp. 1–197 (p. 45).

²⁹ Eiríksson, p. xciv.

A few years later, reindeer were exported from Finnmark to the northeast and east parts of Iceland. In a Royal Resolution, dated 23 April 1781, permission was given to import more reindeer from Norway to Iceland as few of the first reindeer in Iceland had survived after all. All costs were to be paid by the Danish Crown. The reindeer would be put ashore in the northern districts of Iceland. The Rentukammer would take care of the matter.³⁰

In 1784, 35 reindeer were shipped from Kautokeino in Finnmark, Norway. These animals were set ashore in North Iceland, on the east side of the fjord Eyjafjörður. As time passed, they grew in number and roamed free in the northeast district (today the county of Þingeyjarsýslur).³¹ The reindeer put ashore in Eyjafjörður in 1784 were a gift to the Danish king from a man of Icelandic origin, Ólafur J. Hjort (1740–1789), then serving as a priest in Finnmark. These reindeer came from his herd, but he ran reindeer husbandry in Þorsanger and Kautokeino. The Danish Crown rewarded him with a gold medal for his generous gift, as it was phrased.³² One eighteenth-century source indicates that the Danish government intended that these reindeer would benefit reindeer husbandry, but not until later. The ‘Djáknaannáll’ annals record that the reindeer were all set free in Eyjafjörður to grow in numbers for three years, but then they were to be semi-domesticated.³³ If so, presumably, the idea was to catch animals alive from this herd for reindeer husbandry, yet it is hard to know for sure.

There is no indication or evidence of any experiments to keep and nurture reindeer, apart from a sentence in a diary written in the 1790s. Sveinn Pálsson (1762–1840), a doctor and a natural scientist, wrote in his diary in September 1794 about a young reindeer cow living on a farm in the valley of Fnjóskadalur in northeast Iceland. Pálsson was then travelling through this area. He wrote that the farmer on a remote farm in the valley had caught this reindeer two years previously. It had come close to the farm, hungry and miserable in the harsh winter weather. For a long time, it refused to eat hay, but finally it gave in. Gradually it became so used to people that not only did it live free on the farm but went with the people to church. There it lay tranquil in the churchyard during the mass. It avoided the other animals on the farm except for the horses. It was especially

³⁰ *Lovsamling for Island*, IV, pp. 589.

³¹ Skarphéðinn G. Þórisson, ‘Hreindýr: Saga þeirra og nýting til 1954’, *Múlaþing*, 27 (2000), 41–53 (pp. 43–44).

³² *ÞÍ*. Rentukammer 1928 B11/2–16. A Royal command to honour Olavius J. Hiort for his gift to the Danish king, 26. júlí 1786; See also Helgi Valtýsson, 114–15; About Ólafur J. Hjort, see e.g. Kolbeinn Þorleifsson, ‘Íslenski trúboðinn Ólafur Hjörtur og kvikmyndin Lajla’, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* 18 June 1972, pp. 12–13, 16, and *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* 25 June 1972, pp. 3, 13.

³³ *Annálar 1400–1800*, VI, p. 267.

overbearing towards the goats, jumped around them and kicked them over with its front foot. The young reindeer kept itself in the company of the horses in the summer. Then it was set free with the horses up to the heaths for the summer. The farmer hoped that it would find a reindeer bull and return with a calf. The people on the farm are impatiently awaiting the result, wrote Sveinn Pálsson.³⁴ However, there is no follow-up to this story. We do not know whether this young reindeer cow returned to the farm with a calf or stayed with its kin, the free-roaming reindeer herd.

Instructions on reindeer for Icelanders

The introduction to the journal of the Royal Icelandic Society of Liberal Arts (Icelandic: *Hið íslenska konunglega lærdómslistafélag*) in 1787 says that the export of reindeer from Norway to Iceland is one of the praiseworthy undertakings of the Danish authorities, which could raise high hopes for the future. Therefore, it says further, it is with pleasure that the society publishes in this issue some education on reindeer for Icelanders so they will be able to manage these valuable animals and benefit from it. Here, the editor was referring to an article about reindeer published in this particular issue.³⁵

The author of this article was the priest Olaf J. Hjort of Finnmark, who had given reindeer to the Danish king, i.e. the animals shipped to Eyjafjörður in north Iceland, in 1784. Hjort wrote about reindeer herding and reindeer husbandry as practised in the culture and traditions of the Sámi people in the north of Norway and Sweden. Hjort listed all the different foods and uses man can have of the reindeer, i.e. meat, milk, hides and antlers, and that it can be tamed to pull sledges or carry things. He also described the habits and nature of the reindeer, its ideal habitats, the vegetation on which it feeds, its natural strengths and weaknesses, its natural enemies, predators, diseases and plagues, i.e. the insects that pester it in the northern hemisphere. In all this, however, Iceland was different, Hjort pointed out, a country with none of the predators and insects that plague reindeer elsewhere. He described how to manage reindeer, catch them with a rope, tether them, and milk the reindeer cows. He wrote about how to slaughter the reindeer and use reindeer products for food, shelter and tools.

Nevertheless, Hjort doubted that Icelanders could establish reindeer husbandry, because, as he put it, the animal is swift and so wild by nature that it never becomes entirely 'tame'. He presumed that circumstances in Iceland would always

³⁴ Sveinn Pálsson, *Ferðabók Sveins Pálssonar: Dagbækur og ritgerðir 1791–1797*, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Örn og Örlygur, 1983), I, pp. 405–6.

³⁵ 'Fortale', *Rit þess konunglega íslenska lærdómslistafélags*, 8 (1787), v–xxii (p. viii).

make it difficult for Icelanders to own herds of reindeer without losing them into the open and mountainous landscape, where they would at once become wild, he says. Hjort expressed his pessimism about the possibility of reindeer herding or reindeer husbandry in Iceland. The reindeer in Iceland so far must be categorised as wild, he claimed. Therefore, someone might ask how to make them semi-domesticated, to make better and more general use of them than is done now. He added that he doubted very much that it would be an easy task. Firstly, the reindeer in Iceland can hardly be caught alive, and even if they were caught, it would be challenging to keep them under human hands. The reason is that as soon as a reindeer from a free-roaming herd manages to escape from an enclosure or a leash, it heads for the flock from which it came, he explained. Secondly, if the reindeer owner wants to have the reindeer always tethered, it cannot feed as it needs, not least because it suits these animals best to roam free.

Moreover, Hjort continues, this method would be very time consuming because it takes much time to move them to one place from another. Hjort concluded that the best way to succeed in semi-domesticating reindeer in Iceland would be to catch three or four reindeer, especially calves, and bring them to a small island, far enough from the mainland to prevent them from swimming to it. Occasionally, people should come to this island and approach the reindeer, coming increasingly closer to make them get used to humans.³⁶

The idea of herding dismissed: reindeer hunting the only option

In 1786, von Levetzow (1754–1829), then a provincial governor in Iceland, suggested to the Danish authorities in Copenhagen that they should once more export reindeer from Norway to Iceland, this time with a Sámi family. According to their tradition in Finnmark in Norway, they should teach Icelanders to tame the reindeer and make use of its meat, milk and hide. He suggested that the Sámi family should be allowed to live on some farm in the county of Gullbringusýsla, in

³⁶ Hjort, pp. 79–81; Hjort had his knowledge about reindeer from Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino and Árvjovárri, a part of the parish where he was a priest in the years 1774–1780. See P. L. Smith, *Kautokeino og Kautokeinolappene: En historisk og ergologisk regionalstudie* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1938), pp. 146–47. At that time, there were both semi-domesticated reindeer herds and wild reindeer herds in these tracts, see *Major Peter Schmitlers grenseeksaminasjonsprotokoller 1742–1745*, 3 vols. (Oslo: Kjeldeskriftfondet, 1929–85), I (1962), ed. by Kristian Nissen and Ingolf Kvamen, p. 317. It looks as if Hjort was comparing the reindeer in Iceland, which had stayed unherded and become wild, with the originally wild reindeer, not the semi-domesticated and herded ones, in his former parish, when describing the nature of reindeer, although their semi-domesticated counterparts are neither fully tame nor devoted to humans. On tame and semi-domestic reindeer see e.g. Sara, p. 161.

the southwest corner of Iceland, close to mountains. He envisioned that the next herd of reindeer should go to that area to manage the reindeer herding. However, his proposal was rejected as unrealistic regarding the sociocultural and environmental situation in Iceland. Þorkell Fjeldsted, the deputy governor of Finnmark in Norway, explained to the Danish authorities that both the natural environment and social structure in Finnmark and Iceland were very different. Therefore, reindeer herding according to the tradition of the Sámi people was not possible in Iceland. Reindeer herders need to have access to vast areas, to move around with their reindeer, and they need forests to seek shelter in to put up their tents, he reasoned. Also, there would have to be a plentiful supply of lichen as fodder for the reindeer. None of this was obtainable in Iceland, he explained. He concluded that the only use the Icelanders could have of the reindeer would be to hunt them, as was done in Norway. Thus, the idea of bringing Sámi to Iceland to teach Icelanders how to manage reindeer and handle the product from it was deemed impracticable. At this point, Icelanders seem to have abandoned all earlier ideas of combining the introduction of reindeer with reindeer herding or husbandry or hiring Sámi reindeer herders to control the adaptation. The reindeer in Iceland were left on their own to adapt, roaming free in the environment instead of having reindeer herders directing their adaptation, forming it in compromise with the herds' needs, according to the Sámi tradition knowledge.³⁷

Nevertheless, the Danish authorities were willing to introduce more reindeer to Iceland and got Þorkell Fjeldsted to make the necessary arrangements in Finnmark. His task was to buy 28–30 reindeer cows and five to seven bulls and put them on a ship to Iceland at the first opportunity.³⁸

*Reindeer in the east and Sámi herder's helpful gesture
in times of hardship in Iceland*

The reindeer exported from Finnmark to Iceland in spring 1787 were set ashore in east Iceland, in the Vopnafjörður fjord.³⁹ These reindeer came from Ávjovárri in Finnmark. It is assumed that they soon found summer pastures in the remote highland northeast of the glacier Vatnajökull and during the winters in the ex-

³⁷ About this compromise in the relationship between reindeer and humans in Sámi herding practices, see e.g. Sara, p. 161.

³⁸ *Lovsamling for Island*, V, pp. 393–94; *Magnús Ketilsson: Stiftamtmenn og amtmenn á Íslandi 1750–1800*, ed. by Þorkell Jóhannesson (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1948), pp. 32–35; See also *BÍ*. Rentukammer 1928 B11/7–23. A command from the Danish king about the export of 30 to 40 reindeer from Finnmark to Iceland, funded by Denmark (Rentekammerets Extrafonds), 18th of April 1787.

³⁹ *Annálar 1400–1800*, V, p. 115.

tensive heaths of the east district during winter.⁴⁰ The reindeer cows brought to Iceland in 1787 were a present to the Danish king from a Sámi reindeer herder named Per Jansen. The Danish authorities thanked him for his generosity with a silver cup. When Fjelsted wanted to buy reindeer from Per Jansen to export to Iceland, Jansen did not want to accept any payment from the Danish authorities for the reindeer cows, but only for the five bulls. Jansen explained that he had heard that Icelanders had recently suffered because of the immense and hazardous Laki volcanic eruption and the resulting Haze Famine (Icelandic: *Móðuharðindin*). Jansen added that this was his way to help Icelanders a little, as he had heard that reindeer were already in Iceland and thriving.⁴¹

Farmers demand permission to hunt reindeer

In 1787 the Danish authorities drafted a document proposing a ten-year complete ban on reindeer hunting in Iceland, which shows that they wanted to guarantee their protection in Iceland to enable their survival and reproduction in a new country. This draft casts light on the will of the Danish authorities in the reindeer affair in Iceland. Yet it did not become law.⁴²

The fate of the first few reindeer in South Iceland from 1771 is unknown, except that they seem to have disappeared by the 1780s at the latest. The theory is they were hunted, died of poisonous vegetation during the Laki eruption in 1783–84, or the females were too few for this tiny herd to reproduce.⁴³

The other herds survived, i.e. the herds deriving from the imported animals in 1777, 1784, and 1787. They had multiplied somewhat, and also expanded their territory as the years went by.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Þórisson, 'Hreindýr: Saga þeirra', pp. 44–45; Þórisson, 'Hreindýr á Borgarfirði og í Víkum', *Glettingur* 21:55–56 (2011), 37–41 (pp. 37–38).

⁴¹ *BÍ*. Rentukammer 1928 B11/10–23. A command from the Danish king to honour Per Jansen for giving the Danish Crown 30 reindeer, 19 September 1787; See also Valtýsson, p. 117; Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, 'Geografiske og geologiske Undersøgelser ved den sydlige Del af Faxaflói paa Island. III: Den nordlige og vestlige Del af Halvøen Reykjanes', *Geografisk Tidsskrift*, 17 (1903–1904), 124–145 (p. 125).

⁴² *BÍ*. Rentukammer 1928 B11/9–31. A letter from The Danish Chancellery about deciding a penalty for shooting reindeer in Iceland, 21. July 1787. Accompanying documents: A draft of a proposal to ban reindeer hunt and a letter from Levetzow (Isl. Journ. 7, nr. 579).

⁴³ Þorvaldsson, pp. 91–92; Þórisson, 'Hreindýr: Saga þeirra', p. 43.

⁴⁴ See Karlsdóttir, *Öræfahjörðin*. The reindeer population increased in the first decades after the introduction of reindeer to Iceland, but there are no sources about how widely they dispersed or how many animals there were in the eighteenth century. With neither natural predators nor parasitic insects, and little and primitive reindeer hunting up until the twentieth century, the decisive factors in the survival of the reindeer must have been environmental, such as the

This free-roaming of reindeer caused grudges among local people and led to both a protest and a demand for permission to hunt reindeer. Thus, the chapter on hunting legislation became the central theme in the discussion between the Danish authorities and Icelanders about reindeer in Iceland just a few years after the reindeer came to Iceland. Farmers in northeast Iceland wanted to hunt reindeer to keep their numbers down and make use of them. They complained to the deputy governor about the growing number of reindeer invading their sheep grasslands in winter. Therefore, the deputy governor of the northeast and east Iceland, Stefán Thorarensen (1754–1823), wrote a letter to the Danish authorities, to the Rentukammer, just a few years after reindeer were set ashore in North Iceland in 1784. The herd had since increased a little and dispersed around the northeast of Iceland. He estimated that the number of reindeer in the northeast was about three to four hundred. Therefore, he had received, he added, many complaints from farmers who asked for permission to hunt reindeer because of their growing number. Otherwise, the reindeer would not be of any use, the farmers said. In addition, these complaints reflected a competition for survival between man and reindeer, i.e. in this context concerning the Iceland moss. The reindeer, these newcomers in Icelandic nature, ruined the farmers' annual harvest of the type of lichen that was a traditional food for people, *fjallagrös* or Iceland moss (*Cetraria islandica*). Many people in the rural areas, especially the poor, depended on this lichen as important nutrition. It was part of human survival in Iceland to gather this type of lichen in summer, and people even travelled far to get it, up to the heaths, mountain hills and highlands. Furthermore, Stefán Thorarensen explained, the farmers' complaints arose out of frustration because reindeer used to come down to the lowland from the uninhabited wilderness heaths highlands during the winter. Then they came close to the farms and fed on the grazing land that the farmers needed for their sheep. Thus, reindeer hunting should be permitted, Thorarensen recommended in his letter to the Danish authorities.⁴⁵

climate (weather), in winter and spring, and food availability in winter. Reindeer were extinct in the northeast and southwest of Iceland around 1930. The assumption is that the reason was overhunting in times when the herd did not reproduce sustainably because of a cold and wet climate in winter and spring between frosty periods creating icy layers on the ground, making it hard for reindeer to feed. The number of reindeer in these areas is unknown. The present reindeer herd in Iceland is in the east part of the country. It is a descendant of the 35 reindeer put ashore in East Iceland in 1787. Reindeer management in Iceland has been in the hands of the Icelandic authorities since the early twentieth century. However, reindeer management, surveillance, and hunting control were not applied until the second part of the last century. Up to this day, there has never been reindeer herding or reindeer husbandry in Iceland. See also Þórisson, 'Population Dynamics and Demography', p. 102.

⁴⁵ *Alþingisbækur Íslands*, XVII, pp. 26–27; Author's comment: Possibly the number of reindeer was lower than Thorarensen estimated. It would have been difficult to count reindeer in

The Danish authorities responded positively to these requests from Iceland. Permission to hunt reindeer was given in 1790, but on certain conditions. Hunting male reindeer (bulls) was permitted in the northeast area (then called Norðursýsla, now the county of Þingeyjarsýslur) for the next three years, but only in October. Permission to hunt had to be obtained from the deputy governor. It was forbidden to hunt the female reindeer (cows) and animals of both sexes younger than one year old. No request to hunt reindeer came from the southwest, where there had been reindeer since 1777. On the contrary, Levetzow, the provincial governor in Iceland, emphasised that no reindeer hunting should be permitted in the southwest in his letters to the Danish authorities.⁴⁶

The permitted time to hunt the reindeer bulls in northeast Iceland is odd because the males are not in their best condition in October. At this time of the year, they are tired and skinny after the rutting season, which is from late September into early October, and the meat is even not edible because of hormones that affect the taste during this time of the year. Probably the Danish authorities did not know much about the biology and lifestyle of reindeer, and neither did the Icelanders. At least they did not protest this timing of the hunting permits. Another possibility is that the Danes assumed that Icelandic farmers could not attend to hunting until October because they were busy with harvesting hay in August and early September and gathering their sheep, and slaughtering a selection of livestock in September in preparation for the winter.

The limited hunting permits from 1790 did not silence farmers' complaints about the reindeer in the 1790s. On the contrary, in the northeast of Iceland, the discontent grew, and so did negative attitudes towards the reindeer, not least because of the Iceland moss. The reindeer had eaten this lichen in the areas where people gathered it, so now it had to be sought over longer distances than before.

this mountainous landscape, because of their alertness and constant moving around. About the Icelandic tradition of picking the lichen "fjallagrös" as a dietary supplement in the old agricultural society in Iceland, see e.g.: Hallgerður Gísladóttir, 'Gömul læknisráð: Á næstu grösum', *Læknablaðið*, 86:4 (2000), 312; Hugrún Geirsdóttir, 'Icelandic fjallagrös', <https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/en/ark-of-taste-slow-food/icelandic-fjallagrös/> (read 21 June 2021). *Fjallagrös*, scientific name *Cetraria islandica*, is a type of lichen that Icelanders have collected for centuries, for both culinary and medicinal purposes, and some still pick it for consumption. After picking, it was spread out to dry. It was used to supplement grain, which was often in short supply, and for food in general, not least in poorer households. It was used in bread, offal, soups, porridge, drinks and medicine, and to colour fabric and yarns as it could give a red and yellow colour.

⁴⁶ *Lovsamling for Island*, V, pp. 683–684; See also *DÍ*. Rentukammer 1928 B12/15–5. A command from the Danish king permitting the hunt of 20 reindeer per year for the next three years in the northeast of Iceland, 19. May 1790. Accompanying document: A letter from Stefán Þórarinnsson (*Isl. Journ.* 8, nr. 774 and 775).

In some places, there was no lichen left at all for people to gather in late summer, as had been a tradition for food supply for households in the countryside.⁴⁷ The complaints to the authorities about the invasive behaviour of reindeer continued. These animals ruined the farmers' sheep meadows in the winter and the Icelandic moss in the summer. It was claimed that the reindeer had become so numerous that farmers often saw big herds. The Danish authorities gave in and extended the hunting permission. The second regulation from the Danish king, allowing reindeer hunting in Iceland, was published in 1794. It permitted the hunting of male reindeer in the reindeer areas in the east and northeast of Iceland. No time limit was set this time, and no limit on the number of prey. Thus, male reindeer could be hunted all year round, and as many as hunters could kill.⁴⁸

The Danish authorities kept on expanding the hunting permit due to pressure from Icelanders. A royal regulation was published in 1798, permitting male reindeer hunting in Iceland until decided otherwise, anywhere reindeer could be found. Male reindeer could thereby be hunted down everywhere they were seen. Hunting of females and young reindeer less than one year old was forbidden. The provincial governors were to keep a record of the annual reindeer hunt.⁴⁹ This regulation was announced at the Althing in Thingvellir in the summer of 1800.⁵⁰

Bearing in mind the farmers' request for permission to hunt reindeer, one may presume that they had the means to hunt reindeer. However, there is no information about reindeer hunting in Iceland in the 1790s. Most likely it was only on a small scale. Probably very few farmers had ammunition for hunting, and even then it was of too poor quality to hunt such a cautious and wary animal as reindeer.

From support to criticism: the end of enthusiasm for reindeer

Interest in reindeer continued in Iceland, but only for a short time. Magnús Stephensen, educated in law and an enthusiastic supporter of Enlightenment ideas, wrote in 1797 about the usefulness of reindeer in the northern hemisphere. His writings in this context were about Spitzbergen, but we can see that he thought Icelanders had not yet realised how valuable reindeer could be in

⁴⁷ Pálsson, pp. 377, 401, 405.

⁴⁸ *Lovsamling for Island*, VI, pp. 177–78. See also *BÍ*. Rentukammer 1928 B13/14–19. A command from the Danish king, permitting reindeer hunt for the next three years in the north-east and east Iceland, except for the cows and calves, 18. June 1794. Accompanying documents: A letter from Stefán Þórarinnsson and Ólafur Stefánsson (*Isl. Journ.* 8, jnr. 281, *Isl. Journ.* 9, jnr. 881).

⁴⁹ *Lovsamling for Island*, VI, pp. 349–50.

⁵⁰ *Alþingisbækur Íslands*, XVII, pp. 487–88.

Iceland. Magnús wrote that it was unnecessary to describe the reindeer, so familiar had it become in Iceland. On the other hand, he felt the urge to mention how little use Icelanders made of the reindeer so far, although few animals are by Nature created so useful for man as the reindeer. He referred to how the Sámi people based almost their entire existence on the reindeer, as the milk and meat of reindeer is their best nutrition and the skins their clothes and shelter. Also, they tame the reindeer for carrying things or pulling sledges, and the reindeer is better than any horse. From the antlers they make various objects and tools. The reindeer also does not need much fodder; it can survive on a meagre supply of vegetation and can dig in the snow for the lichen that is its essential nutrition. By the grace of God, this animal thrives mainly in the most challenging and most northernly countries and God has put it there to ensure the survival of thousands of human lives, Magnús Stephensen added. Nevertheless, he did not suggest any methods or policy enabling reindeer husbandry in Iceland, despite his approving observations about the reindeer and reindeer management in the northern hemisphere.⁵¹

The Icelandic eighteenth-century annals for 1799 record a general opinion that the number of reindeer in Iceland is getting too big and that these animals are doing more harm than good by eating up the Iceland moss. The reindeer had only caused damage without being of any use, because Icelanders did not know how to use manage the animal as the Sámi people do. The loss of the Iceland moss was a central issue in all the criticism of the reindeer. This criticism grew after the Laki eruption started in 1783.⁵² However, the reindeer alone were not to blame. The Laki eruption, when poisonous fumes spread over a large part of Iceland, also caused a decrease in this lichen. Bishop Hannes Finnson claimed that because of the negative environmental impact of this hazardous eruption, all the ‘Lichen Islandicus’ had withered or died. Thus, this vital nutrition and saviour of the people had not been available in almost all of Iceland for the three years after the eruption.⁵³

Interestingly, Hannes Finnson did not include the reindeer in his summary of the use of natural resources for survival in Iceland in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Moreover, he did not mention reindeer at all. That raises the question: Was the introduction of reindeer to Iceland viewed as a mistake or at least not considered to be of any importance for the survival of Icelanders? Was this arctic

⁵¹ Magnús Stephensen, *Skemmtileg vinagleði* (Leirárgörðum: Magnús Stephensen, 1797), pp. 195–96.

⁵² Jón Espólín, *Íslands Árbækur í sögu-formi*, 4 vols. in 12 issues (Kjöbenhavn, n.p., 1821–55), 11, p. 101.

⁵³ Finnsson, p. 110.

vertebrate just a useless newcomer in Iceland, despite the high hopes that fuelled the idea of bringing this species to Iceland as a resource for the benefit of the Icelandic nation? It was not until the coming of a new century that this question was dealt with, and it arose up after 1800. By then, the eighteenth-century enthusiasm about importing reindeer to Iceland as a progressive measure had vanished. Icelandic officials already in the early 1800s had lost faith in the idea that the reindeer could be of any use to Icelanders as livestock. In 1797 Magnús Stephensen, the chief judge in Iceland, had praised the reindeer as a life saviour for humans in the northern hemisphere. He changed his mind only a few years later in his book about the eighteenth century in Iceland. In it, he claimed that the semi-domestication of reindeer did not work for his country. The reindeer had been of no use to Icelanders during the three decades they had existed in Iceland, despite the good intentions behind the import of reindeer from Norway. In the northeast, the reindeer had been a nuisance and a plague. It would have been best if the reindeer had never set foot on Icelandic soil, he claimed. From the very beginning they had been fostered by the country to become nothing but a worthless nuisance, causing only annoyance and damage. His explanation was twofold: by eating the Iceland moss, the reindeer deprived the people who depended on that source of food, especially the poor, and it damaged and competed with the sheep in the winter grasslands. The reindeer mainly stayed in the remote wilderness, which was so dangerous for humans in wintertime that no one dared to travel in the winter to hunt. So, he concluded, the reindeer in Iceland were of little use to man, if any at all.⁵⁴

A new tone was set towards these four-legged newcomers less than two decades after their importation to Iceland. Icelanders had turned against the reindeer; attitudes had changed. No one praised the reindeer or its introduction to Iceland as a progressive move, as was the case in the 1700s. On the contrary, in the 1800s, Icelanders viewed the reindeer as useless at best and as a plague at worst.

Conclusion

The Danish authorities had a few dozen reindeer of a domestic stock brought from Norway to Iceland from 1771 to 1787, responding to Icelanders' pleas. It was a response to the cold climate and famines in Iceland and driven by influences from the enlightened policy of the time, aiming to improve and diversify the Icelanders' means of sustenance. There seems to have been no opposition to the idea of importing reindeer in Iceland, only some cautious concerns as to whether this species would survive in Iceland. Iceland's plentiful supply of moss and lichen as

⁵⁴ Magnús Stephensen, *Island i det attende aarhundrede* (Kjöbenhavn: Gyldendal, 1808), p. 76.

important winter nutrition for reindeer fuelled such expectations. When it turned out that the reindeer could live in Iceland, the policy was to bring more of them, and to various areas in Iceland. Some progressive thinking officials in Iceland were ready to embark on experiments that exceeded Nature's known limits in Iceland, and they had the support of the Danish authorities. The reindeer fitted in this progressive policy as a hardy arctic animal, which, unlike the sheep, could survive without shelter and hay. Icelanders knew that the Sámi in Norway kept reindeer, some as their primary food and source of income. Hence, the idea was to try the same in Iceland, to import reindeer to Iceland as a new natural resource for the peasant households. It soon turned out that Iceland's cultural and natural circumstances did fit either reindeer herding or husbandry.

However, the tide turned quickly as those who recommended the importation of reindeer to Iceland failed to consider the possibility of a clash of interests between this foreign animal and the existing traditional agricultural society. A few years after the introduction of reindeer to the northeast and east Iceland, farmers started to complain over the reindeer to the Icelandic authorities, which sent the message further to Copenhagen. The complaint was that the reindeer competed with the sheep for winter grazing in the lowlands in winter. Moreover, it turned out that it was also a competitor with the local people for food. It grazed on the *Cetraria islandica*, the type of lichen that was an essential and traditional food in most rural households. Therefore, a dislike of the reindeer soon developed. Danish authorities responded to the complaints about the reindeer in Iceland by allowing reindeer hunting, yet with some restrictions. It was apparent that the Danish authorities wanted to safeguard the survival of the reindeer herds in Iceland, although Icelanders disliked the reindeer.

In just a short period opinions about the introduction of reindeer in Iceland had turned from hopes and approval of the reindeer into a dislike and opposition. In the 1700s, the reindeer was seen as a benefit for livestock farming in Iceland, but around 1800, Icelanders regarded it as a foreign invasive species of no use to Icelanders. By then, the Icelandic officials believed that it would always be impossible for Icelandic farmers to domesticate reindeer. Prevailing views in the early 1800s were that the introduction of reindeer to Iceland was a mistake, although the intentions were certainly good, but a mistake none the less.

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