The Landscape of Fishing: A Study of Iceland's Fishing Industry

Ryan F. Mackerer

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The Landscape of Fishing is a comprehensive look into the history and modern day fishing industry of Iceland. In this study each active fishing harbor has been documented, mapped and analyzed to understand how the deeply rooted cultural practice of fishing has influenced development across the country as well as its role in shaping the landscape of the country into what it is today. Fishing has been synonymous with the country of Iceland since its settlement. There has arguably been no greater driving force of development that has influenced the country in the same way that the fishing industry has. Over the course of the study it has revealed a truly unique and isolated country which developed around one of their core cultural practices.
The Landscape of Fishing

A Study of Iceland’s Fishing Industry and its Role in Shaping the Landscape

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State University of New York
College of Environmental Science and Forestry
Off-Campus Program: Summer 2017

This study was conducted through The State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry’s Department of Landscape Architecture’s Off Campus Program, and completed over the course of three months while abroad in Reykjavik, Iceland.

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INTRODUCTION

The cultural practice of fishing is one that is so deeply rooted into the lifestyle and culture of the Icelandic people. Almost all people have ties to the industry or even work in the fishing or fish processing industry itself. Fishing has played an integral role in the shaping of the country itself. Almost every coastal town and village owes its existence to the fishing and fish processing industry. These cultural and working landscape serve as the core and heart of each town.

The intrigue of studying the Icelandic fishing industry began when a colleague jokingly remarked that I should study fishing when I travel abroad. As an avid fisherman myself, I thought it could be great fun, but not a scholarly study. However, after some research, I discovered the importance and incredible effects that the fishing industry had on the development of urban areas, the movement of people, and its shaping of the landscape. Fishing, especially in Iceland, is highly effected by the landscape. From the natural harbors to the calm deep fjords, it all plays a role. Which led me to pose the question:

HOW DOES FISHING PLAY A ROLE IN SHAPING THE LANDSCAPE OF ICELAND?
A HISTORY OF ICELANDIC FISHING

The history of the Icelandic fisheries may be divided into three principal periods: those of the rowing boat, the sailing ship, and the motorized vessels. This division has been widely used, but all three periods overlap and may arguably be divided into shorter phases.

The Age of Rowing, is the longest of the three, lasting from the settlement of Iceland at the end of the 9th century until the early 20th century, when motorized vessels arrived and took to the sea in force.

The sailing ship period, the Age of Sail, had early attempts at fishing that occurred in the 1750’s, but these were short-lived. Generally, at the turn of 1800 is considered as the start of the age of sail in Iceland, lasting until the late 1920’s. The heyday of the sailing-ship fishery was the second half of the 19th century, but during the early 20th century the sailing ships were gradually replaced by decked motorboats and steam-trawlers.

The third, and current period, the Age of Motor, started in November, 1902 when the first Icelandic motorboat first went fishing in the West Fjords. When the motorization of the fishing fleet began, the industry grew exponentially and changed the landscape of fishing dramatically. The biggest change to date in recent years was the introduction of the fishing quota system put in place by the Icelandic government. A highly controversial set of regulations, it sets quotas, or limits on the fishing industry. Many towns, particularly smaller villages, lost out during this major change, which devastated the industry in entire regions, causing many fishing towns and villages to practically lose their identity while others expanded.
THE EARLY DAYS

Iceland’s isolated geographical location, nature and landscape have meant that from its earliest days, the nation has been dependent upon harnessing and utilizing the bounty of the sea that surrounds them. The development of the fisheries had a remarkable effect on social development and settlement patterns nationwide. The population of fishing regions grew in direct correlation to the growth, and success of the fishing industry. Around some of the largest fishing stations year-round communities began to develop. In many settlements, residents owed their entire livelihoods to fishing.

The early years of the so called “Fishing Age” were a period when the Icelandic fisheries were booming due to several key factors. Climatic change, abnormally cold temperatures came to Iceland which led to a decline in agriculture, thus, increasing the importance and reliance on the fisheries for nation’s subsistence. At that time, fish products, mostly stockfish and fish oil, became Iceland’s most important and desired exports. These factors created the perfect conditions for the young and growing industry to flourish.

The early days of the Icelandic fishing industry set the tone for what was to come. The fairly slow to grow industry was about to catch up to the rest of the world very quickly.
Since the settlement of Iceland in the late 9th century, through the 20th century the Icelandic economy was reliant on farming, fishing the utilization of other marine resources. At this time, fishing and farming were complimentary industries, relying on each other to survive. Fishing was mainly practiced on a subsistence basis by farmers and those who lived on the coast.

Location played a role in deciding the major activity of the area. In the south and west of Iceland, fishing was already of higher importance with farming secondary, while in the north and east and inland areas, it was the opposite. The answer to this oddity, is found in the landscape. The west offered great natural harbors and rich fishing grounds with minimal land that could be used for productive farming. While the North also was blessed with natural harbors and rich fishing grounds, there was far more great agricultural land available. Soon, all regions would take note of what fishing could offer them and turn to the bountiful sea.

Fishing was still at a very small scale at the end of this era, although there are many references that indicate the export of fish during the first centuries of Icelandic history. The trading of fish, especially dried fish, was an important and valuable commercial item in domestic trade. The Icelandic Sagas for example, frequently mention stories of farmers from rural areas who had travelled great distances in order to trade their own goods for fish from seaside landowners.

The Age of Rowing, the longest era of Icelandic fishing and arguably one of the most important as it set up the foundation for the massive industry that was to come. Season fishing camps or “stations” as they were known were constructed along the coast in areas of good natural harbors close to fishing grounds. Fishing began primarily as a winter activity, although spring and summer fisheries for home consumption were always conducted on a small scale. Small row boats were common until fishing started to grow into an actual industry. Then the row boats became bigger and in most fishing regions 6, 8, 10 and even 12 men oarrings were the most common fishing vessels. At this time, the main fishing season was from late January until early May, and fitted conveniently into the agricultural calendar, as farmers would send laborers to the fishing stations during the farming off season, for up to months at a time.

While the fishing industry was in its early stages, its importance was already being felt by a growing demand, both at domestically and foreign. Reports of fish exportation from Iceland before the year 1300 is unreliable, but the few sources available certainly indicate that some dried fish, known as stockfish, were exported during the 12th and the 13th centuries and that this export demand was indeed growing.

The growing demand for fish in the 12th and 13th centuries resulted in a long lasting structural change in Icelandic fisheries, which at this time assumed a form that persisted throughout the age of rowing boats, and in some instances into the 1980’s. From now the fishing season was decided by the fish, which would move to the banks off the south shore to spawn during the early months of the year, and then proceeded north along the west coast in search of food.

The Age of Settlement 874-1150

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Choosing Settlements

With the first settlements beginning in the future capital of Reykjavik, some settlers chose to stay in the “smoky bay” while others traveled to new ground. Icelanders chose areas to settle very carefully, as there are several “rules” to follow for a good settlement in Iceland. Since the landscape of the country offers many unique challenges, the areas chosen by most are of similar nature. The early settlers looked for good agricultural ground, close fishing grounds and a natural harbor, access to freshwater and potential secondary industries.

Growth and Movement

As the country grew, more people settled or traveled inland for farming, while others chose to move out around the coast to focus on fishing as a way of life. The West, and South West regions were a very popular area, especially for fishing. Fishing was just beginning to serve as a driving force to move people to other areas of the country. As people moved inland and around the coast an interesting and unique type of settlement pattern began to develop.
EXPANSION AND GROWTH

Many papers have been written about the reorganization and revival of Iceland's economy in the late 17th to early 18th centuries. Those writers believed whole heartedly that the economy was turned around by two factors: the advent and operation of decked fishing vessels, and the founding of towns for the purpose of fishing. The idea behind this reasoning is that the towns should be built at places with good natural harbors, close to prolific fishing grounds and, if possible, in populous areas or close to these. The towns would then serve as trading and service centers for merchants and neighboring farmers as well as fishing ports. The most farsighted of these authors saw these towns as future centers and hubs of urbanization with the fishing industry as the catalyst.
The arrival and short embrace of the sailing vessel brought about two major changes to Icelandic fisheries. First, the principal aim of the rowing boat fishery was to produce food for domestic consumption, while any surplus was sold to the merchants for export. The main objective of the sailing ship fishery was to produce goods for export – fish and fish-liver oil being the two major goods. The ability to fish further from shore, with more fishermen and much better equipment and technique allowed the fishing industry to begin its period of extreme growth.

The second major change in Icelandic fisheries resulting from the introduction of sailing vessels, was that unlike the rowing boats, whose main fishing season was from late winter or early spring until summer, sailing fishermen could depart and fish in almost any season. This meant that for those who were ready to go to sea in different types of vessels at different seasons, it was possible to pursue fishing as a year round occupation. With this new technology came an increase in fish, occupations, and development in towns, thus changing the landscape of many rural, coastal areas of the country. Unfortunately for those fond of the art of sailing ships, the motorization of the Icelandic fishing fleet was soon to arrive, suddenly turning the once “new age” sail boats into obsolete technology.

AGE OF SAIL 1800-1920

The motorization of the fishing industry began in November 1902, and continued at an incredible rate. Town by town, introduction of motorized vessels, motor-boats and steam-trawlers during the early 20th century caused exponential expansion of the industry as well as bringing about changes in the Icelandic fisheries. The fishing effort was tremendously improved and catch numbers had never been so high. Within a period of two decades the Icelanders acquired a modern fishing fleet which was technically second to none in northern Europe and allowed them to fish year round, anywhere in their waters.

The fishing capacity of the new fleet of motor- and steam-vessels was much greater than that of the earlier fleet of rowing boats and decked sailing vessels and for the first time in their history the Icelanders were able to utilize practically all fish stocks of the fishing grounds off their coasts. This accounted for pelagic species like herring no less than demersal ones and the trawlers, steam line-fishers and the bigger motor-boats were capable of fishing in grounds far off the coast, and even in distant waters.

Along with these larger, more advanced vessels came many changes to the landscape. Harbors had to be altered, deepened, expanded and/or protected further to create safe landing areas for the new fleet. Settlements that could not change due to a shallow fjord or a harbor that was unsafe were simply left behind, abandoned for a better location or forced to change their economic base. Towns that flourished during the rapid expansion of the fishing industry also grew and expanded in terms of population and infrastructure, becoming the first real urban areas of the country.

AGE OF MOTOR 1902-PRESENT

COLLAR DEVELOPMENT AND MOVEMENT

The “collar” settlement pattern and development was in full motion during this time period. In the Age of Rowing people moved from the initial settlement areas out into the inland areas of the country as well as around the coast. This type of settlement is part landscape driven and part fishing driven, as great fishing was available on the coast and the center core of the country was mostly wasteland and uninhabitable. The coastal settlement in Iceland from an early time set the foundation for the future fishing towns and villages that would develop. With many people living both inland and on the coast, there was a great amount of interchange of goods and services that was mutually beneficial for all.

COASTAL MIGRATION

With the advent of the motorized vessel, the fishing industry expanded rapidly, causing a large movement of people from their inland settlements, back to the coast to join in on the fishing frenzy. Coupled with the new ability to travel by sea around the entire island, the coastal settlements grew quickly, especially those whom had great success in their fishing ventures.
Early fishing that took place during the years of settlement was performed at a very small scale. At this time, agriculture flourished to a degree never achieved since. Until the 12th century, fishing was mainly a sideline for farmers and essentially for subsistence alone. During the farming off-season, those residing on the coast would fish from small rowing boats not far from shore. The catch would be dried and brought back to the farm to be used as provisions.

In the 14th century, the economy began shifting towards fishing and Icelanders began exporting fish products to Europe in larger quantities than ever they ever had. The most popular fish product were dried cod, and fish liver oil. This high demand from abroad led to more fishing operations out of the Southwest and Western regions, closest to the best fishing grounds.

In 1850, fishing from decked sailing vessels was introduced to northern Iceland. This had a dramatic effect on the fisheries in all regions, but especially in Eyjafjörður. This fishery differed in various ways from the operation of such vessels in the south and west. For several decades, the sailing vessels of the north were almost exclusively owned and operated by fishing farmers who focused on shark fishing.
After the terrible recession of 2008, economically, Iceland was reeling. Their entire banking industry had practically collapsed in addition to causing many other industries to suffer. The fishing industry however, was able to stay strong through these hard times, with many people looking back to fishing for jobs and to help pull the country out of recession.

In 1902, a two horsepower engine was installed onto the fishing boat, Stanley in Isafjordur, creating the very first motorized fishing vessel in the country. By 1930, Iceland had over 1,000 motorized fishing vessels and over 40 trawlers. The total fish catch was over five times what it had been before the turn of the century.

The second, and larger of the herring booms started in the early 1960s. It lasted until 1968 when the herring stocks collapsed. Its exponential rise and devastating collapse took a toll on several areas of the country, in particular the more northern towns like Siglufjörður and Dýápavík, who essentially were born to the herring industry and, in the case of Dýápavík, lost everything. It was not until the 1990’s until the herring stock off Iceland rebounded. With smart fisheries management the herring stock is back to a stable point.
The Development of the Fishing Town
FISHING STATIONS

In the early days of Icelandic settlement, fishing was seen as just another task as part of farming. Fishing farms were popular in areas along the coast and soon, dedicated fishing stations were built in areas of good natural harbors and near the rich fishing grounds that were near the shore around almost the whole country. Fishing stations were usually one or two very small stone and turf buildings. Farmers would send laborers to fishing stations around the coast for weeks at a time, to return when the farming season started again, carts of dried stockfish in tow. Fishermen at this time fished from small, several man rowing boats that did not venture too far from the shore. Location and landscape proved to be an important factor as some areas were better sheltered and more suitable for fishing than others.

The map to the right shows the magnitude of fishing stations around the country. Nearly the entire shoreline was dotted with these small outposts. The towns with the best harbors and richest fishing grounds were the most successful and sought after. The best fishing stations would later develop into true towns and villages where a devoted, year round fishing industries would develop. Almost every town profiled in this study began as a fishing station.
THE FISHING STATIONS OF ICELAND

Fishing Stations [inactive]
Fishing Stations [active]
A drawing of an early Icelandic fishing station above, shows the type of settlements that the future towns of Iceland began as. To the right, is a map showing the most important trails to the many fishing stations around the country, these routes were some of the heaviest travelled not only by those involved in the early fishing industry, but by all people. Fishermen and laborers would travel from farms and inland areas to their stations seasonally, fishing for weeks to months at a time. These trails improved travel and communication for the entire country, unifying all regions. The routes laid the foundation for the modern road system in Iceland, many roads being built in the exact location of the original stockfish routes.
With the success of many fishing stations, and exponential growth of the fishing industry in the 20th century due to the motorization of the fishing fleet, many settlements were growing, urbanizing and developing into true towns and villages. It is evident in every town that you visit, that the fishing industry played a role in its development. There are several key pieces to that every good fishing town has:

- A good natural harbor is imperative as large fishing vessels need a safe, and easily maneuverable space for landing their catches. A certain region may have many more fishing towns located in it simply because of the many natural harbors its landscape offers.
- Locating your town nearby good fishing grounds is another important factor. A settlement could have the best harbor in the country, but if they must travel great distances to reach the fishing grounds the location may not be successful.
Settlement Patterns
Collar development is the most prominent settlement pattern shown in towns and villages across Iceland. Settlements, especially those that were successful in the fishing industry, grew directly out of their core, in a circular or collar form around the harbor. The development patterns of fishing towns is clear. The harbor, is the origin and center of the town, with the highest density of buildings closest and becomes more sparsely populated the further you are away from it.

In the Age of Rowing people moved to inland areas of the country as well as around the coast. This type of settlement is part landscape driven and part fishing driven, as great fishing was available on the coast and the central region of the country was mostly wasteland and uninhabitable. The coastal settlement in Iceland from an early time set the foundation for the future fishing towns and villages that would develop. With many people living both inland and on the coast, there was a great amount of interchange of goods and services that was mutually beneficial for all.
Iceland is known for its long deep and steep fjord landscapes found from the Northwest to the far East regions. The greatest constraint in a fjord settlement is the steep topography found on either side of the water. Building a settlement and harbor in a landscape like this is extremely difficult, causing many long, linear settlements built into the bottom of the steep slopes. A common way to work around, or with the landscape is to build a harbor out into the fjord on an existing spit of land or a constructed mass, resulting in a completely altered coastline.

The proximity to rich fishing grounds, and the availability of a good natural harbor are the only reasons that landscapes like these have been settled.
Dispersed settlement patterns can be found in several towns in Iceland. They are highly dependent on the geography of the location, and or the need for the harbor to be separated from the settlement. In several instances, a broken shoreline or one laced with islands. Another typology of the dispersed settlement pattern can be found in numerous settlements located in fjords. Early on the settlements were located at the furthest inland point, where rich fishing stocks were found. However, after the fishing grounds moved further out in the fjord and closer to the sea, the settlement was moved along with the harbor closer to the new fishing grounds, leaving a split of old and new.
The Landscape of Fishing
The Capital Region of Iceland is the oldest, and smallest, but by far the most populated region in the country. Some of the first settlers came to Reykjavik, which would later become the capital of Iceland. The region is made up of a small peninsula that extends into the Faxafloi Bay was known for its plentiful fishing grounds. The first settlers began fishing out of the good natural harbors in Reykjavik and Hafnarfjörður initially for subsistence. However, soon the capital area became a hot spot for the fishing industry. Much of the capital regions development is owed to the fishing industry which provided the capital for infrastructure, and a demand for laborers which attracted people to the area.

Today, Reykjavik is still one of the top fish producing towns in the country, while Hafnarfjörður receives many landings from foreign vessels fishing in Icelandic waters. Due to the expanding tourism industry, the working harbor of Reykjavik has been married beautifully with the tourism industry. The harbor in Reykjavik is making use of fishing infrastructure no longer in use by repurposing former bait shacks, storage facilities and markets into storefronts, accommodations and other service related businesses. The city is now looking back to its harbor for new growth and expansion just as it provided for them many years ago.
REYKJAVIK

TOTAL CATCH LANDED: 94,392 tons
REGISTERED SHIPS: 118
POPULATION: 123,246
SETTLEMENT PATTERN: COLLAR

The capital city of Reykjavik and its municipal area is by far the most populated area of the country, and really the only true "city" in the whole country. Reykjavik was a great location for a first settlement, mainly because of its good agricultural land nearby and good natural harbor.

Fishing took place in Reykjavik from its inception. On a subsistence and used as a supplement to farming, the industry did not take off until many years later with the motorization of the fishing fleet. Reykjavik owes much of its infrastructure and development to the fishing industry's success throughout history. As the fishing industry grew, so did Reykjavik, allowing it to become one of the first, and the most urban area of the country.
Hafnarfjörður’s growth and prosperity has been closely linked to fishing over the years. Fish stocks have migrated along the Faxaflói Bay for centuries. In the 19th century, large catches came hand in hand with decked vessels and the importance of Hafnarfjörður’s harbour became even more obvious. Icelandic trawler fishing began in 1905 and its base was Hafnarfjörður. Within several years, the growth of trawler fishing led to more fish processing being located here. More mechanization called for improved facilities to serve the rapidly growing fleet and the nation’s first deep-water pier was completed in Hafnarfjörður on 1913. The harbor since has been constantly evolved, even filling land in to create more docking and landing space.

Kópavogur is mainly from very small operations or for recreation.

The harbor at Kopavogur is nestled into a small peninsula that is well protected from the ocean. Historically, and presently, the harbor has not played an active role in the fishing industry due to its small harbor and proximity to the larger Hafnarfjörður and Reykjavik harbors.
THE WEST

FISHING TOWNS: 7
TOTAL CATCH: 55,887 TONS

The West Region in Iceland has seven towns and villages, most located on the historic Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Often referred to as “Iceland in miniature” due to its variety of picturesque landscape, the Snæfellsnes Peninsula makes up the majority of the region.

The peninsula is home to many former fishing stations that would later develop into fishing towns of varying scale. Fittingly, all the towns of The West are located on the coast near great fishing grounds and on good natural harbors. This not only enabled them to grow their towns and fishing industries together, but also gave them great opportunity for trade both domestically and foreign. Nearly the entire region traces their origin to the rich fishing grounds nearby and early trading posts in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

Today, fishing still takes precedent in every town but not to the magnitude as it once did. Many of the towns are turning towards the ever growing tourism industry for their economic base. However, the towns of Akranes, Rif, Ólafsvík, and Grundarfjörður still have a stronghold in the fishing and fish processing industry.
Akranes was one of the oldest settlements in Iceland. It was home to a cluster of “fishing farms” that formed a tiny fishing village. However, an actual town did not begin formation until the mid-17th century. Akranes, like many coastal settlements in Iceland, owes its origin to the rich fishing grounds located just off its shores. The bay of Faxi, or Faxaflói, was a primary source of provisions for inhabitants in Iceland. It was not until the widespread motorization of the fishing fleet that the town began to urbanize and the fishing grounds move further out to sea.

Currently the fishing and fish processing industry is still the main economic driver for the town with a large area surrounding the harbor dedicated to the fishing industry.

Arnarstapi is home to a very small harbor to match its tiny town. Presently it’s main users are small fishing operations and recreational usage. However, in the 15th-16th centuries it was a very important trading and fishing harbor for the western coast of Iceland.

The harbor itself is almost completely natural with great protection from the open ocean, its a great example of working with the surrounding landscapes and how the landscape informed location and design. The magnificent rock formations and cliffs that the area is known for are used to shield the harbor and offer the ability to construct piers and docks directly off of them.

Rif is another small town that holds the fishing industry in very high regard - without it, the town simply would not exist. With a population just over 100 nearly the whole town is dedicated to the harbor and fishing industry. A small settlement was started at Rif in the early 20th century, with a focus on farming and fishing. These “fishing farmers” were fortunate to have such rich fishing grounds within rowing distance. However, due to the poor conditions for landing boats, the settlement could not be maintained unless a proper harbor was built to sustain the fishing industry. In 1956 the harbor was finally opened, followed by the building of the first residential housing and people moving back to the area. This marked the beginning of the development of the seaside village.
Due to its location on the bay of Breiðafjörður, Ólafsvík was one of the first villages in Iceland to receive a commercial licence from the King of Denmark, in the 17th century. Ólafsvík's economy is focused on the fishing industry as well as commerce, and provision of services for farmers in the area.

A good natural harbor and proximity to the fishing grounds were two main reasons the area was settled. Located under avalanche prone cliffs, the town is not exactly in the most thoughtful place otherwise; Ólafsvík owes fishing its settlement.

It's evident the large harbor is still very active and the all too familiar fish stench from the processing plant in town will be your first clue.

Grundarfjörður is a fishing town like most of the towns around the coast of Iceland. The harbor is one of the best in Snæfellsnes. Since it's settlement, Grundarfjörður was a trading post, as well as a group of fishing farms scattered over a relatively large area. In the early 18th-century French fishing boats began fishing Icelandic waters, spring through summer. The French presence was so large that they even constructed a hospital and a church.

However, Grundarfjörður actually did not even begin to develop as a town until in the early 19th century, and a real village hadn’t formed until the forties, due in part to the motorization of the fishing industry. Today, a solid fishing industry remains as the backbone of the town.

The fishing industry at Búðardalur is minimal. A simple and very small harbor exists where commercial fishing is nonexistent. Although it is located on the coast, fishing or fish processing never developed.
STYKKISHÓLMUR

TOTAL CATCH LANDED: 3,905 tons
REGISTERED SHIPS: 64
POPULATION: 1,195
SETTLEMENT PATTERN: DISPERSED

An important trading post in its early days, Stykkishólmur owes its settlement to the availability of a great natural harbor, well protected by natural rock outcropping. The epitome of an Icelandic fishing village, fishing and trading have always been the major industries and that holds true today as well.

Over the years the harbor has been expanded to encompass the surrounding islets to make up a large and cozy safe haven for ships of all sizes. With rich fishing grounds close by and the Danish demand for trading, the town of Stykkishólmur developed earlier than most other towns in the West. It is clear to see the town’s development originating out of the harbor with its highest density closest to the harbor, tapering down as you stray from its center.
A region almost isolated and tough to reach until recently, the Westfjords are a unique area of the country. With many great natural harbors that are sheltered in the deep fjords that the region is known for, coupled with vast areas of rich fishing grounds off the coast, the Westfjords region is a prime example of the landscape of fishing.

The region has a long history with fishing as well. From the early days of fishing stations to the booming days of the mid 20th century. The towns of the Westfjords are closely associated with fishing, because almost every town and village in the region is there solely because of fishing. However, the industry that once made the region great unfortunately has left many areas struggling. The Westfjords were one of the hardest suffering regions of the country after the Icelandic government introduced the quota system in the 1990’s. This took fishing rights away from towns that had depended on fishing for their livelihood for centuries.

Despite this struggle, the Westfjord inhabitants have fishing ingrained into their lives, much like the rest of the Icelanders. The region is still known for its fishing prowess and always will be.
The very small village of Reykhólar, located on the southern side of the Westfjords has a very minimal history with the fishing industry. Presently, there is no real fishing presence in the town other than recreational, and very small private operations. The harbor stretches out on a narrow spit of land, a kilometer or so from the village center.

Brjánslækur is another small village that is not known for its fishing prowess. The settlement serves as the terminus for the ferries to Stykkishólmur on the Snaefellsnes Peninsula, via Flatey. The “village”, if you could even call it that is only home to a few people and a few buildings.

Historically, the area was home to a fishing station which men would come to seasonally to fish off the shores, but due to its location and with better fishing elsewhere, nothing developed in Brjánslækur. Today, there is not much in terms of fishing industry here, mostly private and recreational usage which produces just over 200 tons of fish landed here.

The largest town in the southern Westfjords with a population of 660, Patreksfjörður grew up as a fishing town. With rich fishing grounds nearby in the early 20th century, Patreksfjörður was a leading force in Iceland’s fishing industry, one of the first to begin trawler fishing. Patreksfjörður is a prime example of a town that had all the necessary pieces to grow and sustain itself as a fishing town, but after the fishing quota system in 1990, Patreksfjörður was deprived of its fishing rights and fishing tradition.

Nowadays, despite the quota system, with large scale operations gone, the chief occupation is still commercial fishing and fish processing. Other industries, like fish farming and services are also becoming increasingly important.
A fairly “new” town in historical terms, there is a limited amount of history in Tálknafjörður before it started to grow in the 20th century. It is a typical Icelandic village that came to exist and developed because of the rich and easily accessible fishing grounds off the coast and a good natural landscape for a harbor. In the late 1940’s, a harbor was built which paved the way for a fish processing plant constructed soon after. Since its inception, everything in Tálknafjörður evolved around fish and fishing. Most of the residents work or have worked in the fishing industry and owe their livelihood to it in some way.

Another victim to the quota system, the fishing industry is not what it used to be, or what it could be. However, the town still uses fishing as its primary industry.

Historically, Bíldudalur was one of the busiest towns in import and export in Iceland, one of the first to export fish to far away countries like Spain. This booming history in the 18th and 19th century, was short lived however, the village took a downturn in the 20th century and has never fully recovered. Today, it is a small struggling community, but still dependent on fishing as its primary economic base. Just like many small villages in the Westfjords, it was hit hard by the fishing quota system the Icelandic government created in 1990.

Bíldudalur is also home to a growing tourism industry as well as sea mineral processing and fish farming.

Like in most other seaside villages in Iceland, the culture and industry has been shaped by the sea throughout the centuries. The sheltered landscape inside the fjord allowed for a good natural harbor for early row boat fishing ventures.

Despite this, Píngeyri didn’t start to develop as a true town until the late 19th century. It was not until several farmers purchased a docked vessel in the second half of the 19th century and began fishing at a larger scale than before, that things began to move. Soon after, Píngeyri built a harbor which led to fishing and fish processing becoming the chief industry and the primary source of income for the town.
Flateyri actually traces its beginnings as a trading post, not as a fishing farm. Fishing took place but on small scale, and in the late 19th-century shark fishing and a large whaling operation became great industries to supplement its cod fishing industry.

At the turn of the 20th century, the village became more active in the fishing industry with many small boats and large trawlers. Due to this, through the 50's-70's the town grew and expanded with much of the infrastructure and services in the community being developed at that time. However, Flateyri was another causality of the quota system, and things began to decline. In recent years, Flateyri has lost much of its former strength in the fishing industry and its population.

The small village of Suðureyri, located in a steep, narrow fjord in the northern Westfjords is a relatively new village as it was only a small settlement until the beginning of the 20th century. Until the end of the 19th century, the fjord was very isolated during the winter and the only access was by sea or walking trails to neighboring farms and villages. In the early 20th century, the village started to grow in correspondence to increased fishing and fish processing ventures.

Today, the population is under 300, and most of the residents work in the fishing industry. Suðureyri is also now part of the Ísafjörður municipality. Suðureyri, like many of the villages and towns in the Westfjords, is now moving towards the tourism industry.

Home to the oldest fishing station in Iceland, Bolungarvík, is one of the most northern towns in the Westfjords. Fishing has always been the major industry due to the short distance to rich fishing grounds. For centuries, Bolungarvík was one of the largest fishing stations in the country.

In the late 19th century, fishing, fish processing, and commercial activities became the primary means of income and industry. Just like many towns around the coast in Iceland, major changes began when Icelanders started fishing with decked vessels and motorboats. With the increase in fishing productivity, Bolungarvík began to urbanize and the former fishing station grew into a true town.
One of the few coastal towns in Iceland that does not trace its beginnings to the fishing industry but rather to farming. With land for agriculture being hard to come by in the Westfjords, and fishing grounds were rich in many other places where fishing towns developed.

However, Súðavík, similarly to other coastal towns and villages around the country, did take part in fishing on a small scale. At the end of the 19th century the village began to form after Norwegian entrepreneurs started a whaling company. The very small town is now known for its small fishing operations and fish processing facilities.

With only 53 residents, Norðurfjörður is as small as a village can be. The very remote area did not serve as a great location for growing a fishing industry. Even though the fishing grounds could be easily accessed, the isolation of the village stunted its growth. Still, small scale fishing takes place by residents mostly.

Drangsnes is a pure Icelandic fishing village. The small village grew out of an early fishing station much like many other coastal towns. Located near the rich fishing grounds of the north, it thrives off of its nearby bounty. With fewer than 100 inhabitants, nearly all of them work in the fishing industry or have had their lives affected by it in some way.
HÓLMAVÍK
TOTAL CATCH LANDED: 1,580 tons
REGISTERED SHIPS: 30
POPULATION: 375
SETTLEMENT PATTERN: FJORD

Hólmavík did not develop as a village until fairly recently. The first settlement began in the late 19th century and developed around a small trading post. A small cluster of houses made up the settlement in the early 20th century, and it wasn’t really until the forties and the fifties that Hólmavík began to develop as a village.

When the village of Hólmavík began to develop in the early fifties, it was mainly the fishing and fish processing industries that built up the village’s economy and allowed for urbanization like most Icelandic villages on the coastline. The town today still depends of support from the fishing industry for the core of their economy.

ÍSAFJÖRÐUR
TOTAL CATCH LANDED: 20,238 tons
REGISTERED SHIPS: 37
POPULATION: 2,559
SETTLEMENT PATTERN: FJORD

The largest town in the Westfjords, Ísafjörður began as a trading post and fishing station. The town began to form around the mid 19th century and the growth of the town was triggered by salt fish production. Ever since then, the fishing industry has been vital for the community.

In the 20th century, the fishing and fish processing industry became the backbone of the town and for the majority of the population, their main livelihood. In the 80’s, Ísafjörður was one of the strongholds of the fishing industry in Iceland. At one point, the largest and most modern fishing vessel in Iceland called Ísafjörður home, but things began to change with the fishing quota system was implemented. Just the same for many of the towns and villages in the Westfjords, this was a huge drawback for development.
The Northwest region of Iceland has not been the most prolific fishery in the country, but with settlements located on the coast, of course there is a history of fishing. Many of the towns in the region were settled either due to fishing or trading as is the common theme for coastal towns.

All of the towns were fairly slow to develop however. It was not until the middle of the 20th century, after motorized fishing vessels were widely available, that the Northwestern towns began expanding. Another reason could be the lack of great natural harbors in the region compared to other parts of the country. Many needed expanding or large protective piers for safer navigating. The herring boom came about in the same time period, which helped to bring industry to an all time high in the region, specifically Skagaströnd who went all in for the herring industry, only to be left struggling after the herring stocks were overfished and almost entirely depleted.

Presently, much of the region has begun catering to tourist and other travelers passing through the region on the ring road. Fishing is still a core value to most of the towns and it looks to be a part of the region for the foreseeable future.
Hvammstangi, is a small but densely populated town of the Northwest. Similarly to many coastal towns, Hvammstangi doesn’t have much history before the 20th century due to the fishing industries rapid growth in that time.

Trading has been taking place at Hvammstangi for over 50 years. The town came to be at a time when new trade opportunities were increasing with the fishing industry meaning that residents did not have to rely on their agriculture as much.

Today the small scale fishing industry which focuses mainly on shrimp, is still an important factor in the towns economy.

Skagaströnd developed rather slowly despite being a trading center since the late 15th century. Despite this early trading and being located on a good natural harbor that was prime for landing fish, Skagaströnd did mature into the trading hub as many had hoped it would.

Work on expanding the harbor area began in the 1930’s with a fish processing factory as well as a herring factory in 1946. There were plans to expand the town tremendously during this herring boom but that would never come to be. The herring disappeared from Húnaflói along with any hopes of further development. However, today Skagaströnd is still a strong fishing town. The fishing and fish processing industry serves as the backbone of the town’s economy.

The trading post at Hofsós dates all the way back to the 16th century. This however, did not translate to growth over time for the tiny village. On paper, Hofsós had all the correct pieces of the puzzle to become a larger town; It was a trading post for the Danish Trade Monopoly, there was good fishing grounds nearby, it is central in the region, and it has a relatively good harbor for landing fish. The town simply did not develop like other coastal towns that had similar characteristics.

Recently, the town has begun shift its main source of income from fishing to tourism. The fishing and fish processing industry is currently still the main base of the town’s economy.
Sauðárkrókur is known as a town with the most diverse economy of all the smaller towns and villages in Iceland, and one of the larger “small towns.” Although the town is located on the coast, Sauðárkrókur first developed as more of a service center for the agricultural area in Skagafjörður, rather than a fishing town. Serving as a trading post in the past, the town had to compete with the small village and trading post of Hofsós on the other side of the fjord which proved difficult for quite some time. Fishing and fish processing didn’t expand until the mid-20th century. One reason was the lack of good landing spot or a good harbor. It wasn’t until a pier was built that landing conditions improved. Since then, Sauðárkrókur has developed and maintained its share in the fishing industry.
FISHING TOWNS: 13
TOTAL CATCH: 105,946 TONS

The Northeast region of the country has a long, and rich history of fishing. The region is home to several deep fjords and towns that all seem to be located on good natural harbors. This, along with great fishing grounds close to settlements, helped to shape The Northeast into one of the best fishing regions in the country. The fared quite well through the implementation of the fishing quota regulations and is home to one of Iceland’s largest commercial fishing companies.

The herring boom and subsequent bust created a frenzy in the Northeast. Towns like Siglufjörður put it all on the line for the short lived herring industry. Nowadays, Siglufjörður has repurposed their abandoned herring era infrastructure into museums and into tourism based services which has been a similar booming industry for the town lately.

Many of the towns in the region are still very much a part of the fishing industry today, as they were years ago and look to have a promising continuing with their fishing industries.
The town of Siglufjörður is a geographically isolated place. Located in a narrow fjord surrounded by steep mountains, and valuable natural resources. For centuries, the town was a short distance to incredibly rich fishing grounds. Siglufjörður developed into a major herring operation; this marked the beginning of the town’s growth and highly fascinating history. The boom of the herring industry was incredible. In the early 20th century, factories for herring-meal production were built left and right. The business was highly profitable, and Siglufjörður became the Klondike of Iceland, and the population and fishing industry grew exponentially until the herring stock simply disappeared in the 60’s due to overfishing. The incredible herring boom and bust changed the town forever.

A typical coastal fishing town that came to be at the end of the 19th century and developed in the first half of the 20th century. Similar to its sister town, Siglufjörður, the fjord where the village is located has a history of isolation and lack of communication throughout the centuries.

Despite their isolation, they had good access to great fishing grounds which helped to fuel development in the town. The change from rowing boats to decked and motorized vessels made it much easier to sail farther out from the fjord to the open sea and fast-tracked Ólafsfjörður to become a fishing village. Today, small scale fishing takes place out of Ólafsfjörður with most large scale operations in Akureyri and Dalvik.

The northernmost inhabitant territory in Iceland, in only 5 square kilometers in size. The small island has been a fishing powerhouse since the Viking days. With nothing but collecting bird eggs and fishing to support their economy, Grímsey has been an important fishery of the north. Steep, rocky cliffs surround all but the southern side of the island which offers the only good area to land fish.

A recently improved harbor has created even better conditions for the residents to continue supporting the town with the natural bounty found around the waters of their home. If it were not for the fishing industry, life on Grímsey would likely not be possible.
Since the early days, the large island was known for fishing and trade. In the 19th century, Norwegians and Swedes built a herring salting factory on the island, with Icelanders following suit soon after. The herring industry boom, reached its greatest heights in Hrísey between 1930 and 1950. Overfishing the Icelandic herring stock led to a steep decline in the fishing industry in the 1960s, and the last fish freezing plant on Hrísey, owned by the Eyjafjörður Co-operative Society, closed in 1999.

Today the locals still make the majority of their living through fishing industry on a smaller scale. Recently, with the tourism boom in Iceland, locals have been catering more and more towards that growing industry.

Located on the west side of the deep fjord Eyjafjörður, Dalvík is like most coastal towns in Iceland, it developed from rich fishing grounds in the early 20th century. Up until that time, the consisted mostly of farming. The first houses were built in at the same time as fishing and fish processing started to develop. The town developed in accordance with the fishing industry, as the industry grew, so did the town.

The fishing and fish processing industry has always been the primary source of income for most residents of Dalvík and still is. Although many towns and villages in Iceland were hit hard by the introduction of the fishing quota system, in the late in the 20th century, Dalvík was not affected and is still a strong fishing town.

A small community just down the road from Dalvík, Árskógssandur did not flourish from the fishing industry as much as its close neighbor did. While the fishing village holds the fishing industry close and still uses fishing to support its economy, it simply did not compare to the superior harbors and location of the nearby towns of Dalvík and Akureyri.
Fishing and the fishing industry has been a dominating factor throughout the history of Hauganes. Early on in its history, much like the rest of the coastal settlements, Hauganes was home to small fishing operations. While fishing is still ingrained into the culture of the people of Hauganes, no large scale fishing operations are present today. The town is however, the proud home to the Éktakur, one of the main producers of salted cod fish in consumer packaging in Iceland.

Grenivík is a young village, since it has only been around for a few decades, probably the newest and youngest in Iceland. Even in 1935, the town did not contain more than 20 houses, and most of the inhabitants worked in agricultural related activities. This was due to the lack of natural harbor or good landing place for fishing vessels.

In the mid 20th century, the first fishing vessels arrived at Grenivík, and fish processing began. Soon after, a better harbor was built, and increased fishing activity began. Today fishing and fish processing are the main sources of income for most of the residents. Through all of the changes in the fishing industry in Iceland since the introduction of the quota system, Grenivík has survived and thrived.

It is widely thought that Húsavík, is the first place inhabited by people in Iceland. Interestingly it has been a place for trading for ages and also a place that has, throughout centuries taken advantage of the fishing grounds in Skjálfandi bay. The town served as an important trading post in the middle ages, and later at the time of the notorious Danish–Icelandic Trade Monopoly.

The first thing that will hit you if you visit Húsavík is the strong smell of fish that still wafts around the harbor. Húsavík harbor right in the heart of town. The harbor once was home to a large fishing fleet, filled with the activity of fisherman. Today, it still serves as a fishing harbor but today’s activity revolves more around the successful whale watching and tourism business.
Kópasker is a small fishing village located on the eastern shore of Oxarfjordur fjord. As a coastal town in Iceland, it took part in early fishing ventures in small row boats. The town still fishes on a small scale which accounts for part of their economic base along with agricultural services.

Raufarhöfn was at one point in time, home to largest export harbor in Iceland. In the mid 20th century, the herring boom dominated the Icelandic economy and Raufarhöfn was a town that did not miss out on the craze. However, the herring boom was short lived, and once it went bust after the herring disappeared, the effect was devastating for the village. Much of the old factories and former fishing industry is still in place within the village.

The town continues to fish, out of their good natural harbor but ever since the herring industry went bust, the town never fully recovered.

Þórshöfn is a small remote village that interestingly developed from trading rather than fishing in its early settlement days. Despite their trading history, Þórshöfn did not develop into a village until the first decades of the 20th century. This is due to the arrival of motorized fishing vessels which shifted the town’s economic base from trading to the fishing and fish processing industry just as it remains today.

Unlike many of the remote villages in Iceland that are struggling today because of the changes brought about by the fishing quota system, Pórsfóhn has held a good economic standing due to their ability to continue fishing at a large scale.
Akureyri, “The Heart of The North” is the largest town outside of the capital. The town had already begun forming in the 17th century, far earlier than most towns around the country. With fertile agricultural ground, and rich fishing grounds very close by, Akureyri had all the right pieces to become a trading hub for the North, which in turn helped it develop into a large town.

Today, Akureyri has an extensive operation in the fish industry today and is home to one of the strongest and largest fishing companies in Iceland. Fishing on an industrial scale however, did not begin until the 20th century. This is despite the fact that Akureyri has perfect natural conditions for a harbor and had maintained excellent fishing grounds throughout time.
A fishing powerhouse, the thirteen fishing towns of The Eastern region of Iceland are the clear champions of total fish caught. A quick look at the landscape of The East lends some reasoning as to why it is such a productive fishery. The many deep, isolated fjords of this region are full of great natural harbors, safe from the rough open seas and usually deep for large fishing vessels. After the quota system was put in place, many towns of The East fared quite well, and the region is home to some of the largest and most productive fishing companies in the country.

The region, like the rest of the coastal areas in the country, grew, and developed mainly from the fishing industry. However, it was not just the Icelandic people that pushed the fishing industry to new levels. Foreign fishermen and investors came to The East at many times in its history, many from France, and Norway. This brought a new and unique culture to the towns of the region, which still show some foreign influence today.
The miniscule village of Bakkafjörður is arguably the smallest and most isolated village in Iceland, in terms of activity and geography. It is basically a cluster of houses with a small harbour. Just slightly larger and more modern than the historic fishing stations that dotted the coastline.

The entirety of the population depends on the fishing and fish processing industry in the town. Almost all of the boats in Bakkafjörður, the town’s fjord, are small family owned motorboats operated by one or two persons. There was one fishing company, Toppfiskur, who employed part of the town until the end of 2015 when they shut down operations in Bakkafjörður. The struggling town still now looks to the sea to stabilize them in the future.

The name Vopnafjörður literally translates to “Weapon Fjord.” The fjord luckily is also home to great fishing grounds and a good natural harbor which the town was built upon. The development of the town was directly related to motorboats early in the 20th century and later the herring boom which dominated the northern and north-eastern regions in the forties and fifties.

Presently, fishing and fish processing are the major industries of the town and main contributors to the economy. The majority of the town works in some sector of the fishing industry and all residents have their livelihoods effected by it. Due to their strong fishing industry, the future in Vopnafjörður is quite promising.

Fishing began on a small scale in the town when a trading post, fishing and fish processing venture was started in the late 19th century. This continued into the 20th century, when most of the livelihood and development in the village was based on fishing and fish processing. Despite this, fishing did not amount to much for the residents until the infamous herring boom in the sixties. A herring plant was built and the town went all in for the “Icelandic gold rush” However, this was short lived as the herring stocks brutally collapsed, leaving many towns, including Borgarfjörður Eystri in financial crisis.

Currently, Borgarfjörður Eystri is struggling to provide for the remaining residents in the village. The economy is still mostly based on the fishing industry.
Seyðisfjörður is unique as surprisingly, it is the only town on the coast that is located at the bottom of a fjord. This is due to the depth of the sea in the fjord, making it possible for ships of all sizes to sail into a calm, natural harbor in the bottom of the fjord. Similarly to many other towns, fishing and proximity to fishing grounds played a significant role in the development of Seyðisfjörður. However, it was not the usual catch, but rather herring and whale. In the mid 19th century, a smaller, early herring boom hit The East. Merchants, and entrepreneurs in the fishing industry came to Seyðisfjörður to take part in this industry, which opened up development opportunities for people in the surrounding areas and caused them to move to the new growing urban area by the fjord.

Mjóifjörður, or The Narrow Fjord, is a fjord that is 18 km long and very remote, even according to Icelandic standards. A tiny settlement is located there with hardly enough people for any sort of industry.

The area does have some interesting history though, just slightly over a century ago, local industry included whaling, which occurred out of the station at Asknes, across the fjord. It was built by Norwegians around 1900, and at that time, the station was one of the world’s largest, employing some 200 people. That is in stark contrast to the settlement today, where the residents still fish on a very small scale in small private vessels in the fjord.

The origin of Eskifjörður can be traced to trading and fishing, like most of the towns and villages in Iceland. Word spread fast to entrepreneurs in trading that learned about the profit in fishing and fish exporting and the economy in Eskifjörður was thriving in the end the 19th century. The harbor became one of the busiest exporting harbors in Iceland. Since fishing was already a vital base for the town in the 20th century, it was quick to adjust to technical development and motorboats arrived in 1905. This was a great for the growth of Eskifjörður and the town flourished until the third decade when the catch declined and prices in foreign markets dropped. Despite this, the town rebounded in the 50’s and has not slowed down since. The current fishing industry in Eskifjörður is a strong backbone for the town.
<table>
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<th>Location</th>
<th>Total Catch Landed</th>
<th>Registered Ships</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Settlement Pattern</th>
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<td>36</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>Fjord</td>
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</tbody>
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The same story as most of the towns and villages of coastal Iceland, Reyðarfjörður is a village that originated as a fishing town and trading post in the late 19th century. The rich fishing grounds close by and the exceptional natural harbour conditions at the bottom of the longest fjord in region all played into the town’s favor. Reyðarfjörður had all of the necessary pieces to the puzzle for a successful town.

In addition though, while most towns in Iceland have three main factors as their prerequisite for development; fishing, trading and tourism, Reyðarfjörður also has an aluminium smelting industry. This has created an economic foundation that gives the town almost an exceptionally strong economic base.

Fáskrúðsfjörður owes their existence mainly to its rich fishing grounds and trading posts. The village has a very interesting and unique history.

In the 19th and 20th century, European fishermen and entrepreneurs in the fishing and fish processing industry had noticed the enormously rich and lucrative fishing grounds around Iceland - even before most Icelanders realized the value of those resources in front of them, except for means of surviving. One nation that had the ability to take advantage of the fishing grounds was France. For over four decades, Fáskrúðsfjörður was the main base of operation for hundreds of vessels from France. The small village became more integrated with foreign relations than any other town or village at the time.

Once known as a fishing town, Stoðvarfjörður has shifted its focus to other industries. Due to its lack of natural conditions for a harbor the fishing industry did not develop to the same extent as it did in many other villages in the The East. Several attempts were made, but the fishing industry never fully developed into a permanent economic base. However, after a small harbor was built late in the 20th century, conditions have improved for small boats, which allows small scale, mostly private fishing to take place.

A recent project in the town is the renovation and redevelopment of the fish factory. A deserted fish factory in the town is being transformed into a cultural and creative hub with studios, workshops and a center for area artists.
Breiðdalsvík traces its origin to trading in the 19th and 20th century. Although it is located on the coast, the bay is shallow and loaded with large rocks and small islands. This made it difficult for vessels to navigate to shore throughout the centuries; one of the reasons why a dock or a functional harbor did not develop until later in its history. This was the reason why fishing did not play a large role in the village's development.

In the 60's and 70's, Breiðdalsvík had a good base for developing its economy based on fishing and fish processing. However, with just one trawler and a few fishing boats, the town ended up like so many small villages in Iceland; it did not survive the fishing quota system. Due to this loss of industry, the population has declined ever since as only small scale fishing takes place.

Djúpivogur is a village that has origins very early in Icelandic history. Djúpivogur is very small. As early as the late 16th century, Djúpivogur became an important trading post for the southern part of The East, trading back to the Danish as well as the Germans.

The town has history in fishing of course, being a coastal Icelandic settlement that goes without saying. Today, the fishing and fish processing industry still places a key role in the town as a large part of it's economic base.

Höfn is a larger settlement that is located on a peninsula in the southeast region of the country. The name Höfn translates to harbor, which is quite fitting as it is a fishing town surrounded on three sides by the sea.

Höfn is one of very few harbors in the southern part of Iceland and it needs to be navigated with caution. This is due to the changing pattern of shoals located in and around the harbor. Dredging is essential to ensure safe passage by removing sand that has accumulated near the harbor.

Today, the economy is mainly based on the fishing and fish processing industry. Most all of the Norway lobster caught in Iceland is landed in Hornafjörður.
Neskaupstaður is the easternmost town in Iceland and is one of few towns in Iceland where life and the town’s economy still depend almost completely on fishing and fish processing. Throughout the centuries, Neskaupstaður has always been blessed with rich fishing grounds nearby. The town’s fishing industry started to develop in the late 19th century from Faeroe Island and Norse entrepreneurs and continued to grow up until the quota regulations.

Arguably the best fishing town in the country, Neskaupstaður has the most total fish landed for the 2016 calendar year. With one of the largest fishing and fish processing companies based in town, Neskaupstaður has a promising future with their fisheries.
The southern coast of Iceland is better known for its black sand beaches, glaciers and waterfalls rather than for its fishing industry. The typical Icelandic coastline is rocky irregular, with numerous fjords and inlets, that is, except for the south where the coast is mostly soft sandy beaches that lack any good harbors that are needed for large scale fishing industry to take place.

In the early days of rowing boat fishing, the southern coastline was dotted with several seasonal fishing stations. The small open boats could be pulled ashore at the conclusion of fishing, however, when the fishing industry grew and larger sail and decked vessels became more popular, these sites were quickly abandoned for areas with harbors.

Despite only two active fishing towns being located in the south, their catch total rivals that of more favorable landscapes due to a small archipelago just off the mainland called Vestmannaeyjar. One of the countries most successful fisheries, they are quite literally located in some of the best fishing grounds in Iceland. The harsh volcanic islands are in stark contrast to the rest of the southern region.
Like much of Iceland, fishing has always been a part of life in Þorlákshöfn. It is home to one of the best natural harbors along the southern coast, and is only a short distance from rich fishing grounds. In the age of rowing, it was common for 30-40 boats to be based in Þorlákshöfn. During the winter, this would mean that the town’s population would be 300-400. Living accommodations were stone and turf lodges.

As the second half of the 20th century began, work started on developing a solidly based fisheries operation, and the population began increasing. A suitable harbor was built for larger vessels and today the fishing industry is still the major industry of the town.

Since its settlement, the islanders have sustained themselves with the bounty that they have sought at sea. Excellent fishing grounds are located very close by and since the island was inhabited, Vestmannaeyjar has always been the country’s most profitable fishing harbor. For centuries men rowed in open boats to the fishing grounds using the same equipment of lines and hooks. The most important revolution in working conditions ever seen in Vestmannaeyjar occurred near the turn of the last century. At that time the fishing fleet was motorized and the equipment was extensively improved to enable much larger catches. As a result of the growing fishing industry, the population of the island grew quite sharply. From 500 people in 1900, it now stands at about 4,500.
THE SOUTHERN PENINSULA

FISHING TOWNS: 3
TOTAL CATCH: 69,617 TONS

The volcanic landscape of the Southern Peninsula has a rich fishing history to match the rich fishing grounds that are located not far from its shores. Also known as the Reykjanes Peninsula, this area is presently home to three very active fishing towns; Sandgerði, Keflavik and Grindavik. Icelanders have been fishing this area of the country since the early days of settlement, Grindavik itself boasts that it has been in the fishing industry for over 1,000 years. There are still remnants of the original fishing stations that can be found along the coast.

The close proximity to flourishing fishing grounds played a large role in why this area was settled, as well as why these fishing towns still exist today. The landscape itself also was an important deciding factor as this area was blessed with several good natural harbors. In addition to the notable fishing and fish processing industry that is present on the peninsula, there is also large scale fish farming operations in Grindavik.

With the country’s international airport located on the peninsula, it is prime for the export of fish. A fish caught or raised on the peninsula can quite literally go from the ocean, to a plane, to your plate at a restaurant in New York. Location, location, location.
Similarly to the many small towns and villages along the coast, Sandgerði owes its existence to the rich fishing grounds located just off the coast. Sandgerði consisted of a cluster of fishing farms that formed a fishing post by the seaside. Sandgerði began to develop as a fishing village in the second half of the nineteenth century when motorboats took over the rowing boats, urbanizing like many towns did at this time.

Today, Sandgerði continues as an important part of the fishing industry after surviving the fishing quota system, created by the Icelandic government in 1990. The harbor is still the center of the town’s economy, where many fishing vessels of varying size operate.

Early seasonal fishing stations were located at the good natural harbor in Keflavik, which grew in direct relation to the fishing industry. A notable fishing town up until the 1980s, the town lost many fishing vessels and fishing companies to other towns and villages. This caused the fishing industry in Keflavik to decline in the last two decades of the 20th century. The fate of the town was decided just the same as many fishing towns across Iceland, by the fishing quota regulations that were put in place. The town is still active in smaller fishing ventures, but nowadays it has shifted its focus towards the ever growing tourism industry, which is fitting seeing as the only international airport in the country is located in Keflavik.

One of the oldest settlements in Iceland, fishing has been a way of life, and way of survival for Grindavik’s population. However, fishing trips were often dangerous, men frequently lost at sea and the catch not always stable. This changed when a safer access point to land was created at Hópið in 1939 changing fishing conditions dramatically. From 1950 serious development in the fishing industry had begun to take place.

This typical Icelandic fishing town and it is one of the few towns in Iceland which survived the fishing quota system, created by the Icelandic government in 1990. A quota system that hit many fishing towns hard. Recently, the fishing industry has grown and thrived turning Grindavik to one of the strongest fishing towns in the nation.
Iceland may be a small, isolated island, but it reaches every part of the globe with its export of fish products. Known as one of the world’s best fisheries, Iceland supplies clean, responsibly caught fish in every way imaginable.

The Icelandic economy has, almost from the beginning, depended heavily on importing products such as minerals, grain and manufactured products. Consequently, export has also been important. From the 14th until the mid 19th century, usually around half of the exports were marine products, mainly shark liver oil and dried or salted cod.

After the mid 19th century, the importance of marine products steadily increased and reached around 90% of total merchandise export in the period from 1930 to 1967, when the herring stocks collapsed and the ratio of marine products in total merchandise export fell sharply.
ELEMENTS
INFRASTRUCTURE
SCALE
FUTURE FOR FISHING

There is no disputing the importance of the fishing industry to the country and to the culture of the Icelandic people. Fishing quite literally is the reason for the existence of many towns around the country. Despite the many ups and downs over the long history of the fishing industry, the future looks bright for many areas of the country.

Many of the working waterfronst and harbors are now catering to more than just the fishing industry. With tourism at an all time high in Iceland, the harbors are teeming with tourist who flock to them. Reykjavik has done a great job at blending the tourism industry with the fishing industry. The two are quite literally side by side, as guests look out their hotel window over the dry docks, and those dining in the harbor restaurants located in repurposed fishing buildings can watch their catch be brought from the ocean to the table. The city is now looking back towards the harbor to serve as their center once again. The push to utilize and redevelop the large harbor has grown greatly recently. Current redevelopment includes renovation of bait shacks to shops, former fish markets updated to hotels, and fish warehouses changed to maritime museums. A recent design competition received entries from all around the world offering potential master plans for the harbor. The key in the winning designs were the seamless blending of the working waterfront and the residents, and tourist of the city.
CONCLUSION

The fishing landscape of Iceland is not just ships and water. The deeply rooted cultural values, history and tradition that is forever ingrained into these vital landscapes is something that cannot be overlooked. I do not believe that there is a relationship that can compare to Icelanders and their fishing industry. Its importance and role in the development and settlement patterns of towns and villages around the country is unparalleled. The very first place we went when arriving in Reykjavik, Iceland on June 2, 2017 was the harbor. We did not really plan on going there, but rather were just naturally drawn to it. The harbor, the working landscape was, and in many places still is the core and heartbeat of the towns in Iceland.

Today, in almost every town and village in the country, there is a harbor, a working landscape where men and women take part in a cultural practice as old as the country itself. No matter the newest economic trend, the fishing industry has been supporting and growing the country since its settlement. The Landscape of Fishing played a major role in Iceland by shaping its development and settlement on a country-wide level and on the individual landscapes of each fishing town, harbor by harbor. These fishing landscapes are not only working landscapes, but landscapes of culture that served, and continue to serve as the foundation that the country was built upon.
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