

**Speech by
First Lady Eliza Reid
Fishermen's Day in Grindavík
2 June 2019**

Good afternoon, til hamingju með daginn, and thank you for inviting me to be with you here today to celebrate this most special, and, if I may say, Icelandic, of holidays.

I say “Icelandic” because for foreign-born and raised me, Sjómannadagur is one of my favourite holidays here. For me personally, it showcases something far removed from what I grew up with. On the farm where I was raised near Ottawa, Canada, we were hundreds of kilometres from salt water. Fresh fish was a rare luxury for us to eat. For my grandparents too, the ever-present scent of sea air we take for granted here in Iceland was not something they were raised with. In fact, my maternal grandfather grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba, perhaps as far from the ocean as any larger town in Canada. And yet, during the Second World War he volunteered with the Royal Navy. I once asked him why so many from his hometown signed up for nautical service, and he replied that the big skies of the Prairies were so similar to the wide expanse of sky when one was at sea.

Of course, that novelty is not really why I have such a soft spot for Sjómannadagur. It's so many other things. Sjómannadagur is not a day imported from abroad and exploited to sell more cards, flowers, or costumes. It's not based on a religious festival that is reproduced in similar form in other countries around the world. It is here for those most important of reasons: To celebrate, to educate, and to remember.

We have much to celebrate when it comes to our fisheries. We are among world leaders when it comes to sustainability, traceability and management of fish stocks in our waters.

We are using more of the fish in more creative ways, from the use of fish skin to treat diabetic and other wounds, to the use of fish products in dietary supplements, and beauty products, and fish leather as an attractive and durable material for fashion items.

Fish processing plants remain large employers in many of Iceland's communities, helping to sustain them and refresh them. In turn, a new wave of immigrants from around the world are working in these facilities, contributing their unique backgrounds and experiences to our society. And, I recently read online that fishermen are sexier than farmers I suppose that's not news to you though!

Dear friends, Sjómannadagur is more than a celebration. Earlier today I attended a service at the church here in Grindavík, while my husband was at a ceremony in Fossvogur Cemetery. Thankfully, there are fewer accidents at sea now than in decades past. And at the beginning of the year we could celebrate that there have been no fatalities in Icelandic waters for the past two years. Nevertheless, fishing remains a potentially dangerous profession.

Poet James Reeves' poem "The Sea" captures some of this danger. This is the first verse:

The sea is a hungry dog,
Giant and grey.
He rolls on the beach all day.
With his clashing teeth and shaggy jaws
Hour upon hour he gnaws
The rumbling, tumbling stones,
And 'Bones, bones, bones, bones!'
The giant sea-dog moans,
Licking his greasy paws.

We have a duty to remember the sacrifices of all those who have lost their lives at sea and to work hard to prevent as many future deaths as possible.

Come to think of it, maybe Sjómann dagur is not so far removed from my upbringing after all. Sure, I was not near the sea, but I was near people who worked hard to provide, who tried to harness nature's gifts to help us, in a sustainable way.

And here, in the place I chose to make my home, the sea is ever present, one of my strongest memories from my first visit, and what I think of when I'm abroad. That sea breeze, that salty smell, seeps into your bones, and into your soul.

To all of you who nurture that sea feeling in your souls, who provide us with food and employment, and transport, and entertainment, thank you for your work, your sacrifices, and this invaluable contribution to making our communities and society what they are today.

Thank you all, and again, congratulations.