

Importing Cruelty

CANADA'S COMMERCIAL SEAL HUNT:
CRUEL AND UNSUSTAINABLE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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CANADA'S COMMERCIAL SEAL HUNT

The Canadian seal hunt is the world's largest marine mammal hunt. It is unacceptably cruel and biologically unsustainable, as documented in this report.

The seal hunt is bigger now than it has been in 50 years. Between 2003 and 2005 more than one million seals were killed and the vast majority were harp seal pups aged between two weeks and three months of age.

The scale of the suffering is now of such magnitude that decisive action by the international community is imperative.

UNQUESTIONABLY CRUEL

The Canadian Government claims that the methods used to kill seals are humane but consideration of the relevant legislation and veterinary reports reveals that the hunt is inherently cruel. All veterinary panels have documented unacceptable levels of cruelty evident in the Canadian commercial seal hunt.

Independent veterinary experts have concluded that shooting seals in open water can never be humane.

A team of veterinarians found that 79% of sealers did not check if the seal was dead before skinning it.

The sealers' practice of shooting multiple seals on the ice to immobilise them is also inhumane. This leads to considerable pain and distress if the animal is not killed with the first shot. Indeed, sealers have an economic incentive to leave shot and wounded seals to suffer as the value of the pelt decreases with each bullet hole.

Footage of all the seal hunts documented show severe animal suffering. The 2005 footage has scenes of seals with terrible head injuries that are left in stockpiles of dead and dying animals for as long as 90 minutes.

UNENFORCEABLE

The seal hunt involves thousands of individuals using numerous boats and skidoos over hundreds of square miles of open ocean and ice. Sealers compete with each other for the available quota over a huge area during a relatively short period of time. The relevant authorities do not have sufficient capacity to monitor the hunt or to enforce the regulations. Indeed the enforcement difficulties represented by the location of the hunt and the environment are almost certainly insurmountable.



“The more they kill the better I’ll love it”

JOHN EFFORD, NEWFOUNDLAND’S FISHERIES MINISTER, 1999.



Many seals are not killed by the first blow, often causing considerable suffering.

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UNSUSTAINABLE

Canada's 2003 - 2005 management plan set a quota of 975,000 harp seals with an annual total allowable catch (TAC) of up to 350,000 in any two years, leaving 275,000 for the third year. These quota levels are equivalent to the over-hunting of the 1950s and 60s that significantly depleted the population.

This management plan does not even begin to comply with modern conservation standards of precaution. It does not adequately account for either scientific or environmental uncertainty. As the seal hunt targets seal pups, catastrophic changes in population could take many years to emerge.

Canada's lack of caution in its approach to natural resource management has long been the target of scientific criticism. Its involvement in the over-fishing that caused the collapse of North Atlantic cod stocks is just one example.

A recent scientific report suggests that the current approach risks depleting the harp seal population by more than 70% within the next 15 years.

UNSCIENTIFIC AND UNECONOMIC

There is no scientific evidence that culling harp seals will produce measurable benefits for any fish stock or commercial fishery. Formerly it was claimed that the harp seal population was impeding the recovery of the cod stocks, however, now even the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) admits that seals cannot be held responsible for the decline in fish stocks. The food web is complicated and culling seals is unlikely to result in an increased amount of cod.

Despite years of market research and development the most valuable part of the seal is its fur, a non-essential luxury product.

Revenue generated by sealing is negligible when compared with that from fishing: it accounts for one-half-of-one-percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

IMPORTING CRUELTY – THE TRADE

Europe is responsible for the continued existence of the Canadian seal hunt because of its import of seal products. If Europe banned the import of these products, as its public overwhelmingly desires, the market would be significantly reduced, thus decreasing the incentive to continue the hunt.

In 2004 the UK accounted for over 30% of the value of all EU imports of Canadian seal skins. The total value of the UK trade in seal products in 2004 was £305,149.

There is little evidence of seal products for sale in the UK and it is suspected that many sealskins are simply re-exported.

A 2005 public opinion poll found that 79% of Britons think the hunt should be banned and that 73% think seal product imports should be outlawed too.

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THE LEGAL CASE

Leading international lawyers consider that there is a strong case for either the EU or individual EU member countries to extend the current ban on the importation of seal pup skins to older harp and hooded seals irrespective of where they were killed. It is argued that such a ban would be compatible with the rules of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on the basis that it could be justified as a measure necessary to protect public morals.

Importantly, a seal product ban is closely analogous to dog and cat fur product bans. The US has stated that its ban on dog and cat fur products is consistent with its WTO obligations.

TIME FOR ACTION

The sealers will continue the hunt as long as the UK and other European nations make it worth their while by importing seal products.

IFAW is calling for a UK import ban on all harp and hooded seal products. Such a ban would make very little difference to British businesses. It would, however, send a powerful message to the Canadian government that it is time for the commercial seal hunt to be consigned to the history books.

The UK Government should prohibit trade in all harp and hooded seal products as soon as possible. Many countries including Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands are already taking similar action. The United States and more recently, Mexico both have a ban on the trade in all marine mammal products.

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