

Canada's Commercial Seal Hunt: Past, Present, and Future





Introduction

This booklet is about Canada's commercial seal hunt, the one that occurs every spring off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. It is *not* about the Inuit seal hunt, which occurs in a different place, at a different time of year, and targets a different species of seal using different methods, primarily as a source of food.

Canada's commercial seal hunt was the first animal welfare issue to be internationally condemned, as grainy images of white seal pups being clubbed and skinned on the ice circled the globe through television and print in the 1960s and '70s.

Even today, late-night comedy hosts continue to refer to Canadians as "baby seal clubbers." And despite polling that consistently indicates the majority of Canadians oppose this industry, we *do* club baby seals: clubs are still legal and regularly used, and over 98% of the animals killed are pups aged 3 weeks to 3 months of age. The question is: Why?

Many people believe the seal hunt ended in the 1980s. And they're mostly right: with the closure of the EU market to whitecoat seal products in 1983, the industry was all but dead. Then came the collapse of the cod fishery in 1992, and although we now know that overfishing and mismanagement were at fault, politicians found a scapegoat in seals. In 1995, Fisheries Minister Brian Tobin declared — with no scientific evidence — that harp seals were responsible for the failure of cod to recover. Tobin increased the quota for harp seals by 30%, and introduced millions of dollars in federal subsidies, effectively creating the commercial seal hunt as it exists today.

Since then, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to develop and market new seal products, support sealers' organizations, provide direct subsidies to sealers, and promote seal products internationally.

For about a decade, these subsidies reinvigorated the industry. The number of seals killed skyrocketed in Canada, with almost 3.5 million animals killed between 1996 and 2008. But as the kill numbers increased, so did the concerns over inhumane killing, with hunt observers and veterinary teams regularly documenting animal cruelty and unnecessary suffering.

In 2009, the European Union took notice and banned the commercial trade in all seal products except for those from Indigenous hunts. Canada and Norway challenged the ban at the World Trade Organization, but lost both the original challenge and appeal. In 2014, the WTO ruled that trade bans may be justified based on public moral concerns over the commercial hunting of seals.

The commercial seal hunt continues to rely on government support, offering seasonal, part-time employment for a few hundred individuals in Atlantic Canada. Efforts to market seal products other than pelts have failed, resulting in massive waste; over 90% of the meat is left on the ice or thrown in the ocean.

Canadian politicians have kept this struggling industry alive for decades with a steady stream of taxpayer dollars. It is now time to support alternatives to commercial sealing that will provide sustainable, long-term, and meaningful employment.

It's 2016. It's time to move on.



Sheryl Fink

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The Commercial Seal Hunt: A Brief History

Harp seals have been commercially hunted in Atlantic Canada since the 1600s. Seals were originally killed for their blubber, which was made into oil. By 1740, the seal hunt was integral to Newfoundland's economy, with large quantities of seal oil shipped to Britain for heating and light, and later as an industrial lubricant and cooking oil. With the advance of technology, the need for seal and whale oil diminished. In the 1950s, Norwegian technology enabled seal pelts to be tanned on an industrial scale, and the industry shifted to hunting seals for their fur, to be made into luxury items like coats, handbags, and boots.

In the 1960s, images of nursing whitecoat seal pups (under 14 days old) being killed in front of their mothers brought Canada's commercial seal hunt international media attention. The public outcry prompted a European ban on products from whitecoat seal pups in 1983, removing the main market

for Canadian seal products.

In the wake of the European ban, and facing the threat of a UK boycott of Canadian fish, the Canadian government finally ended the commercial hunting of whitecoat seals in 1987.

Canada's commercial seal hunt would have effectively ended there were it not for political intervention in the mid-1990s. Following the collapse of the Atlantic cod stocks and fishery moratorium in 1992, Canadians wanted answers, and politicians needed someone – or something – to blame.



In 1995, Fisheries Minister Brian Tobin declared (without any scientific evidence) that “there is only one major player fishing that stock, and his first name is Harp and his second name is Seal.” Tobin increased the Allowable Catch of seals, and introduced millions of dollars in financial support for the industry, including generous subsidies for every pound of meat landed. Over \$20 million in subsidies was spent on the commercial sealing industry between 1996 and 2001.¹

With this influx of taxpayer dollars, commercial sealing experienced a revival. The hunt targeted slightly older pups aged 3 weeks – 3 months of age (known as “beaters”) for their sleek silvery fur. The industry peaked in 2006, when sealers received over \$100 CAD per pelt. Reality struck in 2007, when the industry admitted to having overpaid for skins and sales plummeted.² At the same time, national bans on seal products

SEAL HUNT

Historical Timeline

Largest Seal Hunt on Record
370 boats,
13,600 men,
500,000 seals
landed,
valued at £425,000.

**36 out of 50
Wooden Steamers Lost**
72% of the first generation
of steamers were sunk, most
crushed by the ice.

**48 Men Die in the
Greenland Disaster**

**The Great Newfoundland
Disaster, and the sinking of
the Southern Cross**
78 men died on the ice due to
lack of a wireless aboard the
SS Newfoundland. Many
blamed Captain Abram Kean
for pursuing profit over the well
being of working men. A further
173 men were lost in the sinking
of the *Southern Cross*.

**Norwegians
Begin Sealing off
Newfoundland**

**Newfoundland
Joins
Confederation**
The seal hunt
effectively becomes
a “Canadian” hunt.

**First Scientific
Warning of
Over-Hunting**
Dr. Dean Fisher
writes that
restrictions on the
hunt are needed
to keep the seal
population healthy.

1818-1862 1857 1880s 1863-1895 1898 1906 1914 1920s & 1930s 1937 1939-1945 1949 1950s 1952

**The Golden Age
of Sealing**
18.3 million seals
landed by
Newfoundland
sealers.

Catches Begin to Drop
The increased efficiency of
steam vessels meant that
the harp seal herd began
diminishing.

**First Steel Hulled
Steamer Enters the Hunt**
With boats and equipment
becoming increasingly
expensive, Water Street
merchants increase their
control and profit.

**Seal Hunt Begins
to Dwindle**
An average of 161,000 seals
are landed each year, with
fewer than ten ships, and
around 1500 men participating.

The Newfoundland Sealing Fleet Enters Wartime Service
Average catches plummet to 48,000 seals annually. In 1943,
no large ships went to the hunt, and no seals were hunted.

Industrial Tanning Begins
Norwegian technology enabled the
industrial processing of seal pelts.
As demand for blubber dropped,
seal pelts began to replace it as a
commodity.

were beginning to take hold in Europe.

In 2009, the European Union banned the import and sale of all commercially hunted seal products and the industry has been in decline ever since. Following the ban, the number of seals killed in Atlantic Canada dropped from 218,000 to 76,000. The industry took another blow when Russia — which reportedly represented 90% of Canada’s seal fur exports — followed with a ban in 2011. Recent catches of harp seals are back to mid-1980s levels, and pelt prices are stuck at \$20-30, even when processors receive government loans to purchase pelts.

Despite the commercial sealing industry receiving at least \$50 million in federal funding over the past two decades, the price of a seal skin and landed value of the seal hunt has plummeted from a peak of \$102 per skin in 2006 to \$25-30 in recent years. In 2015, only 35,000 harp seals were killed from the allowable catch of 400,000 — the lowest kill since 1986.

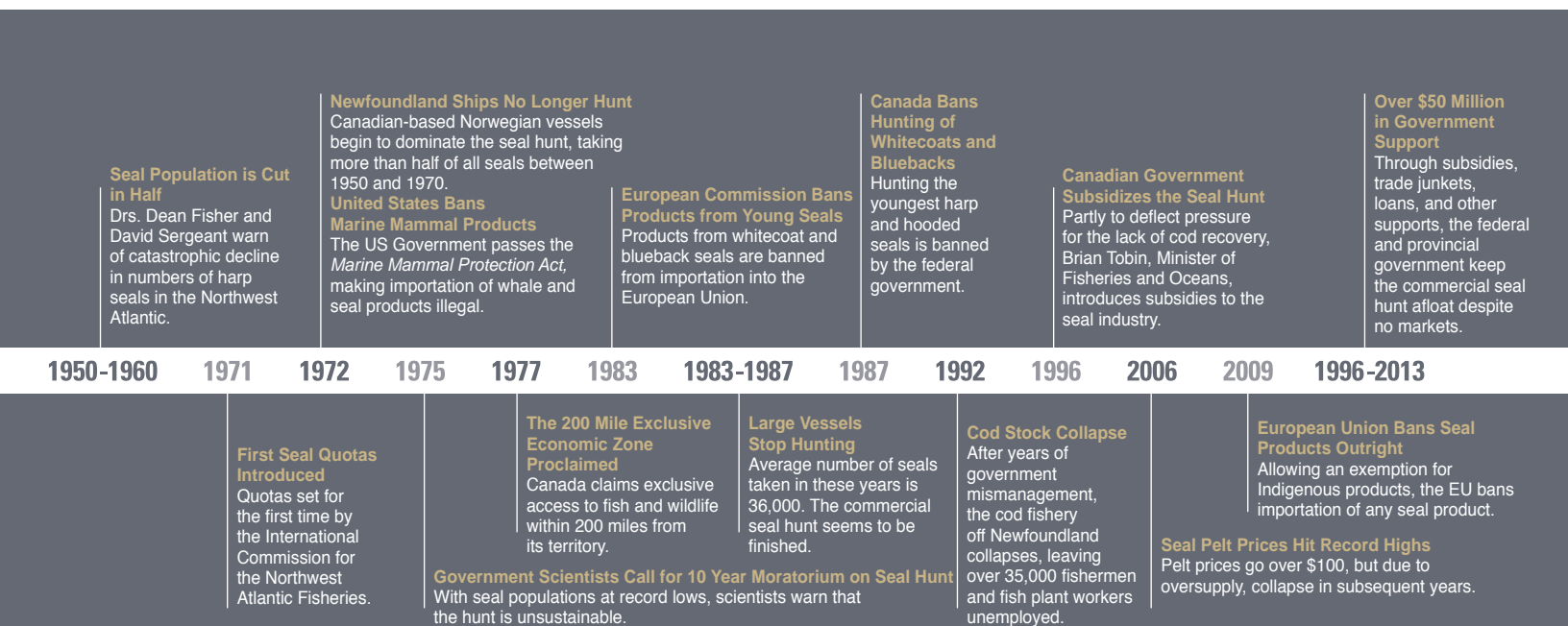
There are currently two seal processors remaining in Newfoundland and Labrador: Carino Ltd., a privately owned subsidiary of Norwegian giant GC Rieber, and PhocaLux International Inc. which began operating in 2015. In 2012, 2013, and 2015 the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador provided \$8.2 million in loans to these processors to purchase pelts.

Unfortunately, sealers themselves have seen little benefit from industry subsidies and loans. Sealers receive \$25-30 per pelt, and profits after expenses such as food and fuel are small. Sealing is an unpredictable and dangerous activity that offers only a few weeks of employment each year. Not surprisingly, the number of sealers involved in the hunt has declined as fishermen turn to other sources of income. In 2006, an estimated 5,594 sealers took part in the hunt; in 2014, only 393.

Although there is a small market for seal products within Newfoundland, attempts to develop international

markets for seal products other than fur have failed. Seal meat is not widely consumed in Canada or elsewhere. Medical research into seal heart valve transplants has been abandoned. Selling seal penises to Asian markets as aphrodisiacs is still being considered,³ but demand appears to have been reduced with the introduction of Viagra. After decades of false promises, the Canadian government’s attempts to access Chinese markets for seal meat have failed, and promotion of seal fur as a luxury product in Asia is struggling, as seal is viewed as a “low-end” and less desirable fur.⁵

For the most part, Canadian fishermen appear to have successfully withstood the decline of the sealing industry, and many Newfoundlanders accept the end of the hunt as a foregone conclusion. Strangely, governments have refused to assist fishermen in the face of disappearing markets, and remained steadfast in their support for a sealing industry that is no longer necessary or economically viable in the 21st century.



Shrinking markets for seal products

Whether one agrees with it or not, the reality is that commercial sealing is an activity that will always attract criticism, both internationally and at home. The fact that harp seals are not an endangered species, or that the pups now being killed are marginally older than the whitecoats seals targeted in the past, makes little difference.

After conducting extensive scientific and socio-economic reviews of commercial seal hunts around the world, the EU passed a resolution in 2009 banning the import and sale of all commercial seal products, with exemptions

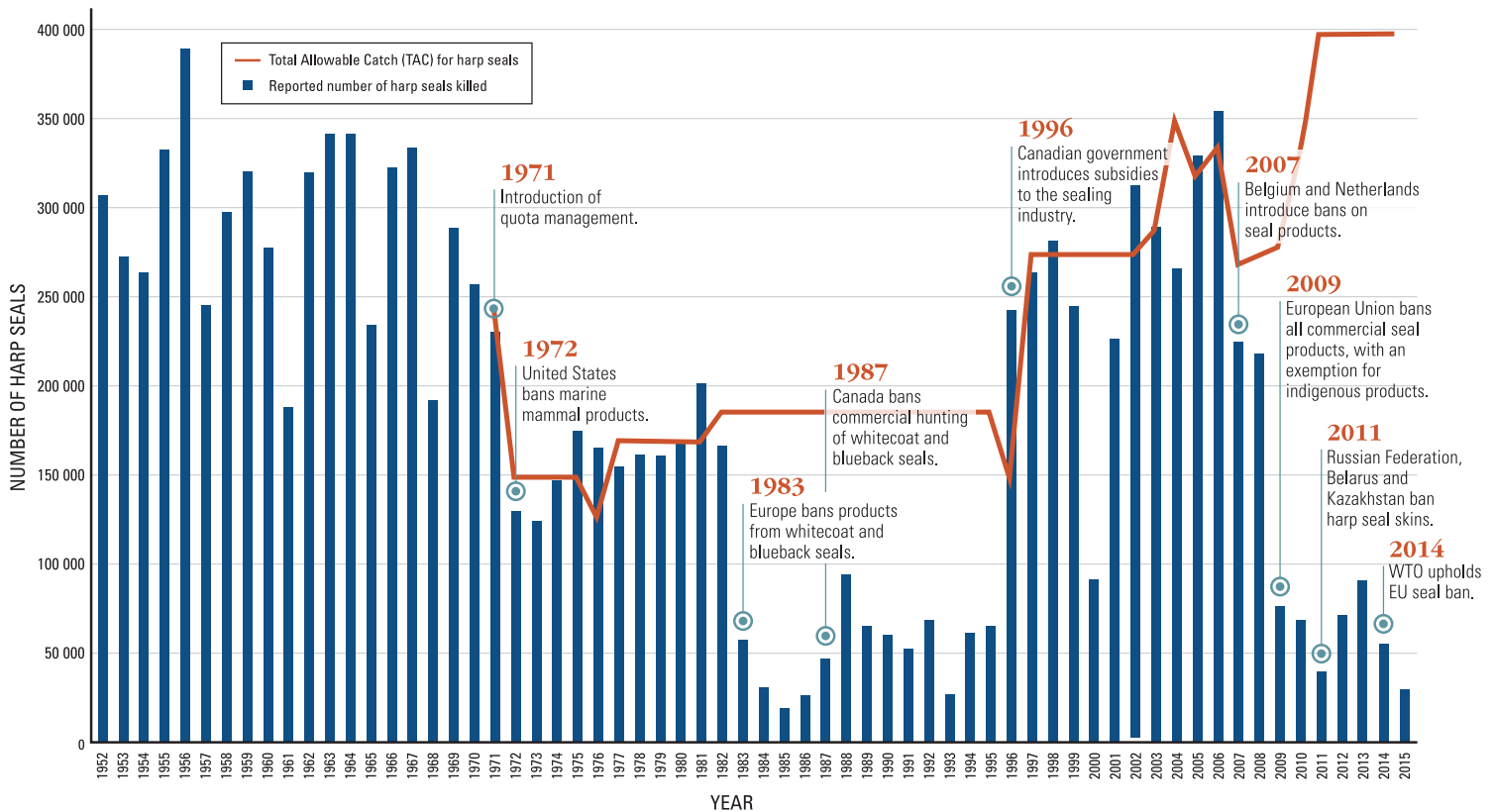
A TOTAL OF 34 COUNTRIES NOW HAVE RESTRICTIONS ON THE IMPORT AND SALE OF SEAL PRODUCTS.

for seal products hunted by Inuit and other Indigenous peoples.⁶ Canada and Norway challenged the ban at the World Trade Organization (WTO), arguing that it was discriminatory and unfair. Both the WTO Panel and Appellate Body upheld the ban, but ruled that modifications to the exceptions were required in order to be compliant. The EU has now made the necessary adjustments, and the ban is firmly in place.

In 2010 Russia also banned the import of harp seal skins,⁷ eliminating 95% of Canada's export market. In 2011, Taiwan banned the import of marine mammal products.⁸ Although Asia has long been touted as a potential saviour for the sealing industry, a 2011 agreement between Canada and China to allow edible seal products to be exported has not been ratified, and there are now reports of China considering a ban on seal products as well.⁹



Canadian Harp Seal Catches Over Time



International Seal Product Bans

1972 United States passes the *Marine Mammal Protection Act*, bans import of seal products.

1983 Europe bans the import of whitecoat harp seal and blueback hooded seal products.

1987 Canadian Government bans commercial hunting of newborn harp seals (whitecoats) and hooded seal pups (bluebacks) in Canadian waters.

2006 Mexico and Croatia ban the import and export of seal products.

2007 Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Austria, implement or take steps towards bans.

2009 EU bans the import of all seal products, with an exemption for Inuit.

2009 Russia bans the killing of harp seals under 12 months old.

2011 The Customs Union of the Russian Federation, Belarus and Kazakhstan bans the import and export of harp seal skins.

2012 Taiwan bans seal products.

2014 Switzerland states it intends to ban seal products.

2014 The World Trade Organization finds the EU seal ban compliant with international law.

2015 Animal protection groups in China call for seal products ban.

KEY FACTS About The Commercial Seal Hunt

FACT #1 CLIMATE CHANGE IS A THREAT TO HARP SEALS

Harp seals are highly ice-dependent, and need a stable ice platform for giving birth and early development of the young. Over the past decade, the frequency of below-average ice conditions has increased dramatically, resulting in high numbers of pups dying.

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species notes that climate change “poses a serious threat” to the species, and that “reductions in pup production and declines in body condition have recently been documented in the Northeast Atlantic breeding groups that are

thought to be due to environmental change linked to warmer water and less sea ice.”¹⁰ DFO scientists also warn that the breeding population in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence (about 30% of the total herd) may eventually disappear if poor ice conditions continue.¹¹

FACT #2 COMMERCIAL SEALING IS A DYING INDUSTRY

Commercial seal hunts continue to exist in Greenland and Namibia. Norway recently eliminated subsidies to the sealing industry (which made up 75-80% of the landed value), effectively ending its commercial seal hunt.¹²

The Namibian hunt has been under international scrutiny over its killing methods. Namibia has failed to meet its quota in recent years with only 26,000 seal pups reportedly killed from a quota of 80,000 in 2014.¹³ Namibian exports

of seal products in 2014 dropped by 63%, with a value of just under 144,000 EUR.

The Greenland hunt is primarily conducted by Inuit, and targets the same herd as the Canadian east coast seal hunt. Greenlandic catches do not appear to have been impacted by the EU ban, with an average of 80,000 seals killed per year over the past decade. High levels of government support and swift compliance with the requirements for the Indigenous

74% OF CANADIANS BELIEVE THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD HELP SEALERS FIND ALTERNATIVES.¹⁵

66% OF NEWFOUNDLANDERS AND LABRADORIANS BELIEVE THE SEAL HUNT WILL END INEVITABLY.¹⁶

Communities exemption have helped protect Greenlandic Inuit from trade impacts. There are estimated to be stocks of 150,000 unsold sealskins in Greenland.¹⁴

FACT #3 COMMERCIAL SEALING IS STILL NOT HUMANE

Despite minor changes to killing regulations, veterinarians and animal welfare organizations continue to raise concerns with commercial seal hunting.¹⁷ Video evidence from recent seal hunts shows live and barking pups impaled through the face with a sharpened steel hook, and seals cut open while still breathing and making conscious movements.¹⁸

The unpredictable environmental conditions, the competitive nature of the industry, and drive to maximize profits mean that humane slaughter cannot be carried out consistently in the commercial seal hunt.¹⁹

Even if the regulations were enforced, they are insufficient to ensure humane killing. In certain circumstances, it is not required to confirm unconsciousness or death

prior to hooking a seal through the eye and dragging it into a boat, or before proceeding to shoot other animals. This is not humane practice.

HUMANE SLAUGHTER CANNOT BE CARRIED OUT CONSISTENTLY IN THE COMMERCIAL SEAL HUNT.

FACT #4 HARP SEALS ARE NOT OVERPOPULATED, AND PREDATION BY SEALS IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LACK OF COD RECOVERY

Statements are often made that seals eat massive amounts of fish, and that without a commercial hunt, harp seals will overpopulate and destroy all commercial fisheries.

First, current population estimates from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) show that the harp seal population is not “exploding”. Rather, it has remained relatively stable for the past decade, and the number of pups being born is significantly lower than in 2008.²⁰

In addition, estimates of prey consumption tell us very little about the actual impact of predation on a fish stock, and it is incorrect to imply that predator removal will result in increased prey abundance.

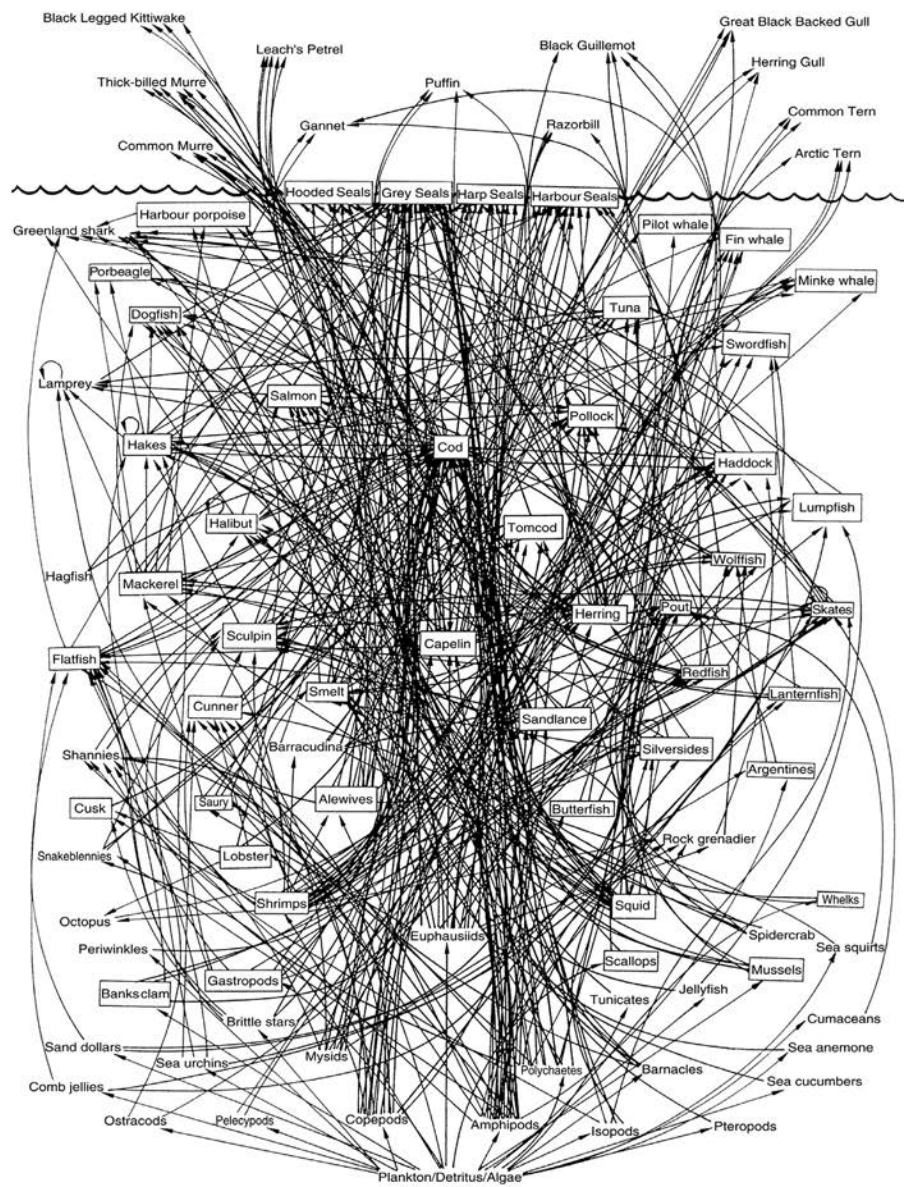
In fact, recent science indicates that harp seal predation is not an important factor influencing cod stocks.²¹ There is no evidence to suggest that seals are preventing the recovery of Northwest Atlantic cod – either by direct predation, or by competition for prey species such as capelin.

Harp seals are a migratory species, and only spend part of the year off the coast of Canada. They eat a wide variety of species, most of which are not commercially fished. Ecosystems are complex, and seals and other top predators play an ecologically important stabilizing function. Scientists warn that removing large numbers of harp seals would likely result in unintended effects on prey, competitor populations, and other

fisheries.²²

The argument that we must cull harp seals to benefit cod stocks is simply not supported by any scientific evidence.

On the contrary, Canadian government scientists note that culls of marine mammals have rarely achieved the desired objective of increasing prey abundance.²³



A partial food web for the Scotian Shelf in the Northwest Atlantic off eastern Canada. Species enclosed in rectangles are also exploited by humans. This food web is incomplete because the feeding habits of all components have not been fully described. Further, all species – including some of the marine mammals – do not spend the entire year in the area. Lavigne, D.M. 2003. Marine Mammals and Fisheries: The Role of Science in the Culling Debate. Pp31-47 in: Marine Mammals: Fisheries, Tourism and Management Issues (N. Gales, M. Hindell and R. Kirkwood eds.). Collingwood, VIC, Australia: CSIRO Publishing, 446 pp.

Commercial Seal Hunting and Inuit

Canada's commercial seal hunt and Inuit sealing are very different activities. They involve different people and species of seal, occur in different regions of the country, and are subject to different regulations. But the main difference is that Inuit seal hunting is conducted primarily for meat, whereas the commercial seal hunt is driven by profit and global fur prices. Inuit hunt primarily ringed seals, not harp seals, and the number hunted for commercial purposes is relatively small; between 1,000-4,000 animals in the years prior to the 2009 EU ban.²⁴

Hunting seals as a source of food is the primary motivation behind Inuit seal hunting, with the sale of pelts being a byproduct of the subsistence hunt. And whereas Inuit take pride in using all parts of the seal, the commercial seal hunt is almost exclusively for skins, which are sent overseas to be processed into "fashion" fur products and trinkets.

While the numbers of seals killed during Canada's commercial seal hunt fluctuate directly with the world market for seal fur, Inuit sealers continue to hunt the same number of seals when market prices are low, preferring to use the pelts domestically. The prices received by Inuit hunters for pelts are stabilized by a Government of Nunavut support program, and hunters received the same value for their pelts before and after the EU ban.²⁵

Traditional seal hunting is central to Inuit cultural identity, and will continue regardless of global demand for seal products.

IFAW does not oppose seal hunting by Indigenous peoples for subsistence use, nor the Atlantic Canadian "personal use" hunt which allows fishermen to kill up to 6 seals for non-commercial use (such as feeding one's family).

Although most trade bans have exemptions for Inuit seal products, the argument is made that disappearing markets for seal products have unintentionally damaged Inuit livelihoods as well.

We urge the Government of Canada to take measures to ensure that the inevitable disappearance of global markets for seal fur does not negatively impact Inuit livelihoods.

"... IN NUNAVUT, SEALING IS NOT AN INDUSTRY AND HAS NEVER BEEN AN INDUSTRY. THOUGH IT'S AN IMPORTANT EXPRESSION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY, IN HARD CASH, SEAL HUNTING CONTRIBUTES VIRTUALLY NOTHING TO NUNAVUT'S ECONOMY". FROM "LESS SYMBOLISM, MORE REALISM PLEASE." NUNATSIAQ NEWS, EDITORIAL. 16 MARCH 2010.

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About the International Fund for Animal Welfare

Founded in Canada in 1969, IFAW saves individual animals and animal populations all over the world. With projects in more than 40 countries, IFAW provides hands-on assistance to animals in need, works to prevent cruelty to animals and advocates the protection of wild animals and their habitats. For more information visit our website: www.ifaw.org.

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