



Myths and Facts: The Truth about Canada's Commercial Seal Hunt

Myth: It is illegal to kill baby seals in Canada.

Fact: Canada's commercial seal hunt is a slaughter of defenseless baby seals. It is true that in Canada, newborn "whitecoat" harp seals are protected from hunting. But as soon as they begin to shed their fluffy white coats—as young as 12 days old—these baby seals are legally hunted by sealers. In fact, 97 percent of the seals killed in the commercial seal hunt over the past three years have been younger than 3 months, and most were younger than 1 month old. At the time of slaughter, many of these pups had not yet eaten their first solid meal or taken their first swim. Sealers prefer to kill the baby seals because their skins are in "prime" condition and fetch the highest prices.

Myth: The seal hunt is humane.

Fact: In 2001, an independent veterinary panel performed post-mortems on seal carcasses abandoned on the ice floes. Their report concluded that in 42 percent of cases, the seals did not show enough evidence of cranial injury to even guarantee unconsciousness at the time of skinning. This report is supported by the testimony of independent journalists, parliamentarians and scientists who observe and document the commercial seal hunt each year. Footage from the commercial seal hunt consistently shows conscious pups stabbed with boathooks and dragged across the ice, wounded pups left to choke on their own blood and conscious seal pups cut open. Video footage of the 2005 hunt can be viewed at www.protectseals.org.

Myth: The seal hunt is sustainable.

Fact: Scientists agree that current kill levels are not sustainable. A recent study by Stephen Harris, a professor at Bristol University in the UK, asserts that the Canadian management regime for harp seals does not apply a precautionary principle and threatens the survival of seal populations. (The report is available on www.protectseals.org.) Over the past 10 years, between one-third and one-half of all seal pups have been slaughtered by commercial sealers. Because seals only reach breeding age at 6 years, the impacts of high hunting levels are only starting to be felt. Under the current management plan, by the time the Canadian government decides to take action to save the population, it may be

too late to intervene. Today's kill levels meet and even exceed those of the 1950s and 1960s, when over-hunting quickly reduced the harp seal population by nearly two-thirds.

Myth: The seal population is "exploding" and a cull is necessary.

Fact: In an attempt to defend the commercial seal hunt, the Canadian government often states that the harp seal population has 'tripled' over the past three decades. But they conveniently neglect to mention that over-hunting in the 1950s and '60s had reduced the population by nearly two-thirds. A dramatic decline in hunting levels in the 1980s allowed the population to rebuild, but today's kill levels now meet and even exceed those of the 1950s and '60s. Harp seals already have many natural predators, including sharks, whales and polar bears—and now the seals have a new threat to contend with—climate change. As the ice cover the harp seals need to give birth and nurse their pups on rapidly begins to disappear, the population will face devastating rates of natural mortalities. Those advocating a cull of harp seals are ignoring sound science and common sense.

Myth: The seal hunt provides important income to 16,000 sealers and their families.

Fact: Sealers are commercial fishermen who earn a small fraction of their incomes from killing seals—the rest from commercial fisheries such as crab, shrimp and lobster. Even in Newfoundland, where more than 90 percent of sealers live, the government estimates that there are only about 4000 active sealers. Tina Fagan, former executive director for the Canadian Sealers Association, explains that while many fishermen may take out licenses to kill seals, a much smaller number participate each year: "The reason for the large number of licenses vis-à-vis the smaller number of active sealers is the fact that if they do not renew their license in any given year, they will not be eligible in the following year" (<http://www.norden.org/pub/miljo/miljo/sk/2001-580.pdf>).

Newfoundland's fishery has never been wealthier, earning nearly \$200 million more annually than it did prior to the 1992 cod collapse. This economic growth is because of the expansion of the shellfish industry, which today accounts for 80 percent of the value of Newfoundland's fishery. Sealing, in contrast, brings in only 2 percent. Revenues from the hunt account for less than one-half of 1 percent of the province's economy.

Myth: Seals eat too many fish and are preventing recovery of fish stocks.

Fact: There is not a shred of credible evidence to suggest that killing harp seals will bring back fish stocks. Human overfishing caused the collapse of groundfish stocks, and human overfishing is preventing their return. Seals are a convenient scapegoat for the fishing industry, providing a distraction from the destructive commercial fishing practices that continue today.

Seals, like all marine mammals, are a vital part of the ecosystem of the northwest Atlantic and help all fish populations to thrive. Moreover, harp seals are opportunistic feeders, consuming small amounts of many species. While commercially fished cod stocks may account for about 3 percent of their diets, harp seals also consume many significant

predators of cod, including squid. Even the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans admits that there is no evidence killing seals will help bring fish stocks back—and their latest research shows the opposite may be the case.

Myth: The Canadian government does not subsidize the commercial seal hunt.

Fact: A 2001 report by the Canadian Institute for Business and the Environment found more than \$20 million in government subsidies provided to the Canadian sealing industry over the seven year period 1995-2001. While tracking subsidies to the sealing industry is difficult (the information is not public), government subsidies to the sealing industry were granted as recently as 2004, when nearly \$400,000 was provided to two sealing companies to process and develop seal products.

Myth: Animal protection groups campaign to save the seals just to raise funds.

Fact: Animal protection groups working to stop the commercial seal hunt are charities and non-profits. They rely on donations from the public to carry out their work, and all the funds that are raised are spent on campaigns to save animals.

Myth: Canadians support a "humane" and "sustainable" seal hunt.

Fact: National public opinion polling consistently shows that the overwhelming majority of Canadians oppose the commercial seal hunt. A poll conducted by Environics Research in 2005 shows 69 percent of Canadians are opposed to the seal hunt outright, and even higher percentages oppose inherent aspects of the hunt, such as the killing of seal pups. Attempts by the Canadian government to show the opposite consistently fail.

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