



Seals, Sea Ice and Climate Change

- Harp seals, which are the primary target of Canada's commercial seal hunt, are ice dependent animals. They need solid sea ice upon which to give birth to and nurse their pups, and they need the ice to remain intact for several weeks until the pups are strong enough to survive in open water.
- Environment Canada confirms 2010 has seen the lowest sea ice formation on record off Canada's east coast. Virtually no sea ice has formed in key harp seal whelping areas, including the Gulf of St. Lawrence and off Newfoundland's east coast.
- While Environment Canada says the unprecedented ice conditions are linked to the North Atlantic Oscillation, there is also long-term climate change related to global warming that is impacting ice conditions in the Arctic and subarctic seas.
- Off Canada's east coast, 21 of the past 40 years have seen sea ice formation below the average for that period, with 15 of those below average years happening between 1996 and 2010. The past 15 years have seen markedly below average sea ice formation.
- The impacts of the diminishing sea ice on harp seals are devastating. When sea ice does not form—which is largely the case in 2010—mother seals are often forced to abort their pups in the water. When sea ice is thin and fragile—as is the case with the little sea ice that did form in 2010—seal pups often die when the ice breaks up before the pups are strong enough to survive in open water.
- In recent years, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has estimated up to 100 percent mortality of pups born in key whelping areas, as sea ice melted too early the season.
- In the short term, it is unlikely that we can reverse the effects of climate change on ice formation off of Canada's east coast. However, the Canadian government can and should end the commercial slaughter of ice dependent seals that are so negatively affected by climate change.
- Polling consistently shows the overwhelming majority of Canadians support ending the commercial seal hunt. Animal protection groups, economists and some sealers are calling for a federal buyout of the commercial sealing industry. This plan would involve compensating fishermen for lost revenue as the seal hunt is ended and investing funds in alternative economic opportunities for those affected.

