

Information to Media

NOTE TO EDITORS: The following points are intended to address the current myths and misconceptions surrounding the Atlantic Canada seal hunt.

ATLANTIC CANADA SEAL HUNT MYTHS AND REALITIES

Myth #1: The Canadian government allows sealers to kill adorable little white seals.

Reality: The image of the whitecoat harp seal is used prominently by seal hunt opponents. This image gives the false impression that vulnerable seal pups are targeted by sealers during the commercial hunt.

The hunting of harp seal pups (whitecoats) and hooded seal pups (bluebacks) is illegal – and has been since 1987. Marine Mammal Regulations prohibit the trade, sale or barter of the fur of these pups. Furthermore, seals cannot be harvested when they are in breeding or birthing grounds.

Myth #2: Seals are being skinned alive.

Reality: The most recent Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) Report and numerous reports mentioned by the Malouf Commission (1987) indicate that this is not true.

Sometimes a seal may appear to be moving after it has been killed; however seals have a swimming reflex that is active – even after death. This reflex falsely appears as though the animal is still alive when it is clearly dead – similar to the reflex in chickens.

Myth #3: Seals are not independent animals when they are killed – they still rely on their mothers and can't even swim or fend for themselves.

Reality: Only weaned, self-reliant seals are hunted after they have been left by their mothers to fend for themselves.

The vast majority of harp seals are taken after more than 25 days of age, after their white coat has moulted. Harp seals have the ability to swim at this stage of development. They are also opportunistic feeders and prey on whatever food source is readily available to them.

Myth #4: Countless seals that slip off the ice after being clubbed or shot are lost and never accounted for.

Reality: “Struck and lost” data from at-sea observers as well as the CVMA indicate that this is not true. In fact, the record of struck and loss for the Canadian commercial seal hunt stands at less than five per cent.

For one thing, most of the harp seals taken in Canada are hunted on the ice rather than in the water and this makes losses much lower than in places like Greenland. Second, harp seals that are hunted have very high levels of body fat, making them quite buoyant. That, coupled with the buoyant qualities of salt water, make it quite easy for sealers to retrieve a seal should they slip into the water after being shot.

Myth #5: The Canadian government is allowing sealers to kill nearly one million seals to help with the recovery of cod stocks.

Reality: Several factors have contributed to the lack of recovery of Atlantic cod stocks, such as fishing effort, poor growth and physical condition of the fish, and environmental changes. Seals eat cod, but seals also eat other fish that prey on cod, therefore it is difficult to hold any one factor responsible for the decline in cod stocks.

In addition, there are many uncertainties in the estimates of the amount of fish consumed by seals. The commercial quota is established on sound conservation principles, not an attempt to assist in the recovery of groundfish stocks.

Myth #6: The club – or hakapik – is a barbaric tool that has no place in today’s world.

Reality: Clubs have been used by sealers since the onset of the hunt hundreds of years ago. Hakapiks originated with Norwegian sealers who found it very effective. Over the years, studies conducted by the various veterinary experts, and American studies carried out between 1969 and 1972 on the Pribilof Islands hunt (Alaska) have consistently proven that the club or hakapik is an efficient tool designed to kill the animal quickly and humanely. A recent report in September, 2002, by the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, had results that parallel these findings.

Myth #7: The methods used to kill seals are far less humane than those used to hunt or slaughter any other domestic or wild animal.

Reality: Hunting methods were studied by the Royal Commission on Sealing in Canada and they found that the clubbing of seals, when properly performed, is at least as humane as, and often more humane than, the killing methods used in commercial slaughterhouses, which are accepted by the majority of the public.

Myth #8: The hunt is unsustainable.

Reality: Since the 1960's, environmental groups have been saying the seal hunt is unsustainable. In fact, the harp seal population is healthy and abundant. In excess of five million animals, the Northwest Atlantic seal herd is nearly triple what it was in the 1970s. DFO sets quotas at levels that ensure the health and abundance of seal herds. In no way are seals - and harp seals in particular – an “endangered species”.

Myth #9: The “hunt” is simply a front for what is actually a cull aimed at reducing the population of harp seals.

Reality: The seal hunt is not a cull. It is a sustainable, commercially viable fishery based on sound conservation principles. In fact, the Department has adopted an Objective-Based Fisheries Management approach using control rules and reference points to establish management measures for the harp seal hunt. This process will facilitate a market-driven harvest that will enable sealers to maximize their benefits without compromising conservation. If the current three-year Total Allowable Catch (TAC) is fully taken, the population will still remain well above 70 per cent of its highest known abundance, found in the latest survey in 1996.

DFO takes a number of factors into consideration when establishing TAC levels for harp seals, including – ice conditions, pup mortality, natural mortality, incidental harvest or by-catch, the Greenland and Arctic hunts and commercial harvest levels.

Myth #10: The seal hunt provides such low economic return for sealers that it is not an economically viable industry.

Reality: The landed value of seals was \$16 million in 2004. Pelt prices as high as \$70 have recently been recorded. Seals are a significant source of income for some individual sealers. The money is earned over a very short period. Sealing also creates employment opportunities for buying and processing plants.

While sealing income may seem negligible by some US or European standards, sealers themselves have stated that their income from sealing can represent from 25-35 per cent of their total annual income. Sealing also represents benefits to thousands of families in Eastern Canada at a time of year when other fishing options are unavailable or limited at best, in many remote, coastal communities.

Myth #11: The Canadian government provides subsidies for the seal hunt.

Reality: The Government of Canada does not subsidize the seal hunt. Sealing is an economically viable industry. All subsidies ceased in 2001. Even before that time, any subsidies provided were for market and product development, including a meat subsidy, to encourage full use of the seal. In fact, government has provided fewer subsidies to the sealing industry than recommended by the Royal Commission on Sealing.

Myth #12: The seal hunt is not worth it - seals are only taken for their fur and the rest of the animal is wasted.

Reality: Seals have been harvested for food, fuel and shelter and other products for hundreds of years. The subsistence hunt is a valuable link to Canadian cultural heritage. Canada exports seal products in three forms: pelts, oil and meat. Traditionally, the pelts have been the main commodity, but production of seal oil for human consumption has grown substantially in recent years. Seal oil markets remain positive, and a large percentage of seal oil is finding its way into areas other than traditional marine and industrial oils.

DFO encourages the fullest use of seals, with the emphasis on leather, oil, handicrafts, and in recent years, meat for human and animal consumption as well as seal oil capsules rich in Omega-3. Any seal parts that are left on the ice provide sustenance to a wide variety of marine scavengers such as crustaceans, seabirds and fish.

Myth #13: The seal hunt is loosely monitored and DFO doesn't punish illegal hunting activity or practices.

Reality: The seal hunt is closely monitored and tightly regulated. Canada's enforcement of sealing regulations is thorough and comprehensive. Regulations and licensing policies stipulate hunting seasons, quotas, vessel size and methods of dispatch. Fishery Officers monitor the seal hunt in numerous ways to ensure sealers comply with Canada's Marine Mammal Regulations. They conduct surveillance of the hunt by means of aerial patrols, surface (vessel) patrols, dockside inspections of vessels at landing sites and inspections at buying and processing facilities. In 2004, Fishery Officers spent approximately 8600 hours monitoring and enforcing the hunt. In the last five years, 94 charges were laid and convictions were upheld in 57 of those cases.

Sealers are well trained in humane hunting methods and are, as a group, responsible and law abiding. Assumptions that large numbers of sealers are violating the laws and regulations governing the hunt are unfounded.

Myth #14: If sealers take more than their allotted quota, DFO simply further raises the quota for them.

Reality: The Government of Canada has strict conservation measures in place, and is committed to the careful management of all seals to ensure strong, healthy populations in the years to come. 2005 is the last year of a three-year harp seal hunt management plan. The harp seal TAC was set at 975,000 for 2003-2005 and it has not been raised. This multi-year management plan was developed in consultation with more than 100 stakeholders, including conservation groups, at the 2002 Seal Forum in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

There have been two instances when TACs were allowed to be exceeded to allow sealers disadvantaged by environmental conditions to have an opportunity to seal after good hunting in other areas had allowed the full TAC to be taken early.

These decisions were made only because the increased hunting would not jeopardize conservation and sustainability.

Myth #15: Anyone can get a licence – even those who have never hunted before, and there are no training requirements.

Reality: Before sealers can qualify for a professional licence they must obtain an assistant licence and work under the supervision of a professional sealer for two years. Individuals applying for a personal use licence must demonstrate they apply good sealing practices to ensure the seal is killed in a quick and humane fashion. Personal sealing licences will only be issued to individuals who had a licence, a valid hunter's capability certificate, or big game licence the previous year and who have attended a mandatory training session.

Myth #16: The majority of Canadians are opposed to the seal hunt.

Reality: Animal rights groups currently campaigning against the seal hunt cite a 2004 Ipsos-Reid poll stating that 71 per cent of Canadians are opposed to the hunt. In fact, Canadians support federal policies regarding the seal hunt. An Ipsos-Reid survey conducted in February 2005 concluded that 60 per cent of Canadians are in favour of a responsible hunt. The survey methodology and results of this poll are available on request.

March 2005