

Atlantic Canada Seal Hunt

Myths and Realities



Myth 1

The Canadian government allows sealers to kill whitecoat 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, adult seals cannot be harvested when they are in breeding or birthing grounds and younger seals must be weaned, self-reliant and independent.

Myth 2

Seals are being skinned alive.

Reality: A 2002 independent veterinarians' report published in the *Canadian Veterinary Journal* 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

The club – or hakapik – is a barbaric and inhumane tool that has no place in today's world.

Reality: Hunting methods were studied by the Royal Commission on Seals and Sealing in Canada and it 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.

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. American studies carried out between 1969 and 1972 proved that the club or hakapik is an efficient tool designed to kill the animal quickly and humanely. A 2002 report published in the *Canadian Veterinary Journal* had results that parallel these findings.

Myth 4

The Canadian government is allowing sealers to kill thousands of 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.

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 5

The hunt is unsustainable and is endangering the harp seal population.

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. According to a 2004 survey, the Northwest Atlantic harp seal population is now estimated at approximately 5.8 million animals, 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 6

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

Reality: The 2005 seal hunt was one of the most profitable in memory. Given favourable market conditions in 2005, the landed value of the harp seal hunt exceeded \$16.5 million.

Seals are a significant source of income for some individual sealers and for thousands of families in Eastern Canada at a time of year when other fishing options are limited at best, in many remote, coastal communities. Sealing also creates employment opportunities for buying and processing plants.

Myth 7

Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) provides subsidies for the seal hunt.

Reality: DFO 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 much less subsidization to the sealing industry than recommended by the Royal Commission on Seals and Sealing.

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.

Myth 8

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. Fishery Officers 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.

Infractions are taken seriously and sealers who fail to comply with Canada's *Marine Mammal Regulations* are penalized. The consequences of such illegal actions could include court-imposed fines and the forfeiting of catches, fishing gear, vessels and licences.

Myth 9

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 the majority 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% of Canadians are in favour of a responsible hunt.

For further information on Canada's seal hunt, you can visit the following website:

http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/seal-phoque/index_e.htm

Published by:

Communications Branch
Fisheries and Oceans Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0E6

DFO/2005-955

©Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada 2006
Cat. No. Fs23-495/2006
ISBN 0-662-69664-6

 Printed on recycled paper