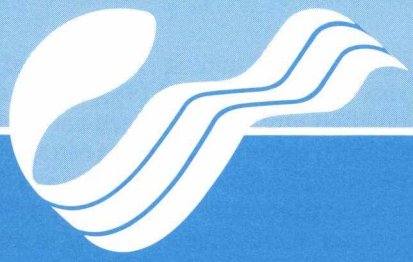


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Sealing – A Canadian Perspective



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Sealing A Canadian Perspective

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Seal Populations in Canada

Six species of seals inhabit Canadian waters; bearded seals, grey seals, harbour seals, harp seals, hooded seals and ringed seals. Most are hunted by the native people of Canada's Arctic and sub-Arctic regions to furnish food, oil, clothing and income through the sale of seal products.

Traditionally however, two species — the harp seal and the hooded seal — have comprised the bulk of seals taken during the annual Atlantic seal hunt off the east coast of Canada.

Here, every March, vast numbers of harp seals and a smaller number of hooded seals gather on ice floes to give birth (whelp) and, a few weeks later, to breed.

The harp seal is the principal species hunted. The harp seal is, in fact, the third most abundant species of seal in the world, after ringed and crabeater seals, and with a total population well in excess of 3 million animals worldwide.

There are three distinct stocks of harp seals. The White Sea and the Jan Mayen stocks are found in the Northeast Atlantic. The Northwest Atlantic stock, the largest of the three, is found in Canadian and Greenland waters.

This Northwest Atlantic population is further sub-divided into two herds, based on breeding areas. The Front herd breeds on heavy Arctic ice floes off the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador. The Gulf herd breeds on floating pack ice in the Gulf of St. Lawrence near the Magdalen Islands.

Hooded seals also range throughout Arctic and sub-Arctic Atlantic waters, whelping on more scattered ice floes further off the eastern coast of Newfoundland. Hooded seals, however, have played a relatively unimportant role in the Atlantic sealing industry. Because of greater abundance, easier accessibility, and greater market demand, harp seals account for more than 90% of sealing activity during the annual regulated hunt.

The Royal Commission on Seals and the Sealing Industry in Canada (1986) estimated that the population of harp seals at the end of 1985 to be approxi-

mately 2 to 2 1/2 million. They concluded that between 1972 and 1983, the total population probably increased and that since 1983, the population has certainly increased. The Royal Commission also expressed concern regarding the possible impact of continued increases in the number of seals on the fisheries.

Life Cycle of a Harp Seal

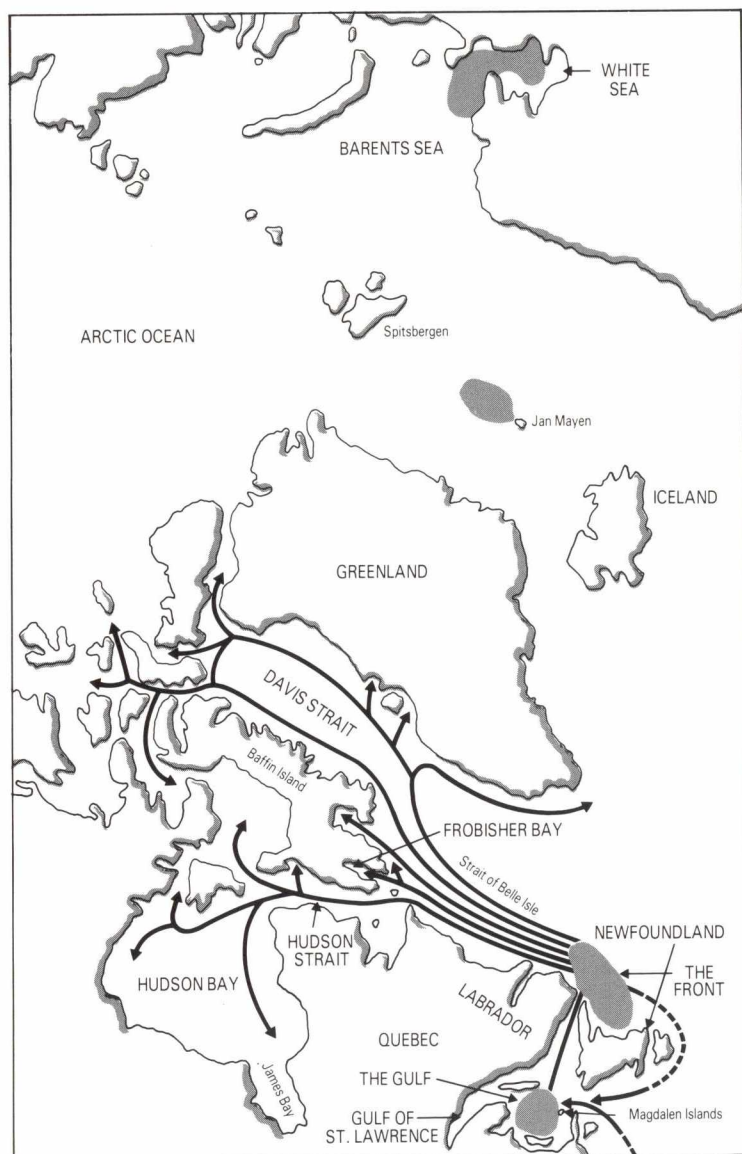
Harp seals of the Front and Gulf herds spend their summers feeding in Arctic waters along the coasts of Baffin Island and Greenland, ranging as far as Hudson Bay and Ellesmere Island. As winter approaches, they migrate south in advance of the descending pack ice to their whelping and breeding grounds off the coast of Newfoundland and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Pups in the Gulf herd are usually born on the ice floes from late February to early March, with whelping taking place slightly later at the Front. Females whelp at some distance from the edge of large ice fields, on rough contoured ice surfaces that afford protection from the wind.

Pups weigh about 11 kg at birth and gain weight rapidly to about 35 kg after approximately 10 days of nursing — one of the shortest-known nursing periods of any mammal. Within 10 to 14 days, pups are weaned and abandoned by their mothers. After leaving their pups, the females mate with the males and feed heavily on fish for several weeks before moulting and commencing the long journey northwards with the retreat of the pack ice.

After weaning, the pup begins its first moult. At the age of approximately 12 days the "whitecoat" becomes an "overgang" when its silver-grey "beater" coat begins to appear. A few days later it becomes a "tanner" as its white hair loosens and begins to fall out. During the last stage of this moult, any remaining white hair is very loose and the pup is called a "ragged-jacket".

Fully moulted at 4 weeks of age, the beaters enter the water and begin to feed, gradually moving northwards to the main summer feeding grounds off the coast of Greenland. Harp seals are long-lived and often reach ages of 30



Breeding and moulting areas, and principal migration routes of the harp seal population.

years or more. Female harp seals become sexually mature between 4 and 6 years of age. Males reach maturity at 7 or 8 years of age.

Harp seals consume vast quantities of fish—estimated to range between 1.0 and 1.6 tonnes per animal annually. At current population levels, the Front and Gulf herds consume more fish than are caught by all countries fishing in the Northwest Atlantic. The most important species by weight of fish eaten is capelin, a small fish that is also an important food source for cod, sea-birds and whales.

Harp seals have few natural predators except sharks, killer whales and polar bears.

The Royal Commission on Seals and the Sealing Industry in Canada

In August 1984, the Canadian government appointed a Royal Commission to look into and make recommendations on all aspects of seals and sealing in Canada. The Royal Commission was chaired by Mr. Justice Albert Malouf of the Quebec Court of Appeal and composed of experts from four countries: Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and the United States.

The Commission carried out extensive research and public consultations in several countries and presented its report in late 1986, making a total of 45 recommendations.

Included as its key findings and recommendations were the following:

- the seal hunt is a legitimate activity which should be continued within the principles of sound management of the stocks.
- the harvesting methods for seals are acceptably humane, even more so than some practices in commercial slaughterhouses.
- there is absolutely no conservation problem, most seal herds are probably increasing in size.
- the income derived from the hunt, while not great, is significant to the hunters due to the lack of alternative economic opportunities in those areas and at the times when hunting is carried out, and there is little or no waste.

The Commission also recommended that the commercial harvesting of whitecoat harp seals and blueback hooded seals, as well as the taking of seals with nets be banned and that compensation for losses due to the market collapse be paid to all sealers.

Management of Seal Stocks

In response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission, the Government announced a new seal policy in December 1987. Under the new policy the large vessel offshore seal hunt is no longer permitted and all commercial hunting of whitecoat harp seals and blueback hooded seals was ended. In addition, the netting of seals will be phased out except for traditional hunts north of 53 degrees north latitude. As the Royal Commission recommended, the annual harvest of older seals by Inuit and other coastal people will continue.

As a result of this new policy, the current seal hunt is an inshore activity, carried out by rural and coastal inhabitants which focuses on juvenile and older seals. Canada's policy on the management of seal stocks is consistent with policies on the management of other living renewable resources. Humane harvesting of seals is allowed at levels which will sustain the total populations over

the long term. Allowable seal harvest quotas are based on scientific information and sound conservation principles which currently allow for an increase in harp and hooded seal populations. Extensive research on seal populations has been carried out by government and independent scientists since 1950.

Several methods have been used to estimate the size of seal populations and the population growth rate, including aerial photography, tag and recapture analysis, examination of age distribution within sample populations, and first-hand information from fishermen.

The Importance of the Hunt

Fishing provides the economic base for many Atlantic coastal communities. With their survival dependent on a single industry, fishermen harvest all the marine resources available on a seasonal basis. Winter is a difficult time for most inshore fishermen. With boats locked in ice-choked harbours, unemployment in some communities soars to more than 90%. The annual seal harvest is, therefore, a welcome beginning to a new fishing season, providing both food for the table and a timely source of money to prepare boats, nets and gear for other commercial fishing activities which will follow.



Research activities.

The Landsmen

Sealers are either landsmen or long-line fishing vessel operators, predominantly inshore fishermen from isolated bays and inlets of Newfoundland, the North Shore and the Magdalen Islands in Quebec, who usually hunt within a few kilometres of their home communities.

Most landsmen go sealing on foot or from small boats, using rifles or clubs. When the ice is firm, landsmen can venture several kilometres from shore in pursuit of seals. Other sealers travel further afield in larger fishing boats, known as longliners. These boats are capable of following the seals out to sea, where larger concentrations frequently occur.

In recent years, approximately 9000 landsmen, including longliner sealers, have participated annually in sealing both in the Gulf and on the Front. Most took seals for commercial purposes, although some hunted primarily for meat for their own use thus taking only a few seals. Landsmen take harp seal beaters, bedlamers and adults.

The number of active sealers is usually less than the number of sealing licences issued annually, reflecting the vagaries

of seal hunting — the often severe weather and ice conditions and the frequent difficulty of reaching migrating seals.

Sealing in the North

The Royal Commission on Seals and Sealing made the following statements about native hunting: *“Hunting of marine mammals (seals, walrus and whales) has been, and continues to be, an integral part of the way of life of Inuit, as well as of some Indian groups. Sealing is carried out year round, though there are seasonal changes in the methods of hunting and the species caught. Ringed seals provide the major part of the catch throughout the year, but in some areas harp seals, at the northern end of their summer migration, are important. Smaller numbers of bearded and harbour seals and a very few hooded seals are also taken. The seals killed are mostly adults or sub-adults, and there is no hunt by northern aboriginal people of harp or hooded seal pups.*

In the past, the hunt was purely for subsistence; the sealer used the products of the seal hunt for food, clothing and

the harnessing and feeding of dog teams. With greater contact between North and South, and especially the changes from harpoon to rifle and from dog-sled to snowmobile, the need for cash increased. Before resettlement into larger communities, moreover, Inuit lived close to the better sealing grounds. The sealer still uses the proceeds of previous hunts to travel to the next hunt, but by selling skins to buy fuel, rather than feeding seal meat to his dog team. When the price of seal pelts is favourable, fewer seals are required to fulfill the needs of the sealer and his family.

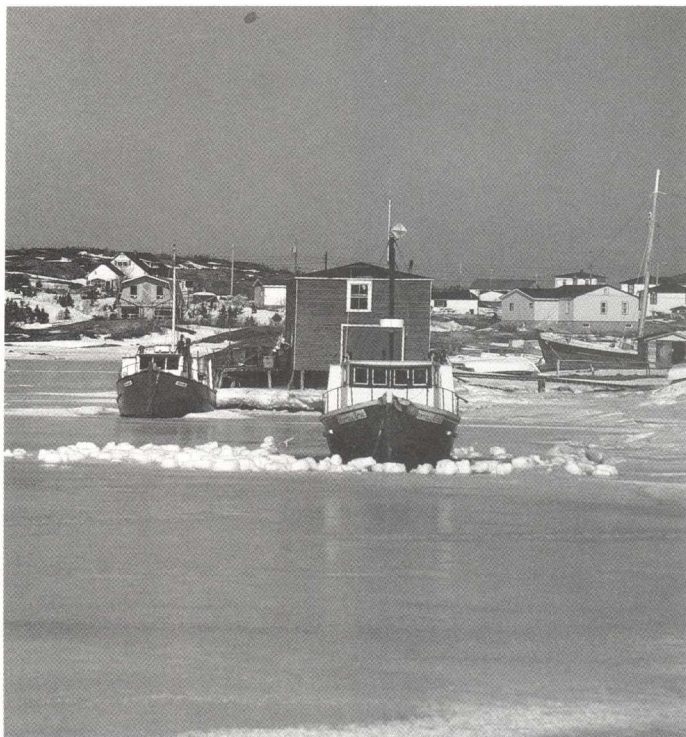
Because of the nature of the Inuit hunt, accurate figures on the number of seals killed are not available. Most statistics refer to the number of sealskins sold, which may considerably understate the total kill, especially in years when prices for skins are low. Annual kills probably have amounted to several tens of thousands, with considerable year-to-year variation.

For similar reasons it is very hard to put a dollar value on the seal hunt in the North. Only a part of the product of the hunt is sold for cash. The value of the meat and skins used by the hunter can be calculated on the basis of the labour and other costs involved in the hunt, or on the basis of the cost of equivalent store-bought clothing and store-bought food. To compare the value of purchased food to that of seal meat may be to underestimate the true value of the latter because much store-bought food has less nutritional value than seal meat.”

The European ban on harp and hooded seal pup pelts, opposition to the Atlantic seal fishery from some vocal interest groups, and uncertainty in the marketplace have led to depressed prices for all seal products, including those taken by Inuit hunters. This has had a devastating effect on the economic well-being of many Inuit communities.

Economic Contribution of Sealing

The estimated average annual incomes of Newfoundland and Quebec fishermen who participate in sealing is usually quite low — generally less than half of the average annual earnings of



Brian Roberts

Typical Newfoundland longliners.

Canadian workers in manufacturing industries.

The average return from sealing declined drastically following the market collapse of 1982-83, since then demand, prices and catches have been increasing slowly. Today, for some fishermen, sealing can represent a third or more of their annual incomes. Equally important is the fact that this money comes just before the start of the spring and summer fishing season and at a time when other employment opportunities are unavailable.

In recent years, more than 10 000 people have been involved in the Atlantic Canadian sealing industry, including sealers, truckers, buyers, workers in processing plants handling and processing the pelts, oil and meat. When considering the economic contribution of sealing to the Atlantic economy, it is necessary to recognize the isolated nature of many fishing communities, their

dependence on the fisheries resource base and the harsh winter climate and ice conditions.

The following is a list of the value of the major primary products:

Oil: Seal oil, rendered from blubber, had an export value of approximately \$400,000 in 1988. Seal oil is exported for processing into machinery lubricants, edible oil products and cosmetics.

Pelts: In 1988, the landed value of Atlantic coast seal pelts (the amount received from dockside sale to processors) was approximately \$1.2 million. Pelts are processed to remove blubber and meat, and then exported to be made into a variety of clothing articles, including coats, jackets, hats, boots, shoes, handbags and belts.

Meat: Seal meat is consumed extensively throughout the Atlantic region, although commercial sale of fresh and frozen meat is confined primarily to Newfoundland. In 1988, meat sales in Newfoundland exceeded \$400,000.

Humane Aspects of Sealing

The killing of seals, or of any other animal, is certainly not a pleasant sight to watch. Nevertheless, the Royal Commission, as well as qualified veterinarians, animal pathologists and biologists who have observed the hunt first-hand have attested to the humaneness of the clubbing method when it is carried out properly and in accordance with the Regulations. The regulations specify the calibre of firearms and types of ammunition which can be used in order to ensure that the animals are killed as rapidly and as humanely as possible. With the hunt now focussing largely on older animals, firearms are used to a greater extent. The regulations also ensure that only experienced hunters, fully able to comply with all the regulations do participate in the hunt.



Dr. A. Farquar

Perceptions and Perspectives

Why has the annual Atlantic seal hunt aroused such international controversy?

Harp seals are not an endangered species — a fact that has been amply established with extensive scientific research.

The hunt is closely regulated and the killing methods have been determined to be humane.

Sealing provides an important source of both food and income to many Atlantic fishermen and to native Canadians.

In spite of all these facts, the seal industry continues to be under attack, primarily because anti-sealing groups have used the photogenic qualities of new born harp seal pups to shift the focus of the debate from the issue of rational utilization of a natural resource to an emotional appeal.

Is the concern over the seal hunt due to the end use of the products? People

have been eating seal meat, using the oil from seal fat, and making articles of clothing from seal pelts for centuries. Seals are a naturally renewable resource whose use is fully in step with an ecologically conscious world.

Opponents of the industry have suggested otherwise, questioning the morality of killing wildlife for human use and stating that seal products can easily be replaced with man-made substitutes. Such views reflect the attitudes of a highly urbanized society where the harvesting and use of natural products — and even an understanding of nature — seem increasingly out of place.

For the people engaged in Canada's sealing industry, however, survival is directly dependent upon weather, tides and the bounty of the sea. Far removed from the world of artificial and packaged convenience, the livelihood of the fisherman depends entirely upon the un-

certainities of nature and changing market conditions, upon what he can catch and how much his catch is worth. The fisherman has the greatest vested interest in ensuring the stocks he harvests do not decline in abundance.

Canadian seal management strategies are entirely in accord with the objectives of the World Conservation Strategy. Sealing has been an important economic activity for both the Inuit and Atlantic fishermen for centuries.

The hunt is humane and there is no evidence that harp seals are in any way endangered. Rather, the best scientific evidence indicates an increase in population size. Based on all these facts, Canada will continue to manage seal populations in the same manner as all other renewable marine resources: to provide the greatest long-term benefits to Canadians within the limits of sound conservation principles.

Explanation of Terms

Beater	a fully moulted harp seal pup from 3 1/2 weeks to 1 year old. Beaters have short-haired, dark-spotted, silver-grey coats.
Bedlamer	an immature harp seal from 1 to 5 years old with a spotted coat. The distinctive saddle or harp-shaped markings of the adult harp seal develop gradually.
Blueback	a hooded seal pup up to 1 year old with a short hair coat ranging from darkish blue grey on the back to cream on the belly.
The Front	an area of open water and ice along the northeast coast of Newfoundland, the east coast of Labrador, and the Strait of Belle Isle where the largest concentration of harp seal whelping and breeding takes place.
The Gulf	the Gulf of St. Lawrence, principally around the Magdalen Islands, where a smaller population of harp seals gathers to whelp and breed.
Landsmen	fishermen who go sealing on foot or from small open boats.
Longliners	a generic term for decked fishing boats between 11 and 20 metres in length, but weighing less than 150 tonnes. Sealing from these vessels is part of the landsmen harvest with sealers using rifles to take primarily beaters and older seals.
Overgang	a weaned harp seal pup during the preparatory stage of its first moult; long white hair is still firmly attached but silver-grey beater coat has begun to appear at approximately 12 days of age.
Ragged-jacket	a weaned harp seal pup during the last stages of its first moult, from 2 1/2 to 4 weeks old.
Tanner	a weaned harp seal pup during mid-stage of its first moult, white hair is loose and can be easily pulled out at approximately 16 days of age. Tanner pelts are used exclusively for the production of leather.
Whelp	the act of giving birth.
Whitecoat	a harp seal pup from 3 to 10 days old, named for its distinctive long white hair.



Typical beater seal.

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