Seals and Sealing in Canada 2007
Prepared by Sheryl Fink

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All photos by Stewart Cook, unless otherwise noted.

Front cover: A harp seal pup, known as a “beater”.
This page: Gulf of St. Lawrence seal hunt, 2006.

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Since its inception in 1969, IFAW has fought to end Canada's commercial hunt for harp seal pups. Today, we remain opposed to the hunt because:

1. It is unacceptably cruel.

2. The number of seals being killed is not biologically sustainable and the population is now declining. The Canadian government’s current management approach places the harp seal herd at unacceptable risk of depletion. In addition to overexploitation, the effects of global warming are dramatically reducing the harp seal’s critical breeding habitat and leading to high levels of pup mortality.

3. Canada’s commercial seal hunt is unnecessary. It is a wasteful hunt for fur coats; most of the meat and blubber is abandoned or discarded. The economic importance of this hunt is minimal, and it is likely that this hunt would not exist without government subsidies and promotion.

4. There is no scientific reason to cull harp seals. Killing seals will not help fish stocks recover, and may in fact prevent their recovery.

5. The majority of Canadians, and millions of people around the world are opposed to Canada’s commercial seal hunt.

The Canadian Government has authorized 270,000 harp seals to be killed in the 2007 commercial seal hunt, the largest marine mammal slaughter anywhere in the world.

Still bearing most of its whitecoat, this photo of a shot and wounded ragged jacket seal pup (about 2-3 weeks of age) was taken during the 2006 commercial seal hunt in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Curiously, no ragged jackets were reported in Canada’s 2006 landed catch statistics.
The Canadian harp seal hunt is a competitive activity, carried out over an extensive area, and under very unpredictable conditions. Haste – not humaneness – is the rule, as hunters rush to immobilize as many seals as quickly as possible. In many years regional quotas are reached in a few days. In 2006, for example, 90,000 seals were killed in 2 days in the Gulf of St. Lawrence hunt.

Year after year, both veterinarians and seal hunt observers report abuses such as the hooking and dragging of live seals across the ice; seals clubbed (often with illegal weapons) or shot and left to suffer on the ice before being clubbed again some time thereafter; and seals skinned while conscious. Although it is required by the Marine Mammal Regulations, few sealers are observed checking to confirm death prior to hooking or skinning an animal.

Documentary evidence – in the form of two veterinary reports following the 2001 seal hunt, and video footage of the seal hunt obtained by IFAW and others in recent years – does not support claims by the Canadian government that the hunt is “humane” or “well regulated.”

In fact, all available evidence suggests that each year, tens of thousands of seal pups die in an unacceptably cruel manner that is inconsistent with contemporary animal welfare standards.

As one of the veterinary reports concluded:
Canada’s commercial seal hunt results in “considerable and unacceptable suffering.”

This is the name scientists give to seals that are wounded by a sealer’s blow or gunshot, but either escape or sink before they are recovered. Struck and lost rates are thought to be as high as 50% when seals are shot in or near the water. Unarguably, wounded seals experience pain and suffering after being shot or struck by a hakapik. The seal pictured here was found dead during the 2005 hunt. It had suffered one or more non-fatal blows to the head but escaped, only to die later from its injuries.

The Canadian government estimates that 5% of seal pups struck on the ice with a club or bullet are “lost.” In addition to their prolonged and painful deaths, these seals are not recorded in the official catch statistics.
What do veterinarians say?

Recent veterinary reports on Canada’s commercial seal hunt document the ongoing, unacceptable cruelty involved, and cite the need for improvement in humane killing practice, regulation, and enforcement.

Burdon et al. (2001)¹
- “There is undoubtedly an obvious need to reduce suffering and improve the welfare of these animals by alterations in the existing regulations and increasing their enforcement.” p.1.
- “… the present seal hunt fails to comply with basic animal welfare regulations.” p.2.
- “We conclude that the hunt is resulting in considerable and unacceptable suffering.” p.1.

Daoust et al. (2002)²
- “A large proportion (87%) of the sealers ... failed to [check for death] before proceeding to hook or bleed the seal, or go to another seal.” p. 691.
- Agreed with Burdon et al. that a number of seals were conscious after being shot, and that live seals were hooked with a boat hook or gaff and dragged across the ice while still conscious.
- Agreed with Burdon et al. that up to 24% of seals observed on videotape were not killed humanely, nor in a manner consistent with Canada’s Marine Mammal Regulations.
- Concluded that the “proportion of animals that are not killed efficiently justifies continued attention to this industry’s activities...” p. 693.

Smith, B. (2005)³
- “The competitive nature of the hunt ... creates an environment in which speed is the rule, and hunters may be encouraged to take shortcuts.” p.11.
- “DFO appears to lack sufficient dedicated capacity to monitor and enforce regulation of the hunt, especially at the Front.” p.14.
- Put forth eleven recommendations needed for the hunt to become humane.

As a Canadian expert in humane slaughter, and past chair of both the Animal Welfare Committee of the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association and the Animal Care Review Board with the Solicitor General of Ontario, I was asked to review 2005 seal hunt footage.

Without a doubt, what I witnessed was clear evidence of unacceptable and illegal cruelty to animals.

Canadian law prohibits this kind of cruelty at animal shelters, slaughterhouses and veterinary hospitals, indeed wherever animals are killed at the hands of humans. Canadians believe if an animal must be killed, the death should be quick and humane. But as the evidence shows, this is not what happens in the commercial seal hunt.

Given the size of the animal and the weapons the men are allowed to use, a quick death cannot be guaranteed. Imagine taking your dog in to be euthanized and finding out that the veterinarian was going to use a bat to do the job. Would that be acceptable to you?

There is also a time constraint. The sealers are paid per seal they kill, not by the hour. They compete against each other to fill quotas, making it necessary for them to collect huge numbers of animals in a very short time. This means sealers rarely take the time to ensure each animal is dead before moving on to the next one.

Now imagine the veterinarian, not just with your dog, but a field full of dogs. He has only one bat and a couple of minutes to do the job.

And finally, the conditions for the seal hunt are precarious. The ice floes shift and break, never ensuring a firm footing. So now put the vet, the bat and all the dogs on fun-house floorboards. In these conditions, can your dog die peacefully?

Excerpt from an article by Dr. Mary Richardson, published in the National Post, 9 June 2005.
Canada’s seal hunt is not sustainable.

Canadian government scientists currently estimate that the Northwest Atlantic harp seal herd can sustain a kill level of 165,000 animals. That is, any kill level higher than this will cause the population to decline.

For 2007, the Canadian government announced a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of 270,000.*

The setting of unsustainable catches, combined with the fact that Canada’s commercial seal hunt is the world’s largest slaughter of a marine mammal, makes Canada’s commercial seal hunt a conservation concern, particularly among scientists and conservation biologists.

The current management approach is to overexploit now, and worry about the required catch reductions later. This is the same approach taken by the Canadian Fisheries Ministers who oversaw the collapse of Atlantic cod stocks in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The problem is that “later” is usually “too late.”

And although it claims to be “precautionary,” the Canadian government’s management plan does not satisfy modern conservation standards of precaution.

In fact, a recent analysis of the Canadian government’s management approach found that the likelihood of depleting the seal population by more than 50 - 70% within the next 15 years is “alarmingly high”.4

The authors of the study discovered that the government’s approach is likely to maintain a high TAC despite a declining population, and that evidence that the TAC should be lowered is unlikely to be detected until the seal population has been reduced to a very low level.

Further, the report noted that when the TAC is finally reduced, the required change in catch limits will be drastic, difficult to implement, and politically unpopular.

There are other deficiencies in the current management approach. The Minister announced that beginning in 2007, any quota overruns would be penalized by a quota reduction in the following year.

However, this approach only makes sense if the following year’s TAC and regional quotas have been announced in advance, which is not the case. Without knowing what the TAC “would have” been, how can any possible quota reduction penalty be apparent? Consequently, this provision amounts to nothing more than a convenient excuse that will be used to justify future quotas based on political whims.

Worse still, this rule actually encourages sealers to overexploit the “resource” as much as possible in the current year, since they do not know what the quota will be for the next year.

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* At the time of writing, the 5-year management plan announced over a year ago was still not available.
There is new science information that suggests that... there's some concern about the population levels ...we've been above sustainable yield for some time.”

Kevin Stringer, Assistant Deputy Minister, Fisheries and Oceans Canada
16 January, 2007

The Canadian government’s most recent estimate of the harp seal herd is 5.5 million animals in 2007, down from 5.8 million in 2006 (see Appendix I).

Why are the numbers dropping? Harp seal kills have been high in every year (except one) since 1996. The Canadian government continues to set the allowable catch well above its estimate of a sustainable hunt. And in 4 out of the past 5 years, these already-unsustainable quotas were themselves exceeded, resulting in the deaths of more than 80,000 additional harp seal pups.

As well, many more seals are killed than those reported in the official catch statistics.

When we account for the government’s estimates of “struck and lost” (seals which are killed but never recovered nor recorded in the landed catch), 1,059,564 seals likely died as a result of the Canadian hunt between 2003 and 2005.

On top of this, there is the unregulated and highly subsidized seal hunt during the summer off the coast of Greenland, currently thought to kill an additional 135,000 seals each year from the same herd.

During the past decade reproductive rates of harp seals have decreased, and pup mortality as a result of poor ice conditions has increased.

FICTION

DFO’s management of the harp seal herd is a “conservation success story.”

FACT

The harp seal herd increased during the period 1970-1996, but what DFO and other proponents of the seal hunt continually neglect to mention is that from 1950-1970 the harp seal population had been dangerously reduced by as much as 66% due to overhunting.

In fact, the only reason the harp seal population was able to recover from this overexploitation is because kill levels were dramatically reduced from 1982 through 1995, a direct result of a reduced demand for sealskins and a European import ban on the skins of whitecoat harp seal pups.

It was not the Canadian government that was responsible for that ban; it was the millions of people who spoke out in opposition to Canada’s cruel hunt.

On the contrary, in response to the threat of a European import ban, the Canadian government sent a “travelling circus” across Europe to try to defend the seal hunt. This same tactic is being used by the government today in response to national trade bans being proposed and implemented by a number of European countries.

DFO taking credit for the recovery of the harp seal population - a recovery that occurred only when commercial hunting was practically abolished - and using this to justify the current cruel and unsustainable seal hunt is simply political spin.
In addition to commercial over-exploitation, harp seals are now having to deal with a new threat: global warming.

Harp seals depend on a stable ice platform to give birth and nurse their pups. If ice cannot be found, mothers are forced to give birth to their pups in the water, where they will die.

If ice is found, but does not remain solid throughout the two week nursing period, pups are unable to get the milk they require to build up the thick blubber layer they need to survive. If the ice breaks up in wind or waves before the pups are fully fed and able to swim, they will be crushed in the ice or succumb to exhaustion and die as they struggle to find a solid surface on which to rest and continue nursing from their mothers.

Poor ice conditions are occurring with increasing frequency during the harp seal’s breeding season. According to data obtained from Environment Canada, ice conditions have been below average in 10 of the past 12 years.

In short, poor ice conditions during the breeding season translate into increased mortality of pups, the same pups that are targeted by Canada’s commercial seal hunt.

In 2002, for example, 75% of the pups born in the Gulf of St. Lawrence are thought to have died as a result of poor ice conditions even before the hunt began. Ice coverage was even less in 2006 and 2007. Early indications are that 2007 may turn out to be one of the worst years on record.

Canadian government scientists have stated that most of the pups born in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in February and March of this year likely perished even before the seal hunt began.

While it is relatively easy to measure the effects of global warming on ice conditions, it is more difficult to measure the precise impacts on ice-breeding seals, now and in the future.

One thing governments can do to counteract the threats posed by global warming is to reduce other, non-climate related threats, such as over-hunting. Yet, once again this year, the Canadian government refused to do anything.

When informed by his own scientists that any catch above 165,000 would cause the harp seal population to decline further, the Minister of Fisheries set the total allowable catch at 270,000, and permitted sealers in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence to slaughter the few remaining pups that had managed to survive the disastrous ice conditions in that region.

Such a decision is the antithesis of precautionary management, and flies in the face of modern conservation principles.
FACT: 10 of the past 12 years have experienced below average ice cover in Eastern Canada.

Recent years with below-average ice conditions (yellow triangles) have coincided with years of high Total Allowable Catches (red line) and high reported kills (green bars). The full impact of this on the harp seal population has yet to be seen.

FICTION

DFO has reduced the 2007 quota because of poor ice conditions.

FACT

DFO reduced the allowable catch because they know that recent quotas have been unsustainable. In order to keep within their management plan (and make up for poor management decisions in the past), even greater reductions in the TAC will be required in the near future. Blaming poor ice for the 2007 TAC reduction is a convenient but transparent attempt to appease both environmentalists and sealers at the same time.
It is unnecessary.

The fact is, this is a hunt for baby seal fur – to be made into coats and other unnecessary luxury garments. According to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, 99% of the value of this hunt is in the pelts, 98% of which comes from pups a mere two weeks to three months of age. According to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, 99% of the value of this hunt is in the pelts, 98% of which comes from pups a mere two weeks to three months of age.7

Canada’s commercial seal hunt is also incredibly wasteful. While the Canadian government claims it strives for “full utilization”, the reality could be nothing further from the truth.

Markets for meat are very small, and the vast majority of seal carcasses are left on the ice. And in spite of massive subsidies to develop products from seal oil, a recent report from Memorial University in Newfoundland noted that currently 80% of the blubber is discarded.8 This wastefulness would not be tolerated in any other hunt.

It has minimal economic value.

No one makes a living from sealing. Canada’s seal hunt provides employment for a very short period of time: in some areas the hunt is over in as little as two days.

The Canadian government now claims that sealing provides income to about 5,000 individuals in Eastern Canada9 (about a third of what they claimed two years ago). Even in 2006 - a year where exceptionally high prices were paid for pelts - the vast majority of sealing communities in Newfoundland reported that less than 5% of their earned income came from sealing.10

The desire to earn a few thousand dollars for less than a week’s work does not justify the cruelty and waste of Canada’s commercial seal hunt. If the Canadian government were to end this hunt, the economic impact would be minimal and sealers could be readily compensated for any loss of income, as is routinely done with fishery closures.

All in all, sealing has minimal economic value, accounting for less than one-half of one-percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

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FICTION

“The annual seal fishery is a sustainable harvest based on solid science, full utilization of the animal, and humane harvesting methods where there is zero tolerance for any inhumane practices.”

Tom Rideout, NF Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture, 28 February 2007.

FACT

• The majority of carcasses are left on the ice
• “Finding a market for seal meat outside of Newfoundland continues to present a major challenge for the sealing industry,” DFO, Atlantic Seal Hunt 2003-2005 Management Plan.
• The landed value of seal meat in 2006 was only $8500.
• About 80% of seal blubber is discarded, which translates into approximately eight million kilograms of waste each year.
It will not help fish stocks recover.

There is no scientific evidence that culling harp seals will benefit commercial fisheries in Atlantic Canada. When the Atlantic cod stocks collapsed in the early 1990s, it was popular to blame seals for “eating all the fish.” Today, scientists – and even most fishermen – agree that seals did not cause the collapse of cod stocks. Quite simply, the cause was overfishing and failures in fisheries management.

Harp seals eat a wide variety of fish and marine invertebrates, but most of them have no commercial value. There is no scientific evidence that culling harp seals will benefit any fish stock or commercial fishery, and culling harp seals will almost certainly not produce any detectable recovery of cod stocks.

Interactions between competitors, predators, and prey in the Northwest Atlantic ecosystem are sufficiently complex – as in the simplified diagram shown here – that scientists now think a reduction in the size of the harp seal population might actually be detrimental to the recovery of depleted cod stocks.

In fact, a recent paper co-authored by two DFO scientists modeled the trophic levels in the northern Gulf of St. Lawrence. They found that predation on cod by harp seals accounted for a mere 1% of large cod mortality. Fishing, on the other hand, accounted for 46% of large cod mortality. The most significant predator of small cod was large cod and other large fish (65%) – not seals.

The paper concluded that seals play an important role in maintaining the structure of the ecosystem, and that marine mammals, when analyzed in a food web context, had a beneficial effect greater than their predation, pointing to an overall positive impact of seals on marine ecosystems.

Fiction

We must ensure that we have a balance in the ecosystem. If we do not keep the seal herds in control, our fish stocks will be destroyed and the herds themselves will self-destruct.

Fisheries Minister Loyola Hearn,
House of Commons, November 23, 2006.

Fact

The Minister’s apocalyptic prediction sounds scary, but we can all relax. Harp seals will not destroy fish stocks or self destruct; seal herds do not need to be “controlled”; and besides, humans are incapable of “balancing” complex marine ecosystems like the one above.
The majority of Canadians are opposed to Canada’s commercial seal hunt.

A 2006 poll conducted by Environics Research for IFAW found that 71% of Canadians expressing an opinion support a ban on the hunting of seals less than three months of age. Currently, seals under three months of age account for 98% of the reported kill in Canada.

The majority of Canadians are opposed to the hunting of baby seals under any circumstances.

Seventy-six percent of Canadians believe that the clubbing of seal pups is inherently cruel, and 71% favour a ban on the use of clubs.

The poll also found that a majority of Canadians were opposed to the subsidizing of the commercial hunting of seals. While direct subsidies to sealers ended in 2000, the federal government continues to spend significant amounts of Canadian taxpayer dollars to support and promote this slaughter.

Existing subsidies include: government promotion of the seal hunt in Europe and elsewhere (at least six delegations to European countries in the past year, a use of taxpayer dollars that is opposed by 79% of Canadians), attempting to develop new markets for seal products (opposed by over two-thirds of Canadians), providing surveillance flights to locate seal herds for hunters (opposed by 73% of Canadians) and icebreaking services to lead sealers to the greatest concentration of seals (opposed by 75% of Canadians).

In spite of the overwhelming opposition to subsidies by the Canadian public, a recent report from the Canadian government Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans recommended that “direct financial assistance” be provided to assist in the development of seal products.12

The fact is, most Canadians believe that Canada’s commercial seal hunt damages its international reputation and the vast majority of Canadians (78%) would not be upset if Canada’s commercial seal hunt were ended today.
All around the world, governments are expressing their concerns about the Canadian seal hunt. Many are now acting to implement bans on the importation of seal products, not wanting to play any role in this cruel, unsustainable, wasteful, and unethical hunt.

- April 2007: The government of France committed to banning the importation of seal products.
- April 2007: The Mexican Chamber of Deputies approved an agreement paper demanding an end to Canada’s commercial seal hunt, and asking for intervention at the government level by the Commission for Environmental Cooperation.
- March 2007: A resolution urging the Government of Canada to end the commercial seal hunt was introduced in the U.S. Senate.
- February 2007: Germany reaffirmed its commitment to move forward with a ban on seal products.
- January 2007: Belgium became the first nation in the European Union to impose a national trade ban on all seal-derived products.
- November 2006: The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on its Member States to introduce national bans on seal-derived products.
- September 2006: The European Parliament called for an end to the trade in seal products, with a record setting 425 Members of Parliament signing a written declaration asking for a seal import ban.
- March 2006: Croatia banned the import of products from harp and hooded seals.
- February 2006: The Italian Parliament temporarily suspended the import of sealskins and seal derived products. A legislative proposal to prohibit the commerce in seal products has been announced.
- January 2006: Mexico banned the import and export of all marine mammals (including seals) and their derived products.
- December 2005: The Dutch Parliament initiated a legislative proposal to ban the import, export and marketing of harp and hooded seals and their derived products.
- November 2003: The United States Senate introduced a resolution urging the government of Canada to end the needless slaughter of harp and hooded seals.
- October 1983: The European Community implemented a ban on seal products derived from white-coats (newborn harp seals, less than 12 days old) and bluebacks (young hooded seals, less than one year old). This ban was renewed in 1985, and made indefinite in 1989.
- 1972: The United States implemented a moratorium on the taking and importation of marine mammals and marine mammal products.
This is a hunt for baby seals.

In each of the past five years, over 95% of the harp seals killed have been pups between the ages of about two weeks and three months.

The killing of whitecoat seals is prohibited, and so is the sale of their pelts. However, it is legal to kill harp seal pups once they have begun to moult their white pelts, as young as about 12 days of age. In 2005 and 2006, 98% of the seals killed were pups between 2 weeks and 3 months of age. These seals have not eaten their first solid food, and many have not yet attempted to swim at the time they are slaughtered. Since harp seals may live up to 30 years of age, and are not sexually mature until 5-6 years, these animals can not be considered anything but ‘babies’.

The seal hunt is NOT “just like any other animal industry.”

A principle of humane slaughter legislation in Canada, the United States, and in many other countries, is that animals which are to be killed should be either killed or rendered unconscious immediately, and by a single shot or strike.

Unlike abattoirs, the seal hunt takes place over a vast area under unpredictable and unmanageable conditions. It is precisely these conditions – moving seals and sealers on slippery and shifting ice, seals in the water, and sealers shooting from boats bobbing up and down in the water – that make it virtually impossible to quickly kill an animal, and have led some experts to conclude that this hunt can never satisfy the requirements of a humane hunt, no matter whether seals are shot or clubbed.

The seal hunt is not “closely monitored and tightly regulated.”

Minister Loyola Hearn has stated that the 2006 Gulf hunt was “the best regulated ever”. Yet in 2006, the Gulf quota was exceeded by almost 20,000 animals, and one region killed over 350% of their allotted quota.

In fact, unsustainable total allowable catches set by the government have been exceeded in the past 4 out of 5 years with no penalty. These overruns amount to more than 80,000 additional animals being killed.

Fiction: The seal hunt is “professional” and “highly regulated.”

Where do Canada’s seal pelts go?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country (Region)</th>
<th>2006 Exports in $CDN</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>$10,042,654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>$2,964,716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>$2,091,143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>$931,452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>$222,556</td>
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<tr>
<td>China (Hong Kong)</td>
<td>$125,105</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>$14,529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>$2,486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$16,394,641</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other sealing countries must subsidize their seal hunts as well.

Sealing does not make economic sense in Canada, or in other sealing countries. Norway (traditionally the largest buyer of Canadian seal pelts) has announced that for 2007, it will subsidize its harp seal hunt to the amount of 13.5 million Norwegian Kroner (NOK) (about $2.6 million CDN), to be divided amongst 5 sealing vessels. According to media reports, in 2006, the Norwegian government put 2.5 million NOK in direct subsidies into their hunt, and then proceeded to subsidize the burning of these seal pelts (which could not be sold) with another 2 million NOK subsidy.

You don’t need to support “animal rights” to know that this seal hunt is wrong.

Some who defend the seal hunt say that those who oppose it are against the use of animals for any purpose, and that an end to the seal hunt is the first step in an animal rights ‘agenda’. Such radical arguments are used to create fear and obscure the true issue at hand: the unnecessary cruelty and suffering that results from Canada’s commercial seal hunt.

The justification for cruelty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Landed values given for seal products in 2007. All values in CDN and subject to change. Source: Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Carino Company Ltd.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ragged jacket pelt</td>
<td>$15 - $30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beater pelt</td>
<td>$10 - $55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult pelt</td>
<td>$27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult penis</td>
<td>$10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seal blubber</td>
<td>$0.20/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seal meat</td>
<td>$0.14/kg</td>
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</tbody>
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Canada’s commercial seal hunt does not involve Inuit.

Canada’s commercial seal hunt and Inuit sealing are two very different operations. They take place at different times of the year, in different places, involve different people, and different seals.

Current estimates indicate that Inuit catch fewer than 2000 harp seals in the eastern Canadian Arctic during the summer months, a far cry from the 300,000+ harp seals that are landed months earlier in Canada’s commercial seal hunt.

In the latter hunt, 98% of the animals landed are harp seal pups, aged about two weeks to about three months – seals that Inuit never see. Most of the meat is left on the ice, and 80% of the blubber is currently discarded. The majority of the pelts are then sent overseas to be processed for use in the fashion industry.

Importation bans on seal products normally exempt Inuit sealskins. So why is the Canadian government once again sending Inuit delegations to Europe to support and promote Canada’s commercial seal hunt?

Few people object to aboriginal subsistence hunting, and the Canadian government is trying to blur the distinction between Canada’s commercial seal hunt and Inuit sealing. In government circles, it’s called “playing the Nunavut Inuit card”. It’s an old and tired tactic dating back to 1985.

What the government is cynically attempting to do is to capitalize on concern for the preservation of aboriginal cultures and traditions. The plan is to use that concern to counteract public opposition to Canada’s commercial seal hunt both at home and abroad.

It is time to end the deception. Canada’s commercial harp seal hunt does not involve Inuit.

For the record, IFAW is not opposed to the subsistence hunting of wild animals, including seals, by aboriginal peoples, provided that such hunting is biologically sustainable and that reasonable care is taken to minimize pain and suffering.
Appendix 1. The harp seal (*Pagophilus groenlandicus*)

The harp seal is a widely distributed and highly migratory species, which is divided into three distinct populations, based on where they breed.

The Northwest Atlantic herd travels thousands of kilometres each year between the Canadian Arctic and West Greenland, to the birthing grounds in the “Gulf” and “Front” off Canada’s east coast. Here, female harp seals congregate by the hundreds of thousands on newly formed sea ice to give birth to their pups at the end of February and early March.

Each mother gives birth to a single pup, transforming the once barren ice floes into a huge, white nursery. The newborn pups – thin, scraggly and yellow at birth – become fat, fluffy “whitecoats” in about a week, thanks to the high fat content of their mothers’ milk. The pups spend much of their time sleeping, and are so inactive that on sunny days the ice melts beneath them, creating body-shaped cradles on the ice surface. After about 12 days, the mothers will leave their fully fed pups and join adult males to mate.

The newly-weaned pups remain alone on the ice, first crying for their mothers, then becoming extremely quiet and sedentary. During this time they survive on the thick layer of blubber accumulated during nursing. Shortly after weaning, they begin to moult their white coats, and can be legally killed in Canada’s commercial seal hunt. A few days later, their white coats will be lost completely to reveal the sleek, black-spotted, silvery pelt of the young harp seal pup known as a “beater.”

About four weeks later, the adult seals, along with many immature, non-breeding seals (called “bedlamers”), will haul out on ice further north to undergo the annual moult. They will then continue their migration back to the subarctic waters between eastern Canada and West Greenland, where they will stay until they make their way south again the following October.
The Canadian government estimated the Northwest Atlantic harp seal population to be 5.5 million in 2007 (95% confidence interval = 3.8-7.1 million). This figure is lower than the 2006 population estimate of 5.8 million (c.i.= 4.1-7.6 million).

There are two other harp seal populations: one that breeds and lives off the East coast of Greenland (the “West Ice”), and another that lives in the Barents Sea and breeds in the White Sea off the coast of Russia. These other populations are subject to commercial hunting by Greenland, Russia and Norway.

The 2005 population estimate of the Greenland Sea (West Ice) harp seals was 634,960 (95% c.i. = 425,140 – 844,860) animals aged one year and older (1+) and 106,710 (± 35,041) pups. The Total Allowable Catch in 2004 was set at 15,000 1+ animals, or an equivalent number of pups (where one 1+ animal = two pups). This is almost double the estimated sustainable catch level for this population of 8,200 1+ animals. Catches in 2004 and 2005 were 9,895 (including 8,288 pups) and 5,808 (including 4,680 pups), respectively.

The 2005 White Sea population was estimated to be 2,064,600 (c.i.= 1,496,520 – 2,633,480) 1+ animals, and 360,880 (± 62,279) pups. The 2004 TAC for this population was set at 45,000 1+ animals (or an equivalent number of pups, where one 1+ animal = 2.5 pups). The reported catch for this population in 2005 was 22,474 (including 15,420 pups).13

Other seal species are also commercially hunted in Canada.

Canada also has a commercial hunt for grey seals (with a TAC of 9,000 animals) and hooded seals (8,200 animals). These seal quotas are rarely taken, since the markets for the skins of these animals are very limited.

A 2005 survey estimated the hooded seal population to be 593,500 (c.i.=465,600 – 728,300). In 2006, 40 hooded seals were reported killed in Canada, with a Greenland landed catch from the same population of an estimated 6,397.

The 2004 estimate of the grey seal population was about 250,000 animals. Estimates of grey seals killed in 2006 varies greatly depending on the government source consulted (between 777 and 2,000), and must be considered highly unreliable.
## Appendix I. Allowable catches and reported kills of harp seals in Canada.

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Pups &lt; 1 year</th>
<th>Seals &gt; 1 year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Quota</th>
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** Quota management was implemented in 1971.

** 2003 - 2005 quota was for 975,000 seals, with a maximum of 350,000 in 2 of the 3 years. 985,312 seals were landed over the 3 year period.
Literature Cited


Suggested Readings

- Fisheries and Oceans Canada.
International Fund for Animal Welfare

Offices in Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, Dubai, France, Germany, India, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Netherlands, Russia, South Africa, United Kingdom, and the United States.