

Bloody Harvest



Tony Rankin/HSUS

The economics of U.S. tourism may decide whether the largest licensed slaughter of a marine mammal is stopped

BY JANET RALOFF

Sue Pressman holds baby harp seal in protective embrace during the 1978 Canadian hunt.

Each year, around the first week in March, female harp seals of the North Atlantic haul themselves out of frigid waters off the east coast of Canada to whelp. Each bears a single pup. A week or two later the men come. In what will appear a brutal and inhumane scenario to newcomers — and to many veteran observers as well — hunters will pummel the heads of the newborn seals. Within two weeks, more than half the pups will be dead — the harvest of licensed hunters.

Like whaling, the harp-seal hunt was once unrestricted. But the decline of the herd in the late 1950s — from an estimated 3,300,000 to 1,250,000 — ultimately led to quotas on the number of animals that could be killed. The herd, which now numbers close to 1.4 million seals (excluding the newborn), is managed by Canada and the European Economic Community (the range of the herd extends north to Greenland, which is governed by Denmark, an EEC member). This year the quota is set at 180,000 animals: 150,000 for Canadians, 20,000 for Norwegians, and 10,000 for native Eskimos of Canada and Greenland. (Subsistence hunting by Eskimos is not restricted, but the average annual Eskimo take is factored in when setting the quota.) Nearly 80 percent of the kill will involve pups, most younger than 21 days old. Pups are prized for their downy-soft, snow-white fur, which they will begin to shed when three weeks old.

Citing the harp-seal hunt as an economic and nutritional necessity to his constituents, Brian Peckford, Newfoundland's Minister of Mines and Energy, toured the United States and Europe earlier this year defending the controversial "harvest" of Canada's seal "fishery." Accompanied by biologist Mac Mercer, senior Canadian policy advisor on sealing, he met with journalists to "set the record straight" on what his government claims are emotional

and inaccurate charges being leveled against Canada and its sealers.

Not surprisingly, environmentalists have responded with an intense counter campaign. To them Canada is promoting wanton exploitation of defenseless animals. And for what, they ask, is this species being pushed to extinction? To become the lining of a New Yorker's glove, the fob on a European's key chain, or perchance the extravagant robe for a pampered Westerner's body.

Charges fly back and forth between the opposing sides. But the fever pitch witnessed in the past few weeks (see inset box, p. 204) has no doubt been heightened by a campaign the Fund For Animals started last November. Its mass mailing to millions of persons in the United States and elsewhere calls for a boycott of tourism to Canada until the sealing stops.

It's easy to understand the emotional aspects of this issue. Sealing is a multi-million dollar industry for Newfoundland and Labrador and a tradition for "landsmen" in their coastal communities. On the other side, few animals are so photogenic as the white-coated, dewey-eyed harp seal; few scenes so gruesome as watching men bash in the heads of cute baby animals. But what will confuse anyone trying to sort through the issues objectively is the barrage of statistics and scientific findings that each side offers. This "evidence" is at best highly contradictory.

A good example is the debate over the harp seal's future. While no group claims the herd is in danger of immediate extinction, many animal-welfare groups charge that the North Atlantic harp seal stock has already been decimated and that unless a moratorium on killing is enacted soon, the population may not be large enough to sustain itself against the competing threats of pollution, disease and predation.



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Meanwhile, the Canadian government contends that the harp-seal quota is below the maximum sustainable yield (MSY)—or the number that could be killed each year and still permit the population to maintain its current size. As such, Canada claims the stock will slowly increase in size. The goal is 1.6 million seals, Mercer told SCIENCE NEWS, and "at current scientific projections, we could expect that to occur in five to 10 years."

Who is right? David M. Lavigne, a zoologist at the University of Guelph in Ontario, is an expert on harp seals. His work and opinions are quoted frequently by environmentalists and Canadian-hunt defenders alike. He says most analyses suggest the herd declined "substantially" between 1950 and 1970. "The Canadian government maintains that the herd has been increasing in number since 1972. That's one interpretation, but I don't believe we have enough information to know what the herd's been doing. The problem is that the analyses that suggest the population is increasing come from mathematical assessments and computer models." But what happens to harp seals in a computer may not be what happens to harp seals in

the North Atlantic, he says.

There should be measurable changes in a herd that is either increasing or decreasing in size, he says, such as changes in growth rates, rates of maturation and whelping success — “those sorts of things that we refer to as being density dependent. In other words, if there are fewer animals in the population, then young animals grow at a fast rate and mature earlier than if there are a lot of animals competing with each other.”

“Because harp seals take five to seven years to reach maturity, there are time lags before you can actually measure the effects of change in population size,” he says. “I would add, though, even if we did see changes in such things as age at maturation or changes in growth rates, these could be attributed to other than population changes. For example, the carrying capacity of the northwest Atlantic may not be as high as it was.”

Lavigne has been critical of his government's sealing policy. The government says the herd must increase because its quota is below the *MSY*, he says, “but I question whether there is such a thing [as an *MSY*] for the harp seal.” He suspects the current sealing quota is too high and causing a decline in the herd. “The one thing you have to remember about the harp seal is that it's a vastly depleted stock.”

Lavigne also worries about what the effects of taking more and more fish from the sea may be doing not only to the seals, but also to the fish stocks. “The situation of many fish stocks off the east coast of Canada is worse than that of the harp seal,” he says, citing the capelin as an example. Canadian capelin catches increased during the 1970s “from in excess of about 6,000 metric tons to in excess of 360,000 metric tons over a couple of years. Then last year it dropped . . . and this year they had to close the fishery,” he said.

The Canadian government worries about the same problem but sees it differently. Explaining that the diet of the harp seal and that of humans have much in common, the Canadian government has claimed — and some Canadian fishermen claim this also — that seals are depleting Canadian fishing stocks. Mac Mercer says his government estimates that harp seals eat about two million tons of fish per year. “That's more food — fish and other marine life — than the total catch of all the nations fishing in the area. So it's a very significant part of the system.”

Nonsense, says Lavigne. “The problem is not seals, it's man and his fishing. We need to feed people, but at some point in time, *Homo sapiens* is going to have to realize that he has to limit his numbers or Mother Nature will do it for him.”

But the two biggest issues over which the Canadian government and environmentalists differ have nothing to do with seal diets or biology. They are whether the hunt is necessary and whether it's humane.

At his January press conference, Peckford said Newfoundland fishermen live in a region with “no industry, no commerce, no agriculture, no mining, and no forestry to turn to when winter closes in.” And the six weeks of sealing is the fisherman's only opportunity “to add to an income pitifully small at best,” he said. What's more, “the harp seal provides a source of fresh meat for many . . . during a time of year when it is difficult to obtain other fresh meat.”

But looking only at the issue of income, many ask if the government wouldn't fare better financially if it were to subsidize fishermen for not taking seals — as many Canadian and U.S. farmers are now paid not to plant certain crops. Income from the hunt to sealers for pelts, meat and oil came to only \$3.4 million last year, Mercer says. Cleveland Amory of the Fund For Animals charges that most of that money didn't go to landmen, but to the big factory ships who then doled out meager wages to their workers. And Lavigne parrots others in his concern that defending the seal hunt costs the government more than the hunt itself nets.

“When you start adding up the cost of flying government-sponsored public-relations firms around the world to tell people how good it is to hunt harp seals, that's got to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. When you accompany sealing vessels with ice breakers to get them into the herds and fly scientists back and forth to assess the populations, that costs money.” Add to that the cost of information booklets produced by the government at between \$30,000 and \$50,000 and mailed to people asking about the hunt, or the cost of enforcement officers at the hunt site. “If you're going to evaluate the true value of an industry you have to add up the inputs as well as the outputs, and with the present market value for seal pelts (in fact, they've been stockpiling pelts), I just don't think they're making any money doing it,” Lavigne says.

Peckford had also said that no part of the seal is wasted. Its meat is eaten and its blubber used for oil. “Absolute garbage,” Lavigne says. “The bulk of the carcasses are left on the ice, although there's a growing tendency to use more.” He says Canadians are being encouraged to try seal-flipper TV dinners, but that seal meat isn't eaten in the quantities the government would have one believe. And an editorial in Newfoundland's largest newspaper, the *Evening Telegram*, bears this out. “If it becomes generally known that seal meat is not being used for food, we will be knocking away one of the props in our case for the seal fishery.”

The cruelty issue is more complicated. Clubbing seals is “bloody, yes, — inhumane, no!” according to Peckford. He said, “It was found after extensive research that the most humane way to kill seals is by using the club, quickly followed by bleeding out. And that is exactly how your own government kills thousands of Alas-



Sealer takes a break from his labors.



Despite government reports to the contrary, some mother seals defend pups, and even follow as they are dragged away.



Greenpeace volunteer protects pup. Hunter, standing before sealing ship, holds hakapik used to crush a seal's skull.

Irony attends hunt protests

Representatives of both the Canadian government and animal-protection groups face civil penalties for protests related to the harp-seal hunt this year. Laws were apparently broken willfully although only the animal-welfare groups were prepared to face the consequences.

A seal-skin parka was confiscated in January from a member of a Canadian delegation touring the United States. Larry Dworkin, of a Montreal public-relations firm, violated the Marine Mammal Protection Act by importing a product made from a protected species. He would have succeeded except for flaunting it among onlookers prior to his participation in a press conference to defend the seal hunt. One of the onlookers was Louis Regenstein, a vice president of the Fund For Animals (FFA). Outraged at Dworkin's attitude and decision to wear the coat to this particular event, Regenstein called the Commerce Department. It promptly sent enforcement officers to seize the coat. Dworkin, still fighting to get his coat back, faces fines of up to \$10,000. Regenstein said Dworkin should know better because a can of seal



Mountie arrests Greenpeacer last year.

meat brought to the press conference last year was seized for the same reason.

Regenstein's own organization could be fined more than \$80,000 for activities earlier this month. Some 32 FFA members sailed to sealing grounds at the Magda-

len Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. On the night of March 8, eight slipped over the side of the vessel and began painting large red crosses upon the backs of baby seals, using a nontoxic dye. Next morning and some 850 to 1,000 seals later, they were arrested and jailed. Ironically, they were arrested for violating the Seal Protection Act.

Twenty-five fisheries wardens and Royal Canadian Mounties saw to it that Ed Chavies of Greenpeace was able to plant a green-dye cross upon only one seal before arresting him. Sixteen other Greenpeace members were arrested after chaining themselves to the decks and masts of sealing vessels bound for the hunt. Another six tried to blockade St. John's Island harbor in Newfoundland, but their two 16-foot rubber rafts proved no match for the departing fleet of sealers.

Greenpeace has become very unpopular with sealers in recent years. This year sealers struck satiric revenge with creation of a parody protest group — Cod-peace. Bumper stickers representing it read: "Save a cod — eat a seal."

kan seals every year: by the club."

"Your own Department of Agriculture, the American Academy of Sciences [sic], the Humane Society of the United States, the Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife [sic] and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries conducted the tests," he continued. "These tests included numerous methods: electrocution, captive bolt, gunshot and carbon-dioxide asphyxia. These findings have all been substantiated again by six veterinarians who served on a panel of the American Veterinary Medical Association. You name it, the method has been tried, and all experts agree the club is still the most humane method."

That's true in theory, but not in practice, says Patricia Forkan, vice president of the Humane Society of the United States. Brian Davies, head of the International Fund For Animal Welfare, agrees and explains why: "First you have animals, maybe five days old; there are two kinds of behavior these young seals are apt to adopt. One is the 'play dead' stance, much like a possum." Here pups essentially stop breathing and draw their heads back into the fat surrounding their shoulders. "At this point there is a very thick layer of blubber covering their heads. It's difficult to kill a seal when it does that. The other behavior, and it seems to occur about 50 percent of the time, is to aggressively snap at the hunter. Then you've got a moving target, difficult to hit."

It's essential that the skull be crushed to ensure instant brain death and so the animals won't feel pain when skinning occurs immediately afterward.

"The Canadian Government never tells you that a good many thousand seals — you can never get the exact figure — are caught in nets and drowned," Davies adds. "No mention's ever made of that because even the Canadian government wouldn't suggest that it's humane."

Davies has observed the Canadian hunt each year for the past twelve. "Men that I've talked to say that for every seal that they hit and recover, they lose five that escape beneath the ice — big animals," Davies recounts. He fears many may die or be seriously hurt. In any case, he says, those clubbed and not killed have clearly experienced inhumane treatment at the hands of the clubbers.

Sue Pressman, director of wildlife protection for the Humane Society of the United States, worries that some harp seal pups might be skinned alive, after viewing the Canadian hunt. Unlike the U.S. fur-seal hunt in Alaska (involving 30,000 animals a year), the harp seal is killed and skinned instantly, before there is time to check whether the animal is even unconscious. And one man does it all, she complains. In contrast, teams of men work on the kill in Alaska. If one man tires, another starts clubbing so that a firm and potentially lethal blow is delivered each time. And, because the animal is bled for an hour prior to skinning, there can be little doubt about whether it is dead.

The British Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is also concerned. It sent its wildlife advisory officer, veterinary pathologist Bill Jordan, to observe the 1978 Canadian hunt. On the first

day that he examined skulls of recently killed pups, he found 7 of 13 had not been fractured even though several had received repeated blows to the head and ears. One animal showed a corneal reflex causing Jordan to ask in his report, "Was it therefore conscious when its throat was cut and it was skinned?" In his report, Jordan remarks that after the first day all skulls he looked at had been crushed, although "many had been crushed after death... by the heel of a boot."

While the claims of sealers and protesters volley back and forth, another issue is quietly exerting growing pressure on the Canadian government. Already 250,000 postcards responding to the Fund For Animals' boycott Canada campaign have been received by Canada's Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. While total proceeds of last year's harp-seal hunt totaled \$5.5 million, U.S. tourists spent \$1.5 billion in Canada last year. "The [boycott] campaign poses a major threat to Canada's efforts to cut back the mammoth \$625 million deficit it suffered in tourist trade with the United States last year," according to the November 29, 1978, Toronto Star.

A March 2, 1979, follow up in the same paper put it more succinctly: "The deciding factor in the future of the seal hunt may be neither animal suffering, the fisheries' survival, nor the extinction of the species but national economics... Whether the boycott and [European ban on imported pelts] succeed may ultimately depend on the emotional response of foreign TV viewers to the sight of baby seal blood splattering on snow-covered ice."