

# Anti-sealers lose credibility

by Anne Evans  
for Canadian University Press

"Over 200,000 seals to be slaughtered in Canadian massacre," announces the huge headline. Above the appeal is a closeup shot of a harp seal pup's face, its beautiful, dark eyes staring straight into yours.

It is an ad by the International Fund for Animal Welfare, soliciting money to put their "anti-cruelty" teams back on the ice floes. They describe the annual seal hunt as "evil", and call it "the cruellest wildlife massacre in the world," of the "world's most intelligent and loveable species". The ad has the same tone as the children's aid ads of the Unitarian Service Committee or the Foster Parent's Plan.

"If there were no seal hunt, it would be a big factor on my income," says Mark Small. He is one of approximately 3,000 landmen — inshore sealers — who live in small communities along the coast of Newfoundland. The landmen, who work for longliners, earn from \$5,000 to \$6,000 every spring and those who work from small, open boats make \$1,000 to \$2,000. "That doesn't mean much to someone making \$100,000 a year, but if you make \$2,000 besides seal money, it means a lot," says Small.

The greatest blow to the industry so far has been the European Economic Community's ban on Canadian seal products. The decision was made in April, following a recommendation from the European parliament.

- Thousands of people in isolated areas are totally dependent on seal hunting for their livelihood, like their ancestors were.

- Economically, the seal hunt was worth \$13 million last year.

That same weekend, about 200 sealers met in a high school gym, to discuss the growing market problems. One of them commented that if the sealers' side was portrayed in Europe, "it might go down a lot better than a politician getting up there."

It seems he was right. The Canadian Sealers Association, the first organization linking the three sealing groups, was formed in that high school meeting. The group has covered a lot of ground in the short time it has existed. Its main objective, this year, is to make the seal hunt commercially viable once more.

The association, under the direction of Kirk Smith, and a broadly representative board of directors, has launched a media drive which it hopes will put a whole new perspective on the industry.

"There is a whole other side to the story which is untold," says Smith, "of a lifestyle for the future.

**"It is a bastardization and offshoot of the trend towards the man-nature balance. These people put animals in front of human beings."**

The only company buying seal pelts this year is Carino, a Norwegian company with a branch in Dildo, Nfld. Carino will buy only mature seal pelts this season, and not white coats (the harp seal pups) or bluebacks (hooded seal pups). The smaller market means that sealers will only be taking 40 per cent of last year's quota, and they'll only get \$13 to \$15 per pelt — half of last year's prices. Of the 60,000 pelts to be taken this year, about 25,000 will be taken by landmen, and the rest by offshore sealers.

A team of Canadian politicians went to Europe on November 25 to lobby against the proposed ban, armed with a list of points in favour of the hunt:

- The seal population in eastern Canada is not threatened with extinction, but growing.

- Each seal consumes about a tonne of fish annually; seals are killed off the coast of Scotland in order to protect fish stocks.

The sealers live an ecologically sound lifestyle which the Canadian and European public would envy if they knew about it. (The sealers) have a deep respect for nature because they live so closely with it."

Smith describes the sealers as "living with one foot in the nineteenth century and the other in the twentieth century."

One of the long-term objectives of the CSA to form a sealer-owned marketing agency, which would purchase the pelt, pay companies for processing, grading and storing, and co-ordinate the marketing of the products. The association also has a number of projects underway to expand the industry in Canada, before attempting to revive the overseas market.

The CSA media campaign has gone beyond what Smith calls "the Fogo process" — a reference to the black and white films made about the sealers of Fogo Island

*They describe the annual seal hunt as "evil", and call it "the cruellest wildlife massacre in the world," of the "world's most intelligent and lovable species."*

ten years ago. Since the formation of the CSA, sealers have appeared on national television, international radio, and in international press coverage.

Small says the media drive gives the sealers a chance to portray "the man involved and how his life depends on the hunt." He's been talking to groups around the province whose original impression of the sealers was very negative. But, he says, "when I explain what's going on, they understand."

This month, Smith travelled with a lobby group of sealers to Ottawa, to discuss the future of the hunt with federal officials.

In early March, they received an operational grant of \$50,000 from the federal government's \$14 million slush fund for small business. That grant was recently matched by the provincial government.

The province has also made available \$500,000, on top of the original grants, to "ensure that the seal fishery is a viable industry."

Smith would not reveal any concrete plans for the money at press time, but the CSA has announced it hopes to make enough additional pelt purchases to bring the catch to 100,000.

Only three ships will be going

to the ice this spring for the offshore mature seal hunt, and they may encounter difficulties as they have never faced before.

The Sea Shepherd Foundation vessel Sea Shepherd II has been laying seige outside of St. John's harbour since last week, and its captain, Paul Watson has said he will ram any vessel that tries to leave for the hunt. The Sea Shepherd's decks are rigged with barbed-wire fencing and guarded with water cannons to keep Canadian authorities from boarding the vessel. Watson adds that if any attempts are made to board the vessel, it will be sunk in the narrows at the entrance to the harbour, preventing any traffic from leaving.

Watson's foundation has also offered the sealers \$1.2 million — \$20 per pelt — not to go to the ice this year, although there is as yet no proof that it has the money.

The *Evening Telegram*, a St. John's daily, quotes sealing captain Morrisey Johnson's claim that he has "too much dignity to take money from people who have been slandering Newfoundlanders for years."

As an alternative to the confrontation, Watson suggested employing Newfoundland sealers as tour guides for boatloads of

people, who would come to see the seals.

But Johnson says that such a program has been advertised twice in *The New York Times*, and received only two enquiries. If a dozen people had shown interest, said Johnson, he would have been willing to carry out the tour.

Watson has also proposed an adopt-a-seal campaign, suggesting that people adopt seals for twenty dollars apiece.

Smith feels the protest groups get money that should go to the Canadian Wildlife Federation. "We have their support and they realize the hunt is a model of wildlife conservation."

He says the sealers are on the forefront of an attack that will eventually affect hunters, trappers and some farmers. "It's a bastardization and offshoot of the trend towards the man-nature balance. These people put animals in front of human beings."

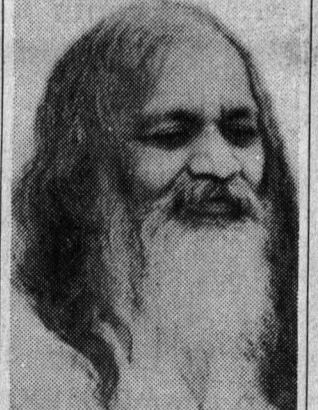
But he is not bothered by the actions of the protesters. "Millions have been spent on emotional, naive people." He says, "People are realizing the movement is turning to violence and it's discrediting itself. It's a logical end result of the emotional basis of their argument. I just hope no one will get hurt."

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