

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

Dal profs looking for alternatives to the seal hunt

BY ERIN SPERLING

For ten years Dalhousie profs and students have been involved in a research project aimed at managing seal population growth. The results have been successful, but some scientists fear they are not going to be implemented.

Dr. Robert Brown is a microbiologist in the Department of Biology. He has been highly involved in the development of a contraceptive vaccine for seals, and is satisfied with the results of the project.

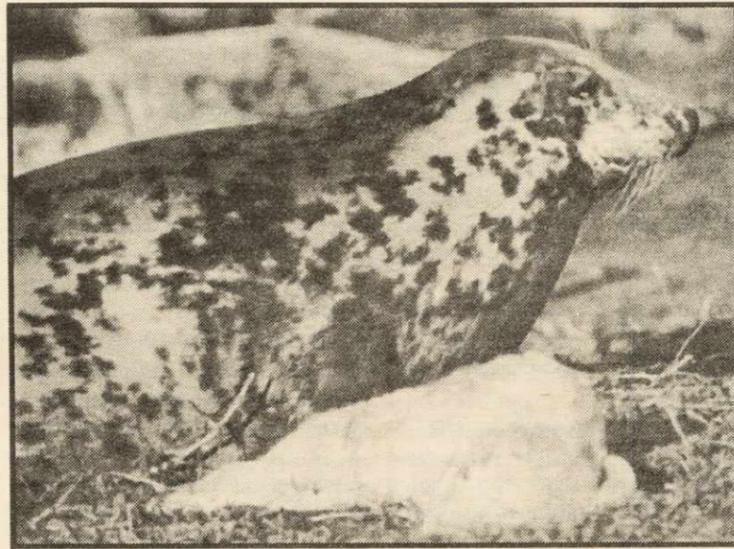
"The research is at a stage where it can be implemented. [The contraceptive vaccine] can also be used to immunize pups...it can be a problem to get to the adult seals. It would be an alternative to clubbing them to death," Dr. Brown said.

Although the long-term study is still ongoing, the results thus far have been extremely promising in terms of population management.

"I wouldn't say [the study] is complete but it is getting there. We now have data which indicates that we can reduce female fertility by 90% over six years at least," Brown said.

The project is being funded by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans

(DFO) until March of this year. Although the DFO has commented directed toward controlling the impact of seal populations on the



that they have not made any decision either way as to the renewal of funding for the project, members of the research team appear certain that March will be the end. Jim Eddington is a team member and manager of marine mammals at Dal.

"The funding finishes in March...[the DFO] will probably tell us in April," he said.

The project grew from research into the problem of seal worms and the contraceptive vaccine became

fishery. But according to Dr. Brown, as well as many other scientists, this relationship is not clearly defined.

"One would like to have good, solid scientific evidence about what is the impact of seals on fish stocks, not only for the birth control program, but just for future management — because obviously the fish stocks need to be managed better," he said.

After spending ten years worth of research dollars on the contraceptive

project, this effective, relatively non-invasive means of population control is not going to be implemented, at least on a large scale. Jerry Conway, of the DFO cull office, believes that contraception may be possible with a population as small as that on Sable Island.

Dr. Brown is "quite neutral" on this issue.

"Everyone has areas of expertise. I know that it is easy to make mistakes. I am no expert on this issue so I leave the big decisions to the experts," he said.

Dr. Sara Iverson is considered an expert in her field. Also a professor in the Dalhousie Biology Department, she has been studying the diet of seals and other marine mammals. By analyzing lipids, or fatty acids, of marine and terrestrial mammals, she has been able to examine their diet composition, among other things.

"We are currently developing a model to try to actually quantitatively calculate the diets of various species, such as grey seals on Sable Island," Dr. Iverson wrote in an e-mail.

"Better information on diets of

marine mammals will be useful in management of marine mammal populations and fisheries, as well as dealing with those of endangered species," she said.

"It would be an alternative to clubbing them to death"

Dr. Iverson's research is being funded by a variety of sources, including Parks Canada, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration (a U.S. organization), and the University of California, Irvine. No funding comes from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

"[The National Science and Engineering Research Council] funds much of my basic research. I am also funded extensively by the 'Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Restoration Fund' in Alaska...to study diets of harbour seals and killer whales in Prince William Sound...The work is ongoing for at least the next 3-4 years," Dr. Iverson said.

There are many other faculty members, staff and students at Dalhousie who are involved in various types of research related to the management of seal populations. Research ranges from microscopic to entire seal populations.

Newfoundland minister supports seal hunt

BY NICOLA LUKSIC

TORONTO (CUP) — With the Newfoundland minister of fisheries and ocean on a cross-country tour, national tensions are escalating about government subsidies to the commercial seal hunt.

Opinions and emotions clashed at John Efford's latest stop — a luncheon at the Royal York Hotel in

Toronto, hosted by the Empire Club Jan. 22 — where the minister was confronted by a member of Canadians Against the Commercial Seal Hunt.

Efford had the floor first. While about 40 members of the Empire Club dined, the minister spoke to them about the virtues of the seal hunt.

"In Newfoundland we produce

seal steak, seal pizza, seal pepperoni, seal oil for a nutritional protein subsidy," Efford said. "I have nothing against seals. I'm an animal lover myself. The problem is that seals eat fish. They do not eat Kentucky Fried Chicken. I don't need to be a genius or a rocket scientist to figure that out."

Efford said that the average seal eats one ton of fish a year. With a population estimated to be between five and six million seals, those tons quickly compound, he added.

But surprise attendee Dan MacDermott, a member of Canadians Against the Commercial Seal Hunt, a project of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), challenged the Newfoundland minister's fundamental assertions.

"Efford's speech was quite devoid of fact," MacDermott said. "He greatly oversimplified the food chain and based much of his evidence on what he calls 'common sense'."

The numbers battle is heating up just weeks after the federal government announced a slight rise in the quota levels for the 1998 seal hunt off Newfoundland, a move IFAW says is bad economics and political pandering.

"Seals are being scapegoated for the decline of the cod stocks," said IFAW spokesperson Laurie Kingston, pointing to scientific research as evidence to the contrary.

Internal documents from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and recent testimony from leading

fish scientist Ransom Myers to the House of Commons fisheries committee point to overfishing as the culprit which led to the collapse of the cod stocks earlier this decade and

"Seals are being scapegoated for the decline of the cod stocks"

with it, 10,000 fishing jobs.

"Efford is desperately trying to make himself a hero in the eyes of Newfoundland. He persists on clinging to a myth," Kingston said.

Efford also sees the seal hunt as a great new opportunity to boost the Newfoundland economy and create jobs.

And Ken Jones, a member of the research management team at the federal Ministry of Fisheries and Oceans in Ottawa, says there is much revenue to be made. He says \$5.7-million in revenue was registered from the 1996 seal hunt after the government injected \$1.4-million in the industry. The international animal rights group begs to differ. Studies completed in October 1997 by economist Clive Southey at the University of Guelph show that "if we eliminate seal meat subsidies, stop the trade in seal pelts, and account for the true costs of labour and capital, the net value of the seal hunt to Canada as a whole is zero."

And because most of the hunt takes

place over a short period of time, the seal hunt currently provides the equivalent of 100 to 120 full-time jobs. After including the \$1.723-million subsidy to the commercial seal hunt, the \$258,000 grant to the Canadian Sealers Association, the \$513,000 in costs to investigate sealing activities and other administrative and research costs, Canadian taxpayers spend about \$30,000 for each job.

There is also the question about the nature of the seal hunt. In the past few years, IFAW has released footage of actual slaughter scenes, including seal pups being skinned alive or being bashed to death with hooks, the inhumane treatment of pregnant seals, and discarded carcasses with their penises removed (to be sold on the Chinese market where they are believed to have aphrodisiac properties).

But Efford says all the deaths are 'humane', dismissing evidence of painful slaughter scenes as fictional images staged by animal rights activists.

Jones of the federal department of fisheries said those who partake in the 'inhumane' slaughter of seals are rarely registered sealers and are duly charged by law. Over 100 sealers were charged last year.

Of the seals legally killed, 95 per cent of them are shot and five per cent have their skulls pierced with a device called a 'hakupick'.

This year 275,000 harp seals are slotted to be slaughtered in the commercial hunt along with an increase in the hooded seal quota from 8,000 to 10,000. The number that are killed illegally is unknown.

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