

## CANADA'S EASTERN SEAL FISHERY

Canadian newspapers have during recent weeks carried numerous reports of public concern about the methods allegedly employed by the hunters of harp and hood seals off the East Coast and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The following statement on the subject was issued on April 3 by Mr. H.J. Robichaud, the Minister of Fisheries:

The seal fishery is one of the oldest pursuits of Canadian fishermen along those sections of our Atlantic seaboard where the fishermen are in a position to harvest the resource. It goes back over 200 years. Traditionally, the hunt is carried on from ships and by landsmen who either walk out on the ice when it is tight to shore or use small boats to reach the ice when it is lying offshore. For quite a number of years, land-based planes have been used to locate the seal herds and relay this information to the sealing vessels.

### INCREASED USE OF AIRCRAFT

In the past two or three years, however, helicopters and light fixed-wing aircraft have been used in actual seal hunting, that is, in ferrying sealers to the seal herds on the ice and in transporting their catch back to shore. The extraordinary interest which has been evidenced in the seal fishery this year in the main results from the considerable expansion that has occurred in the use of these aircraft in seal-catching operations. Presently available information indicates that there may have been 50 or more airplanes and 15 or so helicopters in use in the seal fishery this spring. However, their period of operation was severely curtailed by weather and ice conditions, which in every year are a natural deterrent to this method of sealing. I might add that these aircraft operations were conducted in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The sealing operation is an extremely important one in the lives of thousands of fishermen and their families along our northeast coasts, for whom it represents a source of income at a time when other forms of remunerative employment are not available. These are generally depressed areas, dependent mainly on the fishery in other seasons as well, and where the level of income is on the average quite low. For these Canadian fishermen, the seal fishery is a way of life which is of great importance to their livelihood.

### VALUE OF SEALING OPERATIONS

In 1963, Canadian sealing operations yielded a total of 189,293 pelts with an estimated landed value of \$1,511,000. The figures by region were as follows: Newfoundland, 77,767 pelts with an estimated value of \$664,000; the Maritimes, 65,729 pelts valued at \$496,000; Quebec, 45,797 pelts valued at \$351,000. It should be remembered that the catch of seals may vary substantially from year to year, depending on such factors as the effort expended and weather and ice conditions.

Several other nations besides Canada engage in sealing operations on the "Front", which is the

term given to the area off the east coast of Newfoundland and Labrador. In the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the seal fishery has been traditionally Canadian, with the exception of the operation of one Norwegian vessel in that area during the years 1938 to 1963 and four Norwegian vessels in the current year.

The seal fishery is an extremely hazardous operation, as the record down through the years shows. Scarcely a year goes by that one or more of the vessels engaging in the seal fishery is not lost or damaged — in fact, already this year one Canadian sealing ship has been sunk and a number of others have suffered serious damage. Fortunately, in recent years we have not had the great loss of life that once occurred as the result of this dangerous pursuit, but it still remains an arduous and risky one.

### NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL REGULATION

An important point to remember is that the harp and hood seals off our East Coast constitute an international resource which is of interest to sealers from Canada as well as from Norway, Denmark and the U.S.S.R. For this reason it is essential that international agreement be reached regarding appropriate conservation measures if the herds are to be managed effectively.

I might say that in this, as well as in past years, the sealing operations and the animals themselves have been under close surveillance by officials of my Department. Extensive scientific studies have been conducted, and are being continued, to determine such factors as migration, behaviour, reproductive rate and the recommended harvest. Our objective is an effective management programme which will permit a sustainable annual harvest. However, as I said, this cannot be done by Canada alone; the co-operation of other countries with an interest in, and a right to take, these seals is required.

### KILLING SEASON SHORTENED

For many years we have had an informal agreement with these other countries whereby the taking of seals on the area known as the "Front" is not permitted before the tenth of March. In the Gulf of St. Lawrence, sealing operations for harp and hood seals may not begin before March 5. In 1961, the first action was taken to shorten the killing season, when the sealing countries accepted Canada's proposal of May 5 as the closing date for operations. Last year, again at Canada's urging, the season was further shortened to April 30, and it is felt that this action has been beneficial in reducing the catch of the older, breeding seals.

As I mentioned earlier, the international aspects of this particular fishery make the question of management an involved one. We are intensively pursuing further conservation measures and have taken up the matter in the International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries. The reaction to our proposals within this body has been such that we expect that within a short while a protocol amendment to the Convention under which the Commission

(Over)