

by Cyndy Baskin

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March is the month when university students struggle to get their final essays written, winter fades away into spring and mating season begins for most animals. It is also the month dreaded by many animal lovers, for along with March comes the annual seal hunt off the Atlantic coast.

Most of us have, with the assistance of the media, formed our opinions on whether or not we approve of or detest the seal hunt. The hunt has been depicted as necessary to the economy of Labrador by some newspapers, while others have labelled it "barbaric", backing up their judgement with pictures of baby seals being clubbed to death.

Sealing on Canada's Atlantic coast has been taking place for centuries. Jacques Cartier reported that the Beothuk Indians of Labrador and Micmacs from Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island were hunting seals in the Strait of Belle Isle in 1534. By the end of the 16th century, Basque, Norman and Breton fishermen made annual expeditions to the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence to hunt seals. These animals provided early settlers with food and oil, as well as leather and fur for clothing, all of which soon became important items of trade and commerce.

Today the seal hunt is composed of several different parts. There is a hunt by the native peoples of west Greenland and the Canadian Arctic which takes place during the summer months. There is also a hunt by the large vessels which takes animals from whelping (the act of a seal giving birth) and molting areas on the ice of the "Front" area off northwestern Newfoundland and in the "Gulf" area, in the vicinity of the Magdalen Islands. The recent increase in numbers of strongly-built multi-purpose small vessels has introduced a new component to the seal fishery which takes young animals in early winter, and beaters (young seals which have completely shed their white coats) and molting adults throughout the spring. Moreover, landsmen, operating on foot or in small boats among the loose ice pans, harvest primarily white coat and beater pups and some adults in late spring.

Most sealers come from small coastal communities along the shores of Newfoundland, Labrador, the Magdalen Islands, the Quebec North Shore and occasionally the rest of the Maritimes. These communities became established in locations selected on the basis of accessibility to the ocean in areas where marine resources were abundant. Their success depended upon the ability to catch a variety of species including: cod, salmon, lobsters, capelin and seals as they became seasonally available.

In late February and early March adult female harp seals give birth to one white-coated pup. When the pups are three to four weeks old they molt their translucent coats and learn to swim in preparation for the spring migration. Since the soft white coat of the baby harp seals has traditionally been highly prized by European fur industries, the annual seal hunt takes place immediately after the pups are born. Hence, the majority of seals are killed as babies.

Prior to 1961 there were no regulations governing the seal hunt, its duration, methods of kill or catch levels. In 1961 management of the seals came under the jurisdiction of the International Commission for Northwest Atlantic Fisheries (ICNAF). ICNAF was succeeded by the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) in 1976. A further source of management advice, independent of government, is the Committee on Seals

and Sealing (COSS) established in 1971, whose membership includes scientists, veterinarians and members of the Canadian and international humane societies. This committee is charged with examining the economic, sociological, ecological and humanitarian aspects of the seal hunt and to recommend to the Canadian Minister of Fisheries any changes in the regulations controlling sealing which were considered necessary.

Greenpeace is the largest group protesting the seal hunt. The group began as the "Don't Make a Wave Committee" in Vancouver in late 1969 to protest French and American bombtesting in the South Pacific. By 1976 Greenpeace had become a global organization through its campaigns to save the great whales. In the past year Greenpeace has also become involved in environmental concerns such as nuclear power and acid rain.

Greenpeace operates through donations and fund raising activities such as bingo and door-to-door canvassing. Recently the movement hired some professional fund raisers who are paid a commission on the amount of money they bring in as donations. There are only 14 people on salary throughout Canada, two of whom work in the tiny, one room office in Toronto.

The Federal Ministry which regulates the hunt, Fisheries and Oceans, and Greenpeace disagree on the following four points regarding the harp seal hunt: method of killing, ecology, population of harp seals and economics.

A humane death is defined as one which brings a rapid, efficient death to the animal with the absence or absolute minimum of physical pain or psychological stress.

According to Fisheries and Oceans, their prime objective is to ensure that the method of killing seals is humane and effective. The harp seals are harvested (the term used by Fisheries and Oceans which means killed) by manual stunning (by a sharp blow to the head with a club) followed by exsanguination (bleeding out). A pamphlet provided by Fisheries and Oceans entitled *Humane Aspects of the Harp Seal Hunt* states that, "as the skull bones of seals are thin and fragile the minimum effect which the clubbing technique produces is a deep irreversible unconsciousness, instantaneously rendering the animal insensitive to pain. In the majority of cases, the cranium is entirely crushed, inflicting a swift neurological death."

Between 1969 and 1972 the United States commissioned a number of scientific groups to investigate alternate methods of killing seals. These groups included, among others, representatives from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Humane Society of the U.S. and the Panel of Euthanasia of the American Veterinary Medical Association. A large variety of known methods were examined, such as electrocution, captive bolt pistols, nitrogen asphyxiation, decapitation and injected drugs. These studies concluded that none of the above techniques was more humane than the method already used.

Greenpeace, however, disagrees. They back up their view that the seal hunt is inhumane with a study prepared for COSS and the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies by veterinary pathologist Dr. Harry Roswell on the 1977 seal hunt. According to Roswell, of the 76 seal pups examined after death during this hunt, "unconsciousness was not instantaneous in 10 animals or 14 per cent."

Other organisations also believe the hunt to be inhumane, such as the British Columbia branch of the Society for the

Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Ontario Humane Society (OHS). The president of the OHS, Tom Hughes, believes, "the hunt shouldn't be called a seal hunt. It is a slaughter and should be considered as such. It's inhumane and obscene to kill a seal with a club."

The Canadian government's policy regarding the seal hunt requires every sealer to obtain a licence to participate in the hunt. Furthermore, three years ago the Department of Fisheries and Oceans began organising lectures and courses of instruction for sealers. Says spokesper-

son Peter Meelbrug, "these training courses are designed to ensure that seals are killed in the most humane manner possible and to assist sealers in producing high quality seal meat and fur. We believe that because of these courses the hunt is well managed." Yet, Meelbrug admits that "mistakes can always happen because nothing works 100 per cent. We can't possibly have a fisheries officer watching over every sealer, which is the only way to guarantee that things run perfectly all the time."

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans states that they, "allow harvesting of seals at levels that are sustainable over the long term, based upon principles which ensure the maintenance of adequate breeding populations and which take into account the relationships between the species and their competitors, predators, and prey". The catch of harp seals is restricted "to levels which permit the continued increase of the population."

Harp seals gather annually on the ice in both the Front and Gulf areas to whelp and breed. Aerial photography has been used since 1950 as a means of assessing the number of seals in both areas. Standard black and white photography records the dark adults which crawl out on the white ice and snow. However, white coated pups do not show up, nor is the camera able to record the number of adults in the water at the moment when the photograph is taken. Other population assessments for harp seals include aerial survey techniques, ultra-violet light photography and biomathematical techniques.

From 1972 to 1975 the total allowable catch (TAC) for harp seals was 150,000. Scientific analyses in 1975 contained a wide range of opinion on the status of harp seal stocks, due primarily to disagreement on the rate of natural mortality. ICNAF determined that, because of the existing uncertainties, it was wise to take a conservative approach and the TAC for 1976 was reduced to 127,000. Population analyses conducted following

the 1976 seal hunt resulted in agreement among scientists in ICNAF/NAFO that the harp seal annual natural mortality is approximately 10 per cent. Based on the information provided by these analyses, the 1977 TAC was increased to 170,000 where it remains today.

At the November 1980 meeting of the NAFO Scientific Council new estimates of pregnancy rates were adopted for calculation of yields and projections of catch and population size. Using the best estimate of 375,000 for pup production in 1980, replacement yield (the maximum

harvest allowable in a given year, if the population level at the year's end is to remain the same as it was at the beginning) was estimated to be 210,000 animals, with a population of 1.57 million animals aged one year or more, and the sustainable yield (the maximum harvest allowable on a given population if it is to maintain its present level over the long term) was estimated to be 234,000 animals.

Figures for the 1981 harp seal hunt have not been published for the public yet. Dr. Montreuil informed *The Varsity* however, that he would send a copy of the 1981 report since he is in charge of compiling it. Unfortunately Dr. Montreuil failed to do so.

Greenpeace disagrees with Fisheries and Oceans, stating the harp seal population is declining and will face extinction if the number of seals killed in the hunt is not curbed. Members of Greenpeace stress all scientists agree there were about three million seals in the early 1950's and there are about one million now. This is a 60 per cent reduction in the seal population in 25 years.

Professor David Lavigne, a zoologist at Guelph University who developed the method of ultra-violet photography, supports Greenpeace's views. He disagrees with the government on the number of seal pups born per year. His figure for 1977's birth rate is 250,000. Lavigne explains "just over half of these seals (about 130,000) were killed by hunters in the 1976 hunt, which means had the full quota of 170,000 been reached, only about 90,000 would have been left to survive against the crushing ice and ships, natural predators and disease for between four and five years before reaching the age of mating and reproduction."

Furthermore, Dr. J.R. Beddington of York University, England, conducted a study on the future of Canada's harp seal herd and concluded "there are 50,000 fewer seals born each year than the government figure; and the seal population is in a continual state of decline as a

direct result of government hunt quotas." Beddington also suggests "the over-fishing of North Atlantic capelin in the last ten years can have serious deleterious effects on the size of the harp seal herd. Capelin is the major component of the seals' diet and it is a documented fact that the availability of food places an upper limit on the possible number of seals."

Everyone agrees then that there are fewer fish for the harp seals to feed upon but the contentious issues lies for reason for the depletion. Fisheries and Oceans

asserts "harp seals are estimated to consume 1.5 metric tons of food per animal annually. At a current population size estimated to be 1.57 million animals, the harp seal population alone consumes three times more food annually than the total 1977 Canadian catch of fish in the northwest Atlantic, an amount equivalent to the total catch of all fish species by all five countries in 1977. Harp seals are thus a very significant component of the north Atlantic ecosystem."

However, Dan McDermott of Greenpeace declares "some people believe that seals must be killed so they won't eat all the fish. This is bull. Seals do not remove the fish they eat from the ecosystem in that when a seal eats a fish, that fish is eventually returned to the water through excrement to feed plankton which, in turn, adds to the food cycle to produce more fish. The real culprit in declining fish stocks is the decades of over-fishing. Moreover, harp seals cannot be blamed for depleting fish during the fishing season as this is when they move north, away from commercial fishing grounds. Any of the older fishermen in the out-ports will remember that when the seal population was high, so were the fish populations."

Probably the most important issue relating to the harp seal hunt is its value to the Newfoundland economy. Does the hunt bring in a significant amount of money for the sealers? Fisheries and Oceans affirms that local unemployment operates in certain fishing villages along the coast of Newfoundland and along the shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence frequently approach 90 per cent in March and April. The scarcity of alternative employment opportunities in these resource-based communities results in limited occupational mobility for seal-hunting fishermen.

A survey carried-out by Fisheries and Oceans in 1980 concluded that 83 per cent of sealers with families made less than \$15,000 in the previous year. The survey further asserts that earnings received from the seal hunt benefited

more than 15,000 individuals, including the sealers and those employed in processing and support industries. Therefore, earnings provide an important supplement to the sealers' annual income which, for the most part, is gained through employment in other fisheries-related activities during the summer months.

The government's estimates place the value added to the Atlantic economy by the sealing industry in 1980 at \$10.7 million, including a contribution of \$7.2 million by the primary, or harvesting, sector, and \$3.5 million by the secondary, or processing, sector. The eight large vessels participating in the 1980 hunt had 213 crew members, while the 146 small vessels had 589. Approximately 4,280 landsmen took part in the hunt. According to the government, returns in labour for large vessel sealers averaged \$3,400 for less than four weeks work, while average incomes to small vessel operators and to commercially active landsmen were \$1,900 and \$400 respectively.

Greenpeace, in reaction to the government's publication *Canada's East Coast Sealing Industry 1976*, which they state is the last year for which statistics are available, declares that the hunt is not a vital part of the Newfoundland economy. "On the contrary," says McDermott, "the money made in Newfoundland from the seal hunt is only a spit in the bucket." McDermott goes on to explain that "even taking the government figure (for 1976) of \$5.5 million gained from sealing, less than .2 per cent or two-tenths of 1 per cent of the annual Newfoundland Gross Provincial Income is derived from sealing."

McDermott continued by asserting that of the \$5.5 million gained through sealing, only \$702,000 or 12 per cent, went to the 3,045 landsmen involved in the 1976 hunt. The remaining \$4,795,078 or 88 per cent went to only 29 per cent of those involved.

According to the same government report 7,819 sealing licences were issued in Newfoundland in 1976. However, Greenpeace maintains that less than 4,000 Newfoundland sealers earned any money at all from the hunt that year.

Greenpeace has evidence showing that over half (63.3 per cent) of the landsmen make \$100 or less a year from the hunt. According to the 1976 report, these people, whose welfare is given as the major reason for the hunt, have "3.5 dependents, an average grade nine education, and live in isolated communities with limited occupational mobility." For three-fifths of the landsmen, sealing brings in less than \$25 per dependent per year. This is less than 10 per cent of the money received from family allowance payments.

Those at Greenpeace also suspect that the costs of the hunt to the taxpayers considerably exceed the money made by the landsmen. In 1977 Fisheries and Oceans defended the seal hunt at a cost of \$33,000. It is known that the Canadian Coast Guard must maintain an ice-breaker no more than one day's sailing from the sailing fleet, that salaried fisheries officers use helicopters to move them around the sealing grounds, and that in 1976 one of these helicopters was lost overboard from a sealing ship because of being improperly secured. However, none of these figures appear on any balance sheet for the seal hunt.

Meelbrug explains that, "there is no balance sheet for the seal hunt. In dollars

Fisheries and Oceans don't keep books that way. The whole department has only one budget which is not divided up amongst the different fish under our jurisdiction. Therefore, any expenditures for the seal hunt go on the same balance sheet as expenditures for lobsters, cod or salmon."

The Canadian government also defends the harp seal hunt because they see it as an integral part of the social and cultural heritage of Canada's east coast. According to Newfoundland Premier Brian Peckford "the seal hunt is a part of Newfoundland's culture. We wish to preserve this province's disappearing way of life and this includes preserving the seal hunt."

McDermott agrees that culture should be preserved to a point, but draws the line when it comes to killing a form of life. "The killing of walrus used to be a part of Newfoundland's culture," says McDermott, "and now there are no longer any walrus in that area. We don't want this to happen to the harp seal as well."

Greenpeace offers alternatives to the seal hunt. Members of this organization suggest that strict enforcement of the 200-mile fishing limit be ensured so that Canadian fishermen earn a decent living from this resource before fishing is opened to other nations and that a ban

be placed on foreign draggers which "strip-mine" the oceans. They also propose that the Canadian government investigate developments in cold climate agriculture and animal husbandry in Sweden and the Soviet Union for possible adaptation for the Maritimes and that both the federal and provincial governments help people in the outports to set up co-op community owned fish processing plants. Greenpeace realizes that if the people of the outports are to be

asked to give up sealing for the good of Canadian ecology, they should be subsidized until such a time when viable alternatives can be introduced.

It is up to the reader to decide who he believes to have the true story about the harp seal hunt. Some have already made their decisions, such as the French fur industry which has banned the import of harp seal pelts; the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives who have condemned the hunt; Denmark which has forbidden the hunting of harp seals within its jurisdiction; and the Frankfurt Fur Auction of Germany which has refused to handle harp seal pelts.

Yet despite all these bans the seal hunt will go on as usual this month. At the same time, members of Greenpeace will protest the hunt and will continue to do so as long as the hunt takes place.

## Report from the Hunt

by Ken Burke

While most people read about the seal hunt in their daily newspapers or see a report on the late news, there are others whose job it is to cover the event for our media-hungry world. One such person is Tom MacDougall, a reporter from Canadian Press' Halifax office, who travelled on Greenpeace's ship, the *Rainbow Warrior*, to the scene of the hunt, where heavy ice forced the ship to turn back. MacDougall talked about his experience in an interview with the *Gazette*.

"Greenpeace would be the first to admit the spraying of seals is symbolic. They're there to make a point."

MacDougall was one of only five journalists who made the trip on the Greenpeace vessel. While the ship never actually arrived at the scene of the hunt, MacDougall said they did follow the hunt closely, arriving at scenes where the killing had occurred and the sealers had already gone back to their boats. According to MacDougall, "It's a grisly sight. There's blood everywhere. You could see from looking at the seals where they got bashed in the head."

Because the excursion was forced to return before reaching the hunt, their ability to spray the seals with green paint to make the coats worthless was restricted. However, this did not hamper Greenpeace's success, MacDougall said. "From what I've seen people here think the effort failed. This is misleading, as Greenpeace would be the first to admit the spraying of seals is mainly symbolic. The fact is, they're there to make a point" He said spraying one harp seal only means that another unsprayed seal will die. "They did get satisfaction out of knowing they've saved individual seals," he said.

MacDougall said the Greenpeace people he talked to were "elated" over the

