

Seals

It is impossible to consider Canada's seals without considering their annual cull.

There have been and are two views of the harp seal hunt which takes place each spring off the coasts of Newfoundland and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. They involve emotions, aesthetics and economics. There are honest people on both sides, and on two points there is no real disagreement: The hunt is harsh, and it has been going on for hundreds of years.

There are other areas in which—to the surprise of many—there is also agreement among scientists and other objective observers: The harp seal is not an endangered species. Seals are not skinned alive. The seals taken are not all young whitecoats. (Indeed whitecoats account for much less than half of the total.) The hunt is the most closely regulated killing of wild animals in North America. It is also a vital part of the subsistence incomes of the people who do the hunting.

It is difficult for some animal lovers, particularly those living in urban areas far from the northern seas, to understand the hunters' viewpoint. It is difficult for the hunters to understand the logic of those who would abolish their jobs.

Harp and hooded seals have been hunted off the coasts of Newfoundland and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence for hundreds of years.

"Look. We live here on this little rock. We have to make our living off it. Conservation means more to us than it probably does to you. We're careful, I mean, what we do with our moose. We're careful with our lobsters. Can't you see we're the last people on earth who would want to wipe out the seals?"

—Eli Bryant, interviewed by Sandra Gwyn. "Saturday Night," 1977

The harp seals travel in herds, moving south from the coast of Greenland and the Canadian Arctic to winter in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and off the northeast coast of Labrador. In late February or early March the females give birth to single pups, weighing about fifteen pounds. The young are called whitecoats, although the pup's temporary coat is transparent rather than truly white. The hair focuses the sun's heat on the animal's skin, protecting it from the cold, while a thick layer of insulating blubber is built up. The mothers nurse the pups for three weeks with a milk of astonishing richness, and the pups gain nearly eighty-five pounds. The pups' coats then change to mottled grey, and the mothers abandon the pups. Female harp seals have pups yearly for as long as twenty-five years.



"The protest groups, while all of this is going on, are battling for our attention with the intensity of rival television networks. Round One to Brian Davies, who arrives with Yvette Mimieux, direct from Hollywood. Mimieux is wearing a pink sweater and a nifty blue Arctic suit, and she tells us that sealing, like slavery, is obsolete. Round Two to Greenpeace. The day the hunt opens, their leader, Paul Watson, chains himself to a cable hauling seal pelts aboard a ship and gets dunked in the North Atlantic. ('People who don't know what they are doing shouldn't be allowed out there,' says Davies.) Round Three, in spades, to Franz Webber, who produces Brigitte Bardot, in a red turtle-neck, out of a chartered jet."

—Sandra Gwyn, "Saturday Night," 1977

Three groups hunt seals: the sealers from large vessels, the landsmen of Newfoundland and the coastal islands, and the native peoples of the Canadian Arctic and Greenland.

The large ships, under Canadian and Norwegian flags, are the only vessels capable of reaching the whelping ice, and they hunt whitecoats almost exclusively. (By law, no more than five per cent of their catch may be over one year old.) The large vessel hunters take the fur, flippers and fat of the whitecoats,