

Sealing: Fiendish half-witted delight

The Newfoundland sealer has been portrayed as a fiendish half-wit delighting in peeling the hides off the few remaining baby seals under a warm sun while the warm blood forms pools under his long rubbers, only to put a fur coat on the back of some rich lady.

The term "baby seals" speaks of the kind of attack launched on these people. When was the last time you heard a lamb called a "baby sheep" or a calf called a "baby cow"?

Seals hunted in the Atlantic are used for food, oil products, and the hides are tanned for leather. Harp seal pups sport natal fur for approximately one week (many before the season opens) which is suitable for fur coats. Boots, jackets, and gloves are made from the stiff guard hair hides of the other seals which many fashion conscious people would find repulsive.

Most seal fur coats are made from the Pacific fur seal (*Callorhinus ursinus*) which has been the subject of a continuing hunt since the late 1700's. The Weddell seal (*Leptonychotes weddellii*) is also hunted in the Antarctic along with harvests of the Soviet Union and South Africa.

Why "protesters" would boycott

only the Newfoundland seal hunt (and then not the Norwegian or even the Nova Scotian based ships involved in 1977) is enough to give a Newfoundlander a defensive complex, or at least arouse an eyelash or mild query. Perhaps it is easier to encourage misinformed audiences to be repulsed by anything connected with the aforementioned image of a Newfoundlander than to present any kind of fact.

The seal herd is in no danger of extinction and under the quota system the seal herds have increased in the last few years.

Contrary to much popular belief, seals are hunted in a humane manner according to regulations approved by reputable humane societies, and these regulations are strictly enforced by fisheries officers who are on the ice at all times.

Canadian policy on the conduct of the seal hunt and research on seals and hunting practices is guided by advice from a non-governmental committee on seals and sealing whose members include scientists and representatives of animal welfare organizations.

Sealing has been described as the most dangerous adventure

ever to be called an industry. More than one thousand sealers have died and at least forty-one vessels have been lost at sea pursuing the seal fishery.

Newfoundland sealers earned reputations of courage and bravery against perils of ice jams, rafting ice, drowning, exposure, explosion, and fire from the oil on board ship, not to mention bites from pugnacious hood seals causing the loss of many an arm and leg.

Added to this, the proud sealer now has to timidly let the gaff be taken from his hands and his pelts and carcasses be thrown into the ocean by misguided school boys and unemployment insurance recipients who can see no further than the cans they pick off their supermarket shelves. It would seem to me a form of justice if these "protesters" were to slip off a pan of ice never to resurface, or to be bitten by a 900 lb. hood seal.

However, one could not help but side with such persons when they behold the watering, liquid brown eyes in the ball of fluffy fur and hear the poor babies crying so innocently for their mummies and daddies. No wonder they are considered so much cuter than a starving Biafran or mutilated Vietnamese.

However these cute young things prove to be quite the reverse of the ugly duckling story, as they become flapping masses of ugly blubber enclosed by stiff coarse hairs.

Screams concerning the seal hunt of "Ecological interference!" and "Ecological genocide!" come from half-cocked urbanites whose forests and lands are being reduced to unproductive rubble,



whose ponds and rivers are being filled with poison and dammed for power to be sold to the south, and whose sky is being filled with vile odors and noxious fumes obscuring more energy forms than solar radiation alone.

The freedom of the seal should be admired as he is let to live a natural life until he is attempted to be harvested at which time he could still escape and retain his freedom. The creature certainly seems more noble than his counterpart in aquarium and parks bouncing a rubber ball from his nose and playing drums as part of his ailing vaudeville act, for audiences with ailments more severe.

The life of a seal in nature seems more admirable than that of cows held in stanchions or confined to patches of muck by electric fences, pigs kept in stocks and pens, mink raised in

confinement solely for furs, and chickens who live their entire lives in modified bicycle baskets only to produce eggs for their benevolent owners.

Perhaps the seal hunt "protesters" had better bring their Air Canada baggies with them on their first tour of a slaughter house, or might they find a squealing pig an epitaph to chain themselves onto a trough until all this senseless destruction has ceased.

Perish the thought of a lobster being boiled alive or a trout being hit against a rock or left flicking in the bottom of a boat, not to mention the hideous agony of an oyster being eaten alive. Will there be no end?

To put it in short, the seal hunt is about as cruel as a fox eating a rabbit, a seal eating a capelin, or the torture of life itself.



AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

"The harp seal question is entirely emotional. We have to be logical. We have to aim our activity first the endangered species. Those who are moved by the plight of the harp seal could also be moved by the plight of the pig, with which we make our bacon. If we are sentimental about harp seals, which are not endangered because they are partly protected, then we have to be also emotional about pigs."

Jacques Cousteau Past and continuing controversy concerning the seal fishery centers on misinformation, moral values, and appeals to mass ignorant audiences arousing emotion and attempting to pressure the abandonment of scientific observations and objectives concerning the seal herds.

The remainder of this article will examine the seal fishery in an ecological manner exploring scientific information.

Introduction:

The effects of the seals are spread over an area from Baffin Bay to the furthest Southward limit of their migration, the Grand Banks, just south of Newfoundland. The seals are present in Newfoundland waters usually for seven months of the year. (The season at the front is open for approximately six weeks.)

The two major species of Atlantic seals are harp seals (*Pagophilus groenlandicus*) and hood seals (*Cystophora cristata*),

harp seals greatly outnumbering hoods.

Man is assumed part of the ecosystem in this article, which departs from some purely "biological" approaches.

Seal's life:

As the seal population migrates from the areas of Baffin Island to the southernmost part of Newfoundland, the herds divide as they pass the straight of Belle Isle. Approximately one third of the population go through the straight, and the remainder along the northeast and east coast of Newfoundland. The latter two-thirds, or the front herd, whelp on the ice from late February to mid-March.

The mean whelping age of females is 5.5 years, with each female producing one pup which she suckles for approximately two weeks. The pup, weighing approximately fifteen pounds at birth gains an estimated fifty pounds in two weeks, two-thirds of which is skin and blubber. At the end of the first week, the harp pup's natal fur begins to be replaced by a coarse coat of stiff guard hairs similar to the coat the hood seal is born with.

At present, the herd is estimated at 1.25 million animals with an expected pup production of over 300,000 this year. Members commonly reach the age of twenty-five to thirty years.

Seal's feeding:

The food of seals inhabiting the North Atlantic consists of pelagic

fish, especially capelin (*Mallotus villosus*) and pelagic and benthic crustacea (*Euphausiacea*, *Mysidacea*, *Amphiboda*, *Decapoda*) with smaller amounts of benthic fish.

The annual consumption of a seal is 1.5 tons of seafood/animal. Fish constitutes some 60 percent of the food of seals, and capelin is the major portion at 40 percent of this figure. Approximately 75 percent of this food is taken off Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador.

Predation by seals on capelin stocks off Eastern Newfoundland occurs during the winter months when pack ice is present as a resting substrate, the same resource being consumed in summer by the great whales (*Balaenopteridae*).

There is limited competition between seals and whales, but collectively they are food limited which limits total numbers of each.

Capelin, the major prey of the seal, are undoubtedly the most important fish fodder in the Canadian Atlantic Region.

In the Newfoundland area, capelin comprise over 90 percent of the diet of cod (*Gadus morhua*) during June and July, and nearly 32 percent on an annual basis.

Capelin are also the main prey species of the Atlantic Salmon (*Salmo Salar*) in the northwest Atlantic, and in Newfoundland coastal waters account for 45 to 100 percent of the food of salmon depending on size.

Greenland halibut (*Reinhardtius hippoglossoides*) feed almost exclusively on Capelin, and

American plaice (*Hippoglossoides platessoides*) use 30 to 38 percent capelin for their food supply. A large quantity of varied species consume vast quantities of capelin eggs and capelin during spawning season.

Marine mammals and large pelagic fish such as bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) also feed extensively on capelin in the Newfoundland area, as well as small pelagic feeding on capelin larvae and juveniles.

Cod has traditionally been and continues to be the main species supporting the Newfoundland fishery. Cod are consumed at times by seals but the most serious effect on the cod is through competition with the seals for capelin which is the major food of each.

Man fishes capelin but concen-

trates more effort on the principal groundfish and flatfishes, especially cod. Man is therefore a direct competitor with seals for capelin and also preys upon cod which is a competitor with the seals. Man would like to see cod as a more efficient competitor.

Seal's predators:

Narwhals are a natural predator of seals. An occasional polar bear and arctic fox have captured a seal but the dangers inherent in attaining the prey have made the effect of these two species negligible.

Man is by far the largest predator of the seal. Seal carcasses are eaten and the flippers are considered a delicacy.

A good deal of the seals weight is blubber which produces edible oil, and is also used in soaps, perfumes, illuminating oil and

To Hunt or not to Hunt...

