

Let's Just Buy the Seal Hunt



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Why should you care about the seal hunt?

- 1) It is a tax-supported industry that loses money.
- 2) Sealers need education to get jobs that pay more and add value.
- 3) Perhaps you don't like paying for seals to be killed purely for luxury fur sales?
- 4) And most importantly, there is a *real* chance of getting the seal hunt banned by 2010.

Snapshot of the hunt

In late February, pregnant mothers give birth on the ice off the coast of Newfoundland. Babies cannot swim, so they remain on the ice for about two months. At 4 weeks old, after they've molted their white fur, and immediately after they've stopped nursing, the hunt begins. To ensure that the seal population isn't completely wiped out, the Canadian government caps the hunt at around 340,000 kills per year. Given the quota, and the intense competition among sealers, the hunt is fast, furious, often inhumane, and takes less than a week to fully execute.¹

Limitations of humane regulations

There are regulations designed to make the hunt more humane, which require sealers to crush (not just fracture) seals' skulls before skinning them.² However, with 6,000 sealers competing against each other to get the biggest share of the 340,000 allotted kills, and the hunt only lasting less than a week, not even the regulations are enforced.³ Veterinarian Pierre-Yves Daoust recalls, "I would collect skulls that have been completely crushed and I collected skulls that have only a few fractures."⁴ According to Daoust, fear-induced "paralysis" is a typical behavior of seals, which when mistaken for unconsciousness can lead to skinning seals alive.⁵ And with public observers not allowed within 1 kilometer (0.62 miles) of the hunt, we are asked to *trust* that sealers will show kindness to the seals they are killing.⁶

Sealing is stealing from sealers

From 1996 to 2005, the number of sealers increased dramatically, the number of kills per sealer dropped in half, and the net earnings per sealer dropped from \$6,700 to \$2,200. In 2008, earnings per sealer were only \$280.*⁷ The sealers need some temporary cash to get them out of the hunt, and they need training to get jobs that add value to society. Canada has a \$1 billion Community Adjustment Fund to help communities restructure, and that's exactly what sealing communities require.⁸

Saving sealers from themselves

The profit-motive to kill as many seals as quickly as possible induces sealers to take extreme risks by putting their boats into unsafe ice floes. Each year, over 14 sealing boats are seriously damaged, including at least 1 sunk. Insurers recognize sealers' high-risk behavior by increasing deductibles from \$5,000 for normal fishing to up to \$250,000 for sealing. The government spends \$4.3 million per year helping the sealers with icebreaker ships and other rescue services.⁹ In 2007, the Newfoundland government paid \$8 million to owners of boats damaged by ice. In 2008, four sealers died while being rescued by the coast guard, which will cost the government more than \$6 million in legal fees and settlements.¹⁰ In any given year, the costs of saving sealers from themselves can cost Canadian taxpayers more than the sealers actually earn from the hunt.

* After taking insurance premiums into account, these earnings per sealer may be as low as \$1,900 for 2005 and \$11 for 2008.

Canada's got its pants down

Canada has a valuable reputation as a peaceful and friendly country. The seal hunt is a stain on that reputation. Trade in seal products has been banned in countries such as the United States, Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands. In 2009, the European Union (EU) considered a similar ban. Since 31% of pelts are sold to the EU, and 60% are sold to Norway—which adopts many EU policies—the sealing industry is in danger of losing over 90% of its market.^{11,12} What is the cost to Canada's reputation, trade, and tourism, of supporting for this dying industry?

The cod facade

The Newfoundland government argues that the seal hunt helps the cod fisheries, since seals eat cod. Spain adopted a policy of killing lynx to boost the rabbit population, since lynx eat rabbits. However, the result was a *decrease* in rabbits, since lynx also eat predators of rabbits.¹³ Likewise, seals eat both cod *and* predators of cod. The government has yet to produce a study that takes this into account. If it is even possible to effectively 'manage' complex food webs, Newfoundland has yet to prove that it can do so in an unbiased and scientifically sound manner.

Aberrational not aboriginal

The Newfoundland government promotes the seal hunt by lumping native Canadians' subsistence hunting in with the commercial seal hunt. The two are separate and distinct. According to Stuart Myiow, Secretary of the Mohawk Traditional Council:

*As Mohawk people and world citizens we condemn these acts of horror being committed against the seals as it furthers the destruction of our Mother Earth adding to the global ecological crisis.*¹⁴

Government funded protests?

The Canadian and Newfoundland governments spend a total of \$200,000 per year promoting the seal hunt, including pro-sealing rallies and advertising.¹⁵ Canadian taxpayers typically approve of government support of industries that add value to Canadian culture, such as the arts, which may not be economically viable on their own. The seal hunt is not economically viable, but with such widespread opposition—both in Canada and internationally—can it be said to add value to Canadian culture? If the hunt doesn't profit, we *must* stop it.

See no evil

The Canadian government incurs additional expenses enforcing its ban on observers within 1 kilometer (0.62 miles) of the hunt. The hunt can't be revealed, because it's a killing field. In 2008, the federal government incurred \$487,000 in costs related to seizing and holding the [Sea Shepherd](#)'s Farley Mowat ship for allegedly breaching the 'don't watch us' boundary—an allegation that the Sea Shepherd is disputing based on GPS records. Canada spends at least \$2 million per year to manage and enforce regulations related to the seal hunt.¹⁶

New math for Newfoundland

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is responsible for 3,600 U.S. companies boycotting Newfoundland snow crabs in protest of the seal hunt, resulting in a confirmed drop in annual exports to of \$465 million.¹⁷ That's 3.3% of Newfoundland's total GDP, and 3,300% of the annual value of the seal hunt. It would seem that giving up the \$14 million sealing industry (only \$7 million in sealers pockets) to gain \$465 million would be a no-brainer. Canada isn't just looking cruel to the rest of the world—it's looking pretty stupid.

Cutting out the middlemen

The two animal welfare organizations that devote the most resources to ending the seal hunt have a combined annual budget of over \$200 million.¹⁸ If sealers would accept \$200 million to stop the hunt, which only earns them \$7 million per year, both sides should be happy. Even without private donations diverted directly to sealers' bank accounts, the sealers stand to be rewarded heavily in a government buy-back program.

The British Columbia salmon fishery has a long history of buy-back programs. From 1970 to 1995, the federal government has spent \$142 million on programs designed to reduce fishing capacity. More recently, tobacco farmers in Ontario were offered a \$286 million government buyout package to leave that harmful industry.¹⁹

Kill Bill (starring Mac Harb)

On March 3, 2009, Canadian Senator Mac Harb introduced Bill S-229 to ban the commercial seal hunt. It is the first time in history that a bill introduced in the Canadian senate has failed to get a single second nomination, effectively killing the bill before it could even be debated.²⁰

In Canada, legislative bills are initiated either in the House of Commons (308 elected members of parliament) or in the Senate (105 un-elected life-time senators chosen by the Prime Ministers). Regardless of where legislation is initiated, both branches must approve bills before they can be enacted. Therefore, gaining the support of both the House of Commons and the Senate is essential for either the success of Bill S-229, or any future legislative initiatives to end the seal hunt.

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