



Inherently Inhumane

For decades, veterinary reports have consistently revealed high levels of animal suffering in commercial seal slaughters. Understandably, some people wonder if a combination of stronger regulations, better enforcement, and training for seal hunters could address the problem.

An examination of the factors surrounding commercial seal hunts shows why these measures will never stop the cruelty and the best way to protect the seals is to prohibit trade in their products.

How would veterinary authorities define humane slaughter in commercial seal hunts?

Veterinary authorities have produced numerous recognized guidelines on humane slaughter methods. Those guidelines, and veterinary studies on commercial sealing, suggest sealers would need to perform the following steps in rapid succession to meet accepted standards of humane slaughter:

- 1) Stun the seal without causing fear, distress and anxiety
- 2) Render the seal unconscious with one blow or one bullet to the head
- 3) Immediately monitor the seal for unconsciousness
- 4) Immediately bleed out the seal following confirmation of unconsciousness
- 5) Complete the bleeding process prior to moving the seal
- 6) Remain with the seal throughout the bleeding process to ensure re-stunning is possible if the seal regains consciousness.

In addition, sealers should not target seals in or near open water, or in any situation in which the carcass may not be retrieved.

Why are these steps not required by any sealing nation?

Because the environments in which seal slaughters happen prevent sealers from killing seals in a humane fashion. Canada's commercial seal hunt—the largest slaughter of marine mammals on earth—occurs far offshore, on unstable sea ice, often in extreme weather conditions and low visibility.

In 1977, Dr. Harry Rowsell, an official observer of the commercial seal hunt, noted, “sealing is, in fact, a slaughter operation and seals should be given the same consideration and concern given to domestic animals in the abattoir.” However, unlike in an abattoir, seals are not physically restrained during the stunning process, leading to a high level of inaccurate head shots and blows, and unacceptable suffering.

Moreover, sealers are under enormous pressure to kill seals quickly and leave the area—for their own safety, the security of their vessels, and because of the high cost of operating vessels at the seal hunt.





It is notable that should humane slaughter guidelines be applied, sealers would be unable to kill seals on ice that would not support the weight of the sealer during the clubbing, monitoring and bleeding processes; shoot at seals when unable to guarantee an accurate head shot; club seals when unable to guarantee an accurate blow to the skull; kill seals in or near open water; or shoot at seals from long distances. In theory, this would make it practically impossible for industrial scale commercial seal slaughters to operate.

Do sealers always abide by the regulations?

No. More than 50 years of veterinary evidence proves that seal hunters routinely fail to abide by the few regulations that exist to protect seals. This clear disregard for the law does not necessarily exist because sealers are intentionally cruel, but because the physical environment in which seal hunts operate do not permit the application of humane slaughter methods in a consistent manner.

Can seal hunts be effectively monitored and can regulations be adequately enforced?

“The area that they must patrol is very extensive, the number of sealers is large, and sealing operations are multifaceted. For these reasons it is impossible to keep all parts of the seal hunt under close supervision at all times.”

- Royal Commission on Seals and the Sealing Industry, 1986

No. Commercial seal hunts occur in remote areas, in harsh environmental conditions, over vast areas. Canada’s commercial seal hunt, for example, occurs over an area of ocean larger than the size of France. It is conducted by thousands of commercial fishermen working from hundreds of sealing vessels, spread out over thousands of miles. In many areas, the hunting occurs so far offshore that monitoring helicopters are unable to reach the area.

Veterinary reports have confirmed for decades that the commercial seal hunt is not being effectively monitored. Independent monitoring poses an even greater challenge, given no sealing country allows open access to NGOs or the public to monitor the killing. No government authorities can adequately monitor commercial seal hunts—and without an ability to monitor the killing, there is no way regulations can be enforced.

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Veterinary experts have suggested for years that commercial seal hunting operations are inherently inhumane—because of the inability of sealers to apply humane killing techniques in the field environments they work in, the inability of authorities to monitor the killing and enforce regulations, and the speed at which the killing must be conducted.

A 2007 study of the commercial seal hunt concluded, “EU and Canadian welfare standards in slaughterhouses require that unconsciousness is induced painlessly and without the need to repeat the application of the stunning method. The methods of hunting seals in Canada fall short of this expectation, and the large number of animals involved each year means that this method of hunting should be considered unacceptable.” In her 2007 analysis, Dr. Mary Richardson, a Canadian veterinary expert in humane slaughter, stated, “Canada’s commercial seal hunt...cannot be made acceptably humane according to Canadian and international standards of humane slaughter. History and the best available science show that Canada’s commercial seal hunt is inherently inhumane.”

