



[Protect Seals]



HUMANE SOCIETY
INTERNATIONAL
CANADA

Briefing Note: Myths and Facts about Canada's Seal Slaughter

Myth: It is illegal to kill baby seals in Canada.

Fact: Baby seals are the primary target of the commercial seal slaughter. In Canada, newborn "whitecoat" harp seals are protected from hunting. But as soon as they begin to shed their white coats – as young as 12 days of age – these baby seals can be legally hunted by sealers. In fact, fully 98 percent of the seals killed in the commercial seal hunt over the past ten years have been less than three months of age. At the time of slaughter, many of the pups had not yet eaten their first solid meal. Sealers target these very young seals because their skins are in "prime" condition and fetch the highest prices.

Myth: The seal hunt is humane.

Fact: Veterinarians say the seal hunt is inherently inhumane. Canada's commercial seal hunt has been the subject of consistent veterinary scrutiny for more than five decades. In that time, every study has identified key animal welfare problems. Veterinarians in recent years have suggested that commercial sealing is inherently inhumane because of the harsh, remote environments in which the slaughters occur. A 2013 veterinary study concluded, "The evidence, which continues to be available year on year, through observer data, video material and veterinary study is clear: Canada's commercial seal hunt adopts procedures, and has measurable outcomes that do not meet internationally recognized standards of humane slaughter. There are unacceptable (and unlawful) things being done to animals for profit in this hunt. The evidence clearly shows that the actions of governments in prohibiting seal product trade are, and will continue to be, justified."

Myth: The seal hunt is sustainable.

Fact: Scientists say today's seal kill levels are not sustainable. Independent scientists warn that the Canadian government management plan poses a threat to seal populations, particularly in light of the impacts of climate change. Harp seals rely on sea ice to give birth to and nurse their pups, and a 2012 study from Duke University shows the sea ice in the harp seal whelping grounds has diminished by as much as 6 percent per decade since 1979. The report notes that in some poor ice years, entire year-classes of pups can be lost. In 2017, Garry Stenson, section head of the marine mammal science branch with Fisheries and Oceans Canada, talked with iPolitics about the impacts of the diminished sea ice conditions on the seals slaughtered in Atlantic Canada: "We've got an overall declining trend...We see smaller pans now and more water between them...a combination of overall less ice, sometimes in extent and thickness, but also increased storming. **We're seeing two things: fewer animals pupping and when they do, there is a high mortality with it...**if we don't include mortality due to ice, you can make huge errors in where you think the population is going. We've been seeing years where ice mortality is very high. We've seen dead pups that have drowned. **It has a big impact on mortality.**"

Myth: The seal population is “exploding” and a cull is necessary.

Fact: The harp seal population is recovering from record low levels. In an attempt to defend the seal hunt, sealing advocates often say that the harp seal population has “tripled” over the past three decades. But they conveniently neglect to mention that over-hunting in the 1950s and 60s had reduced the population by nearly two thirds. A dramatic decline in hunting levels in the 1980s allowed the population to rebuild, but kill levels in recent years are comparable to the unsustainable levels of a half-century ago.

Harp seals have many natural predators, including sharks, whales and polar bears, and now the seals have a new threat to contend with: climate change. As the sea ice cover harp seals rely on to give birth and nurse their pups disappears, the seal population faces devastating mortalities. In recent years, the Canadian government has estimated up to 100 percent mortality in key whelping areas when the ice melted before the pups were old enough to survive in open water.

Myth: The commercial seal hunt is a vital economic activity.

Fact: The seal hunt is an economically marginal activity and could easily be phased out. Sealers are commercial fishermen who earn, on average, less than 5 percent of their annual incomes from killing seals—the remainder comes from fisheries including crab, shrimp and lobster. In recent years, only a few hundred fishermen have participated in the seal hunt annually. Even in Newfoundland, where most sealers live, income from the seal hunt accounts for less than one percent of the province’s economy.

Myth: Seals are preventing recovery of fish stocks.

Fact: Human overfishing and other fishing practices are preventing recovery of fish stocks. According to Canadian government scientists, it was human overfishing—not seal predation—that caused the collapse of ground fish stocks. Canadian government scientists also state clearly that harp seals (the primary target of the Canadian seal hunt) do not have a negative impact on cod stocks, either through direct consumption or through competing for prey species. Not surprisingly, there is no scientific evidence to suggest that killing seals will bring back fish stocks. Seals have, unfortunately, become a convenient scapegoat for the fishing industry, providing a distraction from the destructive commercial fishing practices that continue today. In reality, seals, like all marine mammals, are a vital part of the ecosystem of the Northwest Atlantic.

Myth: The Canadian government does not subsidize the commercial seal hunt.

Fact: Millions of taxpayers’ money is used to subsidize the sealing industry. In 2012 and 2013, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador made up to \$7.2 million in financing available to a Norwegian owned seal processor, Carino Company Ltd., to purchase seal furs so they could be stockpiled. A 2009 report from Guelph University detailed the millions of taxpayers’ dollars provided annually to the sealing industry by the federal government, in the form of Coast Guard assistance and funds for marketing seal products globally. A 2001 report by the Canadian Institute for Business and the Environment (CIBE) found over \$20 million in government subsidies provided to the sealing industry over a seven-year period 1995-2001.

Myth: Canadians support the seal hunt.

Fact: National polling shows a solid majority of Canadians oppose the commercial seal hunt. Numerous polls, including those conducted by the Canadian government, have shown a solid majority of Canadians oppose commercial sealing, and even higher percentages oppose specific, inherent aspects of sealing (such as the use of clubs and the killing of baby seals). In Newfoundland, where 90 percent of sealers live, 72 percent of residents support a prohibition on killing seal pups less than three months old (EnviroNics Research, 2011), a move that would effectively shut down Canada’s commercial seal hunt. Half of Newfoundland sealers holding an opinion are in support of a sealing industry buyout—a plan in which the Canadian government would end the seal hunt, compensate sealers and invest in economic alternatives.