



The Biggest Seal Hunt in 50 Years

Many people mistakenly think Canada stopped hunting baby seals decades ago. But as many seals are killed today as during the 1950s and 60s when overhunting significantly pushed seals down the road to extinction. In this section you'll find out the real story about what's happening on the ice each year, and why the Canadian government doesn't want you to know about it.

Each spring, the East coast of Canada is host to one of the world's most beautiful wildlife spectacles. It is here that female harp seals gather by the hundreds of thousands on newly formed sea ice to give birth to their pups.

The seals give birth from late February until mid-March, transforming the once barren ice floes into a huge, white nursery. The newborn pups will be transformed into fat, fluffy 'whitecoats' in about a week, thanks to the high-fat content of their mother's milk.

After about 12 days, the mother leaves her fully fed pup to join adult males for the annual mating ritual. The baby seals remain on the ice, crying for their mothers at first, then becoming extremely quiet and still.

During this time the seals survive on the thick layer of blubber they have accumulated during nursing. A few days later, their white coats are lost to reveal the sleek, black-spotted, silvery pelt of the young harp seal known as a "beater." A pelt they will soon be clubbed or shot to death for.

From Beauty to Devastation in Just A Heartbeat

The scene is stunning – a world built entirely of blue, grey and white. The only sounds are the wind, the ice cracking and heaving, and the soft mews of the pups.

Yet just days later, this pristine wonderland is transformed into a makeshift factory for the mass killing of baby seals as sealers descend upon them in boats, helicopters and snowmobiles, armed with clubs and guns.

Over the past three years, the government quota has allowed over 300,000 seals to be killed each year. But many more have died without being accounted for, leaving more than a million seals bludgeoned or shot to death, all in the name of profit.

Government Subsidized Cruelty

"A sealer near us quickly clubbed every seal within a small radius, to immobilize each of the pups, and then dragged the bodies to the center of his circle. One by one he flipped a seal on its back and skinned it. If the seal flipped around or fought against the skinning he'd flip it back to its stomach, club it several more times and then finishing the skinning."

IFAW Hunt Monitor

Documentary evidence – in the form of two veterinary reports (one sponsored by the Canadian government), and video footage of the seal hunt obtained by IFAW over the past decade – simply does not support claims by the Canadian government that the hunt is "humane" or "well regulated."

Seals are routinely clubbed (often with illegal weapons) or shot and left to suffer on the ice, before being clubbed again some time

thereafter. Seals are still skinned before being rendered fully unconscious and few sealers are observed checking for a blinking reflex to confirm brain death prior to skinning an animal. As one of the veterinary reports concluded: Canada's commercial seal hunt results in "considerable and unacceptable suffering."

Canada's Seal Hunt: "Unacceptably Inhumane"

"The Canadian government insists that the seal hunt is an animal production industry like any other. They say that it might not be pretty, but basically it is just like any abattoir except on the ice. But we found obvious levels of suffering which would not be tolerated in any other animal industry in the world." Ian Robinson, British Veterinarian

Two separate veterinary reports that studied the 2001 seal hunt, one commissioned by the Canadian government, show numerous instances where animals were clubbed or shot and not rendered immediately unconscious.

Together, the two reports also document that a number of animals each year are hooked and dragged across the ice while still conscious and some of these are still alive by the time they reach the decks of sealing vessels.

Here's what one such international team of five independent veterinarians found:

- 79% of the sealers did not check to see if an animal was dead before skinning it.
- In 40% of the kills a sealer had to strike the seal a second time, presumably because it was still conscious after the first blow or shot.
- 42% of killed seals examined were found to have minimal or no fractures, suggesting a high probability that these seals were conscious when skinned.

The veterinarian team concluded that the existing regulations were neither being respected nor enforced, and that the seal hunt is resulting in considerable and unacceptable suffering.

More Than 660 Probable Seal Abuses Caught on Tape

IFAW has submitted video evidence of more than 660 probable violations of Canada's Marine Mammal Regulations to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. These abuses include skinning or bleeding live seals, stockpiling dead and dying animals, dragging live seals across the ice with sharpened steel hooks and shooting seals and leaving them to suffer. To date, not a single charge has been laid in response.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans says it is committed to proposing new regulations to address what it sees as the critical hunt issues. The International Fund for Animal Welfare stresses, however, that it is impossible to effectively regulate any commercial seal hunt. Unpredictable weather and ice conditions, combined with the difficulties inherent in killing a large number of wild animals very quickly, will always add up to cruelty.