

About the Canadian Seal Hunt

Canada's annual commercial seal hunt is the largest commercial hunt of marine mammals on the planet. Facing harsh criticism the world over



because of the hunt's cruelty and unsustainability, the Canadian government and fishing industry have spread much [misinformation](#). Here are the basic facts about the hunt.

Which Seals Are Targeted by Canada's Seal Hunt?

Harp seals are the primary target of the commercial seal hunt, and to a much smaller extent, hooded seals are also killed. In 2006, 98 percent of the harp seals killed were pups under just three months of age.

Where Are the Seals Killed?

Canada's commercial seal hunt occurs on the ice floes off Canada's East Coast in two areas: the Gulf of St. Lawrence (west of Newfoundland and east of the Magdalen Islands) and the "Front" (northeast of Newfoundland).

Who Kills Seals and Why?

Sealing is an off-season activity conducted by fishermen from Canada's East Coast. They make, on average, a small fraction of their annual incomes from sealing—and the rest from commercial fisheries. Even in Newfoundland, where 90 percent of sealers live, the government estimates there are **less than 6,000** fishermen who actively participate in the seal hunt each year.

How Are the Seals Killed?

The Canadian [Marine Mammal Regulations](#), which govern the hunt, stipulate sealers may kill seals with wooden clubs, hakapiks (large ice-pick-like clubs) and guns. In the Gulf of St. Lawrence, clubs and hakapiks are the killing implement of choice, and in the Front, guns are more widely used.

It is important to note that each killing method is demonstrably cruel. Because sealers shoot at seals from moving boats, the pups are often only wounded. The main sealskin processing plant in Canada deducts \$2 from the price they pay for the skins for each bullet hole they find—therefore sealers are loath to shoot seals more than once. As a result, wounded seals are often left to suffer in agony—many slip beneath the surface of the water where they die slowly and are never recovered.



Is the Seal Hunt Cruel?

Yes. In 2001, a [report](#) by an independent team of veterinarians who studied the hunt concluded that governmental regulations regarding humane killing were neither being respected nor enforced, and that the seal hunt failed to comply with Canada's basic animal welfare standards. Shockingly, the veterinarians found that in 42 percent of the

cases they studied, the seals had likely been skinned alive while conscious.

Parliamentarians, journalists, and scientists who observe Canada's commercial seal hunt each year continue to report unacceptable levels of cruelty, including sealers dragging conscious seals across the ice floes with boat hooks, shooting seals and leaving them to suffer in agony, stockpiling dead and dying animals, and even skinning seals alive.

How Many Seals Are Killed Each Year?

Hundreds of thousands. In fact, over the past three years, nearly one million seals have been killed. The current kill levels are higher than they have been in half a century. During the 2006 hunt, the Canadian government allowed fishermen to club and shoot at least 354,344 seals. The last time seals were killed at this rate—in the 1950s and '60s—the harp seal population was reduced by nearly two thirds.

And the actual number of seals killed is probably far higher than the number reported. Many seals are shot at and injured in the course of the hunt, and studies suggest that a significant number of these animals slip beneath the surface of the water, where they die slowly and are never recovered.

Are There Any Penalties When Hunters Exceed the Government's Quota?

No. In 2002, the Canadian government knowingly allowed sealers to exceed the quota by more than 37,000 animals. Sealers had already killed substantially more than the quota allowed by May 15 (the regulated closing date of the seal hunt), and yet the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans chose to extend the sealing season until June. In 2004, sealers killed close to 16,000 seals more than the permitted quota. Again, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans extended the sealing season until well into June.

What Products Are Made from Seals?

Seals are killed primarily for their fur, which is used to produce [fashion garments](#) and other items. There is a small market for seal oil (both for industrial purposes and for human consumption), and seal penises have been sold in Asian markets as an aphrodisiac. There is almost no market for the meat, so seal carcasses are normally left to rot on the ice.

Is the Seal Hunt Economically Important?

No. Sealing is an off-season activity conducted by fishermen from Canada's East Coast. They make, on average, one twentieth of their incomes from seal hunting and the rest from commercial fisheries. Even in Newfoundland, where 90 percent of sealers live, revenues from the hunt account for less than 1 percent of the province's economy and only 2 percent of the landed value of the fishery. According to the Newfoundland government, out of a population of half a million people, **less than 6,000** fishermen participate in the seal hunt each year.

The commercial seal hunt is an activity that Canada's federal government could easily replace with economic alternatives, should it choose to do so. One option is a **government buy-out**. The HSUS and HSI advocate that the sealers ask the Department of Fisheries and

Oceans (DFO) to buy back their sealing licences. This will ensure that the sealers receive fair compensation for the additional income they make from participating in the commercial seal hunt each year. When Canada ended its commercial whale hunt, it did so through exactly this sort of license buyout scheme. As sealing licenses are sold by the DFO, only the DFO can buy them back. The DFO is the only entity that can bring an end to the commercial seal hunt. Senior officials from DFO have made clear that the only condition under which it will end the commercial seal hunt is if and when the sealer/fishermen ask for it to be ended. For this reason, we are working hard through the ProtectSeals boycott of Canadian seafood to provide adequate motivation to Canada's sealer/fishermen to retire their hakapiks and rifles and focus exclusively on fishing in the future. In 2008, only 1.3 percent of the landed value of seafood in Newfoundland came from the seal hunt. The rest came from seafood.

Does the Government Subsidize the Hunt?

Yes. According to [reports](#) from the Canadian Institute for Business and the Environment, more than \$20 million in subsidies were provided to the sealing industry between 1995 and 2001. Those subsidies came from entities such as the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Human Resources Development Council, and Canada Economic Development—Quebec. These subsidies take a variety of forms, including funding the salaries for seal processing plant workers, market research and development trips, and capital acquisitions for processing plants. **In 2004, more than \$400,000 was provided by the Canadian government to companies for the development of seal products, and as recently as April 2007, the Canadian Coast Guard—at the taxpayer's expense—broke through the ice for the sealing vessels as it does each year. In 2007, the Canadian Coast Guard estimates that it spent an additional \$3.5 million rescuing sealing vessels.**

Moreover, Canada's commercial seal hunt is also indirectly subsidized by the Norwegian government. A Norwegian company purchases close to 80% of the sealskins produced in Canada in any given year through its Canadian subsidiary. These skins are shipped in an unprocessed state directly to Norway, where they are tanned and re-exported. The Norwegian government provides significant financial assistance to this company each year.

Is It True Seals Are Jeopardizing the Canadian Cod Fishery?

There is no evidence to support this contention. Some fishing industry lobby groups try to claim that seals must be culled to protect fish stocks, but nothing could be further from the truth.

The scientific community agrees that the true cause of the depletion of fish stocks off Canada's East Coast is human over-fishing. Blaming seals for disappearing fish is a convenient way for the fishing industry to divert attention from its irresponsible and environmentally destructive practices that continue today.

In truth, seals, like all marine mammals, are a vital part of the ecosystem of the Northwest Atlantic. Harp seals, which are the primary target of the hunt, are opportunistic feeders, meaning they eat many different species. So while approximately 3 percent of a harp seal's diet may be commercially fished cod, harp seals also eat many significant predators of cod, such as squid. That is why some scientists are concerned that culling harp seals could further inhibit recovery of commercially valuable fish stocks in the Northwest Atlantic.

Are Seals Overpopulated?

No. The Canadian government and sealing industry have, at various times, tried to claim that the harp seal population has "tripled" over the past three decades, or that the harp seal population is "exploding," or that seals are overpopulated.

This is misleading at best. The harp seal population in the Northwest Atlantic is the world's largest; it is a migratory population that spans the distance between Canada and Greenland, and is supposed to number in the many millions.

In the 1950s and '60s, over-hunting wiped out close to two-thirds of the harp seal population. By 1974, the population was considered to be in serious trouble, and senior government scientists recommended suspending the commercial hunt for at least 10 years.

In the early 1980s, the European Union banned the import of whitecoat seal skins, effectively removing the principal market for the hunt at the time. For the next decade, the numbers of seals killed in the hunt dramatically declined, and the harp seal population began to recover.

But in the 1990s, the Canadian government rejuvenated the commercial seal hunt through massive subsidies. And with nearly one million seal pups killed in the past three years alone, we can only wonder what the impact will be on the harp seal population in coming years. Scientists have already sounded the alarm regarding the poor [science](#) used by the Canadian government to set quotas for the number of seals killed.