



# A Tale of Two Seal Hunts: Contesting the Conflation of Canadian Sealing Activities

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# RECONCILIATION

“We are at a critical time where the **inter-related goals of environmental protection, Indigenous rights and animal welfare** can help to combat climate change, mass extinction, and cultural loss in Canada and beyond. It is time to seek and establish appropriate policy and laws based on current knowledge for the future. Respect and reconciliation between humans and animals is as much for our welfare, as it is for theirs. So bear in mind why we are here. We are here to take care of our universe, to take care of our land, to take care of the people and to take care of all that is part of this Creation. So n’gwamazin: Be strong and steadfast in your beliefs. Take care of all of our relations and be mindful that **reconciliation includes our relationship with animals.**”

-- Senator Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada



# THE INUIT SEAL HUNT

## Purpose

- Cultural significance
- Subsistence
- Excess pelts sold commercially

## Practice

- Adult seals hunted one at a time through the ice
- Killed in a single blow with rifle or harpoon
- Approximately 16,000 seals hunted annually

## Regulation

- *Constitution Act, 1867* – section 35 Aboriginal rights
- *Nunavut Wildlife Act*

# THE COMMERCIAL SEAL HUNT

## Purpose

- Harvest of seal pelts for international export
- Meat is typically left discarded on ice floes

## Practice

- Seal pups are hunted at a distance from boats
- Three step process: striking, checking, bleeding
- Approximately 300,000\* seals hunted annually

## Regulation

- The Marine Mammal Regulations under the *Fisheries Act*
- The Management Plan for Atlantic Seals

\*This figure does not include those seals which are “struck and lost”, of which the Department of Fisheries and Oceans estimates there are thousands per year



# CONFLATION

Government

- Commercial sealing justified on the bases of: food security, culture, and constitutional rights, though these justifications do not apply to settler sealers

Industry

- Commercial sealing justified based on economic importance to hunter's livelihoods, though the Atlantic hunt is a seasonal, subsidized industry

Interest Groups

- Early campaigns from IFAW and Greenpeace did not distinguish between the hunts, though groups now try to make the distinction clearer

# IMPLICATIONS

1983  
EU Ban

- Only pelts from “whitecoat” seals banned
- Devastating social, cultural, and economic impacts for Inuit despite Inuit exemption

2009  
EU Ban

- Ban on all commercial seal products
- Exemption did not protect Inuit sealers due to ongoing stigma against commercial sealing

Inuit  
Response

- Some Inuit support the commercial hunt to protect Inuit sealing interests, while some oppose the commercial hunt due to cultural appropriation



# INUIT RESPONSE

“The commercial hunt has nothing to do with the Inuit. If the hunt were stopped, we would benefit most. There would be more seals left for us to eat, and also people would not have such an aversion to sealskin products...We are skillful hunters who hunt adult animals for food; that is not the same as bashing a pup, which can't move, over the head.”

- Arnaituk M. Tarkirk, Inuit hunter in a letter to the *Ottawa Citizen*

“For the record, Nunvaut Tunngavik Inc. continues to strongly oppose the European ban on Canadian seal skins. Canada's seal harvest is humane and sustainable. The European Union's ban is based on misinformation and misguided public opinion, not any conservation concerns.”

- James Eetoolook, Vice President of Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.

# CANADIAN SEALING AT A GLANCE

Factor	Traditional Inuit Seal Hunt	Commercial Atlantic Seal Hunt
Participants	Carried out by Inuit hunters in Canada's Arctic.	Primarily carried out by settlers in Atlantic Canada.
Purpose	Hunters harvest adult seals primarily for their meat. Only excess pelts not used for clothing are sold on the international market.	Hunters harvest seal pups for their pelts sold on the international market. The meat is often discarded after the animal has been skinned.
Practice	One adult seal is hunted at a time. Hunters stalk and wait for the seal to come up through a hole in the ice. This method of hunting results in a quick death, as found in a veterinary study.	Multiple seal pups are hunted at a distance from boats. The result is that 82% seals are not killed in a single blow and 85% suffer protracted deaths, as found in a veterinary study.
Scope	Approximately 16,000 seals are hunted per year, which amounts to about 5% of the seals slaughtered across Canada annually.	Approximately 300,000* seals are hunted per year, with the cap set at 975,000 over three years. *Does not include those "struck and lost"
Economic Implication	The EU has exempted seal pelts harvested by traditional means in Nunavut and the Territories from the trade ban on Canadian seal products.	The EU has banned the importation of seal pelts harvested in the commercial Atlantic seal hunt. The government now subsidizes the hunt.



# PROPOSALS FOR REFORM

## Animal Welfare

- Implement veterinary recommendations and traditional knowledge

## Sustainability

- Limit the total allowable catch
- Increase monitoring

## Inuit Livelihoods

- Convey sound information regarding the socio-cultural and economic significance of the respective seal hunts



Questions?