

## CANADIAN SEAL HUNT

Seal hunting (variously known as 'harvesting', 'slaughter', and 'killing'), or sealing, is currently practiced in eight countries, with most of the world's hunting taking place in Canada. The seal hunt is surrounded by controversy due to the clash between animal rights and environmentalist concerns and economic interests. In the 1960s, protesters pressured the Canadian government to pass legislation limiting the killing. Since then, killing quotas were introduced. The hunt has led to wide-spread protest by animal-rights activists as well as other concerned groups, and by some international governmental institutions. Conservationists have demanded reduced rates of killing, arguing that the hunt is cruel as well as threatening to the very survival of the seals.

There are two main reasons for the Canadian harp seal hunt: the seal products and the hunters' desire to keep the seals from eating the fish stocks on the eastern seaboard. Most sealing in Canada occurs in late March in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and in the northeast of Newfoundland in April. Harp seals, the main species hunted, are called "hair seals", which depend on their blubber as their defence against the cold – their pelts (skin with fur) have no underfur. The most seals killed are those under four months old that have just grown out of their white-coat stage. According to Sea Shepard Conservation Society Canada sells pelts to eleven countries, with Norway, Germany, Greenland, and China purchasing the largest quantities. Economic, cultural and environmental factors, as well as climate change, affect seal hunting.

Indigenous inhabitants (now called First Nation peoples, or Inuit) of Northern Canada traditionally regarded the animals they hunted as sentient (beings able to feel pain), intelligent beings that shared their environment and deserved their respect. Traditionally, the Inuit diet was rich in fish, whale, and seal, with seal meat being an important source of fat, protein, vitamins, and the pelts vital for providing warmth. According to an analysis by the anthropologist Ann McElroy, Inuit believed that food security depended on observances of taboos, involving respect and humility toward seals. Inuit used to believe that if taboos were broken, Sedna, a goddess who controls sea mammals, would withhold animals from hunters.

When the first European settlers landed on the east coast of Canada in the eighteenth century, there were an estimated 30 million harp, hood, and gray seals. Commercial trading companies, such as the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) engaged in large scale sealing, trapping, and exports of seal skins in the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries,. The HBC and other commercial traders competed for the labor of the Inuit and the native Inuit chiefs controlled the goods and rations exchanged for animal skins. In the 1840s, 546,000 seals were killed annually and this rate of killing continued well into the twentieth century.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the seal populations declined to approximately 2 million. Presently, the aquaculture (marine agriculture) industry is regulated by 17 federal departments and agencies, with Fisheries and Oceans Canada in the lead role. It manages fisheries, regulates the seal hunt, sets quotas, and works with the Canadian Sealers' Association, which promotes sealing.

The seal hunt provides an important source of revenue for the island of Newfoundland's economy (as well as for the Canadian economy more generally) with global demand for pelts, leather, oil, and meat providing part-time employment for up to 6,000 people. The value of the Canadian seal hunt is estimated to be roughly 40 million Canadian dollars in 2014. In 2012, sealers killed over 325,000 seals with an additional 10,000 seal quota allowed for the traditional hunt by the First Nation peoples. Both the quotas and the number of seals actually killed every year fluctuate, due to shifts in public opinion, media coverage, political decisions, the accuracy of statistics, and illegal hunt. The seal population is estimated at 505,000 in 2014.

At present there is little evidence that a significantly expanded population of Inuit still hunt for subsistence (basic needs/survival) but rather for sport and commercial profit, using modern equipment such as rifles, outboard motors, and snowmobiles. Due to large discrepancies in numbers, as well as definitions of

'traditional subsistence' there is a controversy about which seals or seal parts are used for local consumption, and which ones are sold commercially. This highlights political dimensions to what is considered to be hunting in traditional ways. Comments by the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (a non-profit marine conservation organization) imply that the seal hunt is an easy way for Canadian government to solve structural social problems like unemployment and mask large-scale commercial exploitation of the sea that has led to drastic depletion of fish stocks.

Conservationists have been relatively successful in mobilizing public opinion against sealing, leading to boycotts, changes in export regulations, and eventually bans on international trade of marine mammal products, prohibiting sales of items such as seal leather and pelts. Many activists, as well as scientists who are experts on the subject, have pointed out the inhumane nature of seal killing (with seal pups being killed with clubs and spikes), and thus have argued in favor of more humane methods. The International Fund for Animal Welfare began to campaign against *all* forms of sealing in the 1970s, with limited success. Many ethics scholars question the very act of killing – 'humanely' or not, asking whether commercial seal hunts can even be morally justified in the twenty-first century.

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See also: Advocacy; Animals in Indigenous Religions; Cruelty; Ethics; Human-wildlife Conflict; Indigenous Rights; Rights

**Further reading:**

<http://www.animalliberationfront.com/Philosophy/Opinionatedly/SealSlaughter.htm>

Fisheries and Oceans Canada. 2015. <http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/index-eng.htm>

[harpseals.org](http://harpseals.org)

[http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/seal\\_hunt/](http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/seal_hunt/)

Lavigne, D. M. & Lynn, W. S. 2011. Canada's Commercial Seal Hunt: It's More than a Question of Humane Killing. *J. Animal Ethics* 1(1)1-5.

McElroy, A. 2013. Sedna's Children: Inuit Elders' Perceptions of Climate Change and Food Security. In *Environmental Anthropology: Future Directions*. Helen Kopnina and Eleanor Shoreman-Ouimet, eds. New York: Routledge.

Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. 2012. Seal Hunt Facts. <http://www.seashepherd.org/seals/seal-hunt-facts.html>.