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Public Opinion on Seals in Dutch Newspapers 1725–1900

Paul J. Smith

The relationship between seals and humans in the Netherlands has been studied from different perspectives, mainly in book-length studies addressing inland premium hunting,¹ arctic sealing,² and recent Dutch seal populations.³ For a more direct approach to the Dutch perception of the seals, scrutinizing newspapers proves to be an invaluable instrument, facilitated by the recent availability of the website Delpher. Delpher was created by the Dutch Royal Library, providing full-text Dutch-language digitized historical newspapers.⁴ About 1 million newspapers are available from the period between 1618 and 1995 (which represents about 10% of the total published newspapers in this period).

1 Method

The period under discussion in this case study runs from 1725 to 1900. The year 1725 was chosen because in this year the term *zeehonden* (seals) was used for the first time in the digitized Delpher newspapers. The year 1900 was chosen as end date, because in this year a new era started with the introduction of a country-wide premium system on shooting seals. As a search term I opted for the Dutch plural *zeehonden* (seals, literally “sea-dogs”), and not for the singular *zeehond* (seal), not only because of the large number of hits (7,453) but also because an important part of these hits pertains to the proper name *Zeehond*,

1 't Hart P., *Zeehondenjacht in Nederland, 1591–1962*, PhD dissertation, Free University Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2007.

2 Dekker P., *De laatste bloeiperiode van de Nederlandse arctische walvis- en robbevangst 1761–1775* (Zaltbommel: 1971); Schokkenbroek J.C., *Harpoeniers en robbenjagers. Nederlandse walvisvaart en zeehondenjacht in de 19^{de} eeuw* (Zutphen: 2008).

3 Brasseur S.M.J.M., *Seals in motion. How movements drive population development of harbour seals and grey seals in the North Sea*. PhD dissertation, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands, 2017.

4 <https://www.delpher.nl/>.

a favourite name for vessels, such as the Dutch warship *De Zeehond*, which is mentioned weekly from 1785 to 1797, or the marine ‘instructiebrigade De Zeehond’ (instruction brig The Seal), which has been mentioned almost daily in the newspapers’ shipping reports since 1850. I therefore only searched incidentally and in a non-systematic manner, using the singular *zeehond* as the search term. Nor were the common synonyms of *zeehond*, such as *rob* or *zeerob*, chosen as search terms, because these words have different meanings: *Rob*, derived from *Robrecht*, is a common proper name for persons, and *rob* and *zeerob* frequently have the derived meaning of “sailor”. The search term *zeehonden* yields 1,786 hits in the Delpher corpus of 18th- and 19th-century newspapers. References to newspapers in this article are always to the newspaper’s title and publishing day (date indication: dd-mm-yyyy), making it possible to easily find the referenced newspaper on the Delpher website.

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of these hits is complicated by two factors:

(a) terminological ambiguity. At first sight, there seems to be no ambiguity in the use of the term *zeehonden*, because the only species living in the Dutch coastal waters was the harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina*), of which the males can weigh 70 to 150 kg, and the females 60 to 110 kg. The much larger grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*), weighing 105 to 186 kg for the females and 170 to 310 kg for the males,⁵ disappeared from the Dutch waters starting in the early Middle Ages, to return only in the late 20th century. However, in some cases, as with the indicated weight of 200 or 250 kg,⁶ this could concern a grey seal. Moreover, the Dutch newspapers show that the term *zeehond* is ambiguous, indicating, incidentally, very different animals, such as the otter (*Lutra lutra*)⁷ or the small-spotted catshark or sandy dogfish (*Scyliorhinus canicula*).⁸ More common was the confusion between seal (*zeehond*) and sea lion (*zeeleeuw*), fur seal (*zeebeer*), and other *phocidae* and *otariidae* – all these species that do not occur in the Netherlands but are regularly mentioned in the news regarding international sealing, are invariably referred to as *zeehond*. The papers were clearly behind the scientific knowledge of these animals. Only since 1875 have some newspapers regularly distinguished between seals and sea lions.⁹ In 1881 one finds the first Dutch newspaper distinction between four

5 Information from <http://www.soortenbank.nl/index.php>.

6 *Algemeen Dagblad* 12-07-1889; *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* 04-03-1899.

7 At least in the Dutch East Indies: *Bataviaasch handelsblad* 25-08-1886; *Soerabijasch handelsblad* 16-11-1886.

8 *Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en 's Hertogenbossche courant* 15-09-1890.

9 *Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en 's Hertogenbossche courant* 19-04-1877, see also *De standaard* 09-04-1878.

Greenlandic species, with their Dutch and scientific names: *zadelrob* or harp seal (*Phoca groenlandica*, now *Pagophilus groenlandicus*), *klapmuts* or hooded seal (*Cystophora cristata*), *baardzeehond* or bearded seal (*Phoca barbata*), and the *ijsschotsen-zeehond* (no scientific name was given – probably the ringed seal [*Phoca hispida*]).¹⁰ However, these are exceptions: the confusion between the different species persisted well into the 20th century.

(b) absence of instruments for analysing news impact. For newspapers before 1900 media studies did not develop a method of analysis permitting the quantification and qualification of the impact of a newspaper message (assuming its length, place in the newspaper [front page or elsewhere], section [state news, financial news, fishing reports, local news, mixed news, letters, advertisement], target group of intended readers [local, regional, national, or colonial newspapers], publication frequency [daily, every two days, weekly, etc.], and quotation of news from or by other newspapers).

Therefore, as newspaper analysis is difficult to apply, this present article limits itself to giving a general overview of the main newspaper information on seals. The main topics in the news coverage are: (a) international sealing; (b) domestic seal hunting; (c) inland seal spotting; and (d) public perception of seals (empathy and amusement).

2 International Sealing

The coverage in 18th-century media did not pay attention to the Dutch local seal population. One even has the impression that seals were relatively unknown to the 18th-century readership, even though the word *zeehond* in Dutch has been attested since 1293.¹¹ In the first release on the seal hunt to Greenland, the newspaper felt obliged to give a definition of the animal: 'Het is een dier, 't welck soo wel op 't Land als in Zee leeft, doorvoed is met Vis, maer aen 't hooft en verscheyde andere gedeeltens seer na een Hond gelijckt' (It is an animal that lives both on land and in sea, it feeds on fish, but, as for the head and other body parts, it is very similar to a dog).¹² The media coverage was exclusively focussed on international arctic sealing, especially in Greenland¹³ but also in Iceland and other Nordic areas. The Dutch had traditionally been a people of whaling and sealing, but that period had long since passed. One newspaper

10 *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant* 04-10-1881.

11 Sijs N. van der, *Chronologisch woordenboek: de ouderdom en herkomst van onze woorden en betekenissen* (Amsterdam: 2002 (2nd edition)) 150 (s.v. *zeehond*).

12 *Oprechte Haerlemsche courant* 07-08-1725. All translations from the Dutch are mine.

13 For example, *Amsterdamse courant* 30-08-1732; *Leeuwarder courant* 25-07-1759; *Oprechte Haerlemsche courant* 11-03-1760; *Oprechte Haerlemsche courant* 22-07-1760.

article looked back with nostalgia to the time when czar Peter the Great sent his seal hunters to the Dutch for instruction – an initiative that was doomed to failure for political reasons but which could open the door for renewed sealing agreements with Russia in 1893. As the newspaper sums it up:

In 1732 begonnen de Russen onder leiding van deze Hollanders te vischen. De uitslag beantwoordde evenwel niet aan de verwachting. Jaren achtereen werd er zeer weinig gevangen. De Russen wisten wel den walvischen en den zeehonden met harpoenen zware wonden toe te brengen, maar in de meeste gevallen ontsnapten de dieren. In 1731 werd de zaak opgegeven. De Hollandsche visschers, die als leermeesters aangeesteld waren geweest, werden ontslagen en gingen naar hun land terug. Sommige personen uit de omgeving van [de] czaar beweerden, dat die Hollandsche leermeesters zich hadden laten omkooopen door de Hollandsche walvisch-maatschappij en dat zij den Russen het vak niet goed leerden, zodat dezen niets vingen.

Czaar Peter was trouwens reeds in 1725 overleden en zijn opvolgsters en opvolgers waren niet in zulke mate met de Hollanders ingenomen, als hij dit was geweest. Zeker is het evenwel dat de Hollanders als visschers in de noordelijke zeeën een groote rol gespeeld hebben. Mocht Rusland er nog eenmaal toe besluiten aan buitenlanders concessiën te verleen betreffende de visscherij in de noordelijke wateren, dan zouden de Nederlanders daartoe meer aangewezen zijn dan de Franschen of Engelschen.¹⁴

In 1732 the Russians started fishing under the leadership of these Dutchmen. However, the result did not meet expectations. For years in a row, very few fish were caught. The Russians managed to inflict severe wounds on the whales and seals with harpoons, but in most cases the animals escaped. In 1731 the business was abandoned. The Dutch fishermen, who had been appointed as tutors, were dismissed and returned to their country. Some people in the czar's circle claimed that those Dutch tutors had let themselves be bribed by the Dutch whaling society and that they did not teach the Russians the trade well, so that they caught nothing.

By the way, Czar Peter had already died in 1725 and his successors and successors were not as pleased with the Dutch as he had been. It is certain, however, that the Dutch played a major role as fishermen in the northern seas. Should Russia once more decide to grant concessions to

14 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 29-01-1893.

foreigners regarding fishing in the northern waters, then the Dutch would be better qualified for this than the French or English.

Noteworthy are the precision and frequency with which sealing yields and revenues from abroad are listed by the Dutch newspapers.¹⁵ A good example is the detailed rendering in the form of a table of the revenues of 10 English sealing ships – with a total revenue of 41,000 guilders in two months.¹⁶ In this case, providing these details had an explicit goal: a recommendation to create a Dutch Nordic Company for whaling and sealing. But not every report was positive, for newspapers also paid attention to the risks, both financial and human: the great number of shipwrecks and casualties among the sealers was reported regularly.¹⁷ This is the detailed coverage of such a disaster:

Op haar zeehondenvangst, terwijl de bemanning zich op de ijsschotsen bevonden, stak een verblindende sneeuwstorm op, vergezeld van strenge koude, waarin 25 man het leven verloren. 23 anderen werden vermist en 66 leden zoo door de koude dat ongeveer 20 hunne handen en voeten bevroren en dezelve afgezet zullen moeten worden.¹⁸

While the crew [of the sealing ship] was on the ice floes, a blinding blizzard arose, accompanied by severe cold, in which 25 men lost their lives. 23 others were missing and 66 suffered from the cold so much that about 20 of them had their hands and feet frozen, which have to be amputated.

Mainly for financial, economic, and political reasons, Dutch readers are concerned, for example, with the seals on Jan Mayen Island, where the seal population risked extinction by overhunting, in particular by the British. This concern fitted well into more general thoughts on eradication, as can be seen in a review article of one of the publications by the American zoologist Joel Asaph Allen.¹⁹ New to the discussion is that those in favour of stopping

15 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 18-08-1884; idem 26-06-1685; idem 19-11-1886 (e.g., '1,879 big seals for 22 krona, 7,578 lesser seals for 6.5 krona').

16 *De standaard* 08-06-1876.

17 *Nederlandsche staatscourant* 30-05-1872: 'New York, 28 Mei. Vier stoomboten en omstreeks 40 zeilvaartuigen, die op de zeehonden vangst uit waren, zijn op de kust van Labrador vergaan. De bemanning dier vaartuigen is daarbij omgekomen' (New York, May 28. Four steamers and about 40 sailing craft, seeking seals, were lost on the Labrador coast. The crew of those vessels perished). See also *De Volksstem* 16-03-1892; *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* 23-08-1893.

18 *De Volksstem* 30-03-1998.

19 *De Volksstem* 21-09-1898. It is not specified which work by Allen is meant here.

or regulating the seal hunting also proposed modern-style arguments, such those hinging on as animal cruelty. A newspaper mentioned that when the Jan Mayen adult seals are slaughtered, the young ones start to cry like children, ‘hartverscheurend, volgens ’t getuigenis der waarlijk niet overgevoelige robbenjagers zelf’ (heart-breaking, according to the testimony of the not really hypersensitive sealers themselves).²⁰

The Dutch readers were very interested in the international developments around the Bering Sea conflict. In 1867 the US bought Alaska from Russia. From that moment on the US considered the Bering Sea as a *mare clausum*, in which they could freely fish and hunt – which went against the British interests in Canada. Not only were the political and legal aspects of the Bering Sea conflict reported and discussed (who was right in this conflict?),²¹ but the economic and ecological aspects of seal hunting gained a lot of attention as well. Important names from abroad were quoted in the Dutch press, particularly Henry Wood Elliott (1846–1930), who would later become famous as a champion of the regulation of seal hunting in the Bering Sea. From his book *An Arctic Province. Alaska and the Seal Islands* (1886) passages were quoted addressing the endangered life of the Northern fur seal (*Callorhinus ursinus*) [Fig. 16.1]. A Dutch reviewer remarked: ‘Het slachten dezer dieren is zóó afschuwelijk, dat menige dame, na het lezen der beschrijving in Eliott’s boek, geen robbevel meer zal dragen’ (The slaughter of these animals is so horrible, that many a lady will wear no seal fur anymore, after reading this description in Elliott’s book).²² Newspaper readers were horrified by the cruel details presented with heavy irony by the Norwegian polar explorer Carsten Egeberg Borchgrevinck (1864–1934):

Het vangen, dooden en villen der zeehonden is een zeer interessante en aangename bezigheid, die in het bijzonder aan te bevelen is voor menschen met een medelijdend hart. Slechts zelden sterft een zeehond van de twee of drie slagen, welke men hem toebrenghet. Al is het dier echter nog niet geheel dood, men stroopt het toch de huid af. De robbevangens beweren zelfs dat het villen het gemakkelijkst gaat, zoolang het dier nog half in leven is en voelt wat er met hem gebeurt. In zijn verschrikkelijke lijden trekt de zeehond alle spieren samen en vergemakkelijkt daardoor onwillekeurig den wreeden jager het werk.²³

²⁰ *Het nieuws van den dag* 13-03-1875.

²¹ *Algemeen Handelsblad* 23-12-1890; *De Volksstem* 20-04-1892.

²² *Algemeen Handelsblad* 03-04-1887.

²³ *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 27-11-1899.

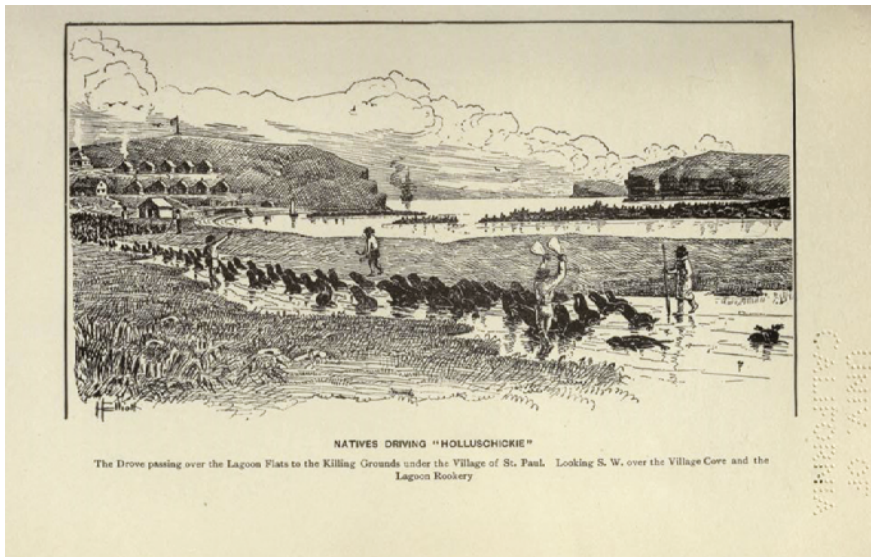


FIGURE 16.1 Henry Wood Elliott, *An Arctic Province. Alaska and the Seal Island* (New York: 1906 [1886]) 336

The catching, killing, and skinning of the seals is a most interesting and pleasurable activity, which is especially recommended to those of a compassionate heart. Rarely does a seal die of the two or three blows inflicted upon it. Although the animal is not yet completely dead, the skin is still peeled off. The seal-catchers even claim that the skinning is easiest as long as the animal is still half alive and feels what is happening to it. In its terrible suffering the seal contracts all its muscles and thereby involuntarily facilitates the work of the cruel hunter.

Indeed, in the 1890s Dutch readers realized with a shock that seals were often skinned alive.²⁴ In reaction to an ad in which a manufacturer in glacé-gloves asked for 'ongeboren huidjes' (unborn skins), a long and indignant letter was published about the cruel skinning of unborn baby seals.²⁵

The Dutch newspapers also presented detailed analyses of the final report of the International Arbitration Committee, presided over by Elliott, leading to the treaty which finally stopped the conflict.²⁶ The problematic implementation of

24 *De locomotief: Samarangsch handels- en advertentie-blad* 04-07-1891.

25 *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 06-12-1900.

26 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 20-05-1893. The report, the newspaper emphasizes, is based on counts: 'In 1873 waren er 3,192,000, in 1890 slechts 959,455 zeehonden op de [Pribyloff-]eilanden, zodat hun aantal in 16 jaren met 2,232,545 verminderd was.' (In 1873

the treaty also got attention.²⁷ The measure taken by the US to mark fur seals with a glowing rod, so that their skin became unsalable for English sealers, was likewise mentioned in the Dutch newspapers.²⁸ Interesting in the Dutch colonial context is that the Bering Sea issue was connected to pearl hunting by Australians in the Dutch Indies, as stated in an anonymous main article titled “Paarloesters en zeehonden” (Pearl Oysters and Seals), in the colonial journal *Java-bode*:

Sedert het vorig jaar vertoonen zich in den Indischen archipel Australische schepen, die er naar paarloesters komen visschen. Vroeger deden zij dit uitsluitend langs de kust van Nieuw-Holland, doch daar hebben zij het terrein leeggevischt, en wanneer men hen hun gang laat gaan, zullen zij met de streek, waar zij nu visschen hetzelfde gedaan hebben, daar zij alles weghalen, groot en klein, wat onder hun bereik komt en zoodoende de paarloester geheel uitroeien.²⁹

Since last year, Australian ships have been showing up in the Indian archipelago to fish for pearl oysters. They used to do this exclusively along the coast of New Holland, but there they have fished out the grounds, and if they are allowed to do their thing, they will have done the same in the way they fish now, as they take everything away, large and small, which comes under their reach and thus completely exterminate the pearl oyster.

3 Domestic Seal Hunting

From 1811 the first reports appeared in Dutch newspapers about the harmful influence of the seal on fish stocks, first in the foreign news about Hamburg³⁰ and then about Copenhagen.³¹ Shortly afterwards, the discussion reached the Netherlands: The native harbour seal became the subject of a pricing competition: “Over de schadelijke vermeenigvuldiging der Zeehonden op de Zeeuwsche Kusten; de daardoor vermoedelijke vermindering van Vischvangst, en de middelen daar tegen aen te wenden” (On the harmful multiplication of seals on the Zeeland coasts, the presumed reduction in fish catches as a result,

there were 3,192,000, in 1890 only 959,455 seals in the [Pribyloff] Islands, so that in 16 years their numbers were reduced by 2,232,545). See also *Algemeen Handelsblad* 28-05-1893.

27 *Leeuwarder courant* 17-08-1893.

28 *Bataviaasch nieuwsblad* 06-09-1897.

29 *Java-Bode. Nieuws-, Handels- en Advertentieblad voor Nederlandsch-Indië* 21-09-1893.

30 *Advertentieblad van het Departement Wester-Eems* 04-07-1811.

31 *Utrechtsche courant* 12-08-1816.

and the means to be used against it).³² From about 1820 there was a discussion in the newspapers about related aspects, first of all in the practical context of the regulations on the premiums, particularly in Zeeland.³³ Newspapers from those days inform us that the premium on every dead seal was 3 guilders (3 guilders being the equivalent to a week's salary for a rural worker). The newspapers published the regulations: the premium was paid if, in the presence of an official, the dead animal's 'snuit' (snout) was chopped off. Then, starting in 1856, when the premium was abolished,³⁴ a vibrant discussion began on seal hunting and the reintroduction of the premium. There were further price competitions published in order to find a solution for the seals.³⁵ Almost every year there were complaints from fishermen, in almost identical terms, first from the fishermen of Zeeland, and then from those of the Zuiderzee (Urk and Lemmer). For modern and contemporary readers as well it is difficult to evaluate the amount of exaggeration in typical recurrent notifications, such as:

Zij zwemmen bij honderden achter de schuiten, verscheuren de netten en vernielen de vangst, zoodat met genoodzaakt is reeds tegen den morgen in de haven terug te keeren. [...] Men begroot het getal zeehonden, dat wel eens op het zelfde oogenblik nabij het eiland Urk is waargenomen, op meer dan 1000 stuks. Iedere hond verslindt dagelijks wel 200 haringen.³⁶

they swim at hundreds behind the barges, they tear up the nets and destroy the catch, so that the fishermen are forced to return to the port already before daybreak. [...] The number of seals, spotted at the same time near the island of Urk, is even estimated at more than 1,000 specimens. Each seal devours daily 200 herrings.

In this case, the daily damage caused by the seals is estimated to be 4,500 guilders. Other newspapers reported seals in which 300 herrings were found.³⁷ The Zuiderzee fishermen were obliged to fish at night without light – which was

32 *Rotterdamsche courant* 23-01-1817.

33 Vooy C.G.N. de – Brasseur S. – Meer J. van der – Reijnders P.J.H., "Zeehondenjacht in Zeeland: het effect van premies", *Lutra* 17.3 (2012) 55–65.

34 *Opregte Haarlemsche Courant* 30-01-1857.

35 For example, *Opregte Haarlemsche Courant* 09-08-1850; *Nederlandsche staatscourant* 08-11-1853.

36 *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant* 30-01-1872.

37 *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant* 13-01-1862 (information repeated at least five times in other newspapers); see also *Algemeen Handelsblad* 16-03-1876.

prohibited by law – in order not to draw the attention of the seals.³⁸ The seals were so frequent that their very exceptional (and inexplicable) absence in the years 1862 and 1878 was also reported in the newspapers.³⁹ In perspective relativization of the problem was rare, for example in this report, which mentions four different causes for the disappearance of the herring, without saying which is correct: (1) there are too many fishermen; (2) there are too many seals; (3) there is the ‘disturbance by steamers’; and (4) fishermen use so-called miracle trawl nets with too fine a mesh.⁴⁰ Rarely, indeed, were the arguments of both proponents and opponents of the premium hunt given.⁴¹ From ca. 1880 it was reported that not only did the herring and flounder fishery suffer damage from the seals, but the salmon fishery did as well, especially in Zeeland. More and more salmons were found that were gnawed by seals, and therefore worth less in sale.⁴²

All this led to even more actions in the 1890s. The petitions of fishermen from Urk and Zeeland made news,⁴³ ultimately leading to the reintroduction of the premium system (one dead female seal, 3 guilders; one dead male, 2.50 guilders). The official entry form, to fill in by the premium hunters, was published in the Dutch Government Gazette.⁴⁴ From this moment on, the news reports on seals focussed mainly on the practical consequences of the implementation of the premium: the problems with payment⁴⁵ and the designation of the municipalities where the premiums could be collected.⁴⁶ Also, the first results of the premiums were reported and discussed.⁴⁷

Inland seal hunting was presented as adventurous and exciting, as can be read in the articles of reporters who accompanied the sealers on their hunt.⁴⁸ Iconic for the seal's presence in the Dutch press was the news coverage of the Visser family living in Westernieland (Groningen). This family took on almost

38 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 29-12-1898.

39 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 29-03-1878.

40 *Rotterdamsche courant* 22-10-1862. See also *De Gooi- en Eemlander: nieuws- en advertentieblad* 31-01-1874, which proposes the very cold winter as a possible cause for the disappearance of the seals.

41 *De grondwet* 09-06-1885 and *Algemeen Handelsblad* 21-08-1885. Against the arguments of the fishers, opponents of the premium hunt argue that sealing is of primary importance for the professional seal hunters, such as the Visser family (see below).

42 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 19-02-1893; *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 18-01-1898.

43 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 03-03-1898; *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 20-12-1898.

44 *Nederlandsche staatscourant* 29-05-1900.

45 *Middelburgsche courant* 26-06-1900.

46 *Middelburgsche courant* 09-07-1900.

47 E.g., *Middelburgsche courant* 12-07-1900.

48 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 02-10-1887; *De Telegraaf* 22-07-1899.

heroic proportions in the press because of their ingenuity to survive in harsh conditions. Dutch readers seemed to recognize in this family their own idealized heroic past. The poetic epitaphs of two of their ancestors (1779–1871 [Fig. 16.2]⁴⁹ and 1815–1873⁵⁰) were quoted in order to highlight the respectable history of their profession.⁵¹

The numbers of seals caught annually were reported⁵² – for example, it is reported that, at the introduction of the premium system, the Visser family earned a premium sum of 500 guilders.⁵³ Their inventiveness was praised: the seals were not only killed for skins and train: ‘de gedroogde vellen worden verkocht op Borkum, en te Bremen met groote winst verwerkt tot vloekleedjes, randen m petten, geldbeursjes, sigarenpijpjes enz., welke voorwerpen dan o.a. naar Nederland worden uitgevoerd’ (the dried skins are sold at Borkum [an island in north-western Germany], processed for great profit in Bremen into rugs, trims for caps, money pouches, cigar pipe holders etc, objects that are exported to the Netherlands).⁵⁴ The Visser family hunted originally with clubs, but from 1898 on they developed a wide mesh net, the exact fabrication of which was jealously kept secret.⁵⁵ From ca. 1880 the Visser family organized hunting parties with rifles in the Wadden area. People from across the country, particularly army officers, participated,⁵⁶ as did some from Britain.⁵⁷ The

49 ‘Tot aan zijn vijf en vijftig Jaren,
Heeft hij de wadden steeds bevangen,
Zeehonden vangen was zijn werk.
Bij vlijt en zuinigheid zoo sterk,
Om zes en dertig jaar alhier
Te leven als een rentenier’

Up to the age of 55 he always sailed the Wadden. His job was to hunt seals. So that through diligence and strong frugality he could live here (in Westernieland) for 36 years as a rentier.

50 ‘Ik was schipper op het Wad,
En ontving geen koude of nat.
Daar ging ik menig zeehond slagen.
Daar redde ik menschen van den dood,
Tot dat een ziekte op kwam dagen,
En mij de dood mijne oogen sloot.’

I was skipper on the Wad, and I didn't get cold or wet there. There I went to kill many a seal. I saved people from death there. Until a disease came and death closed my eyes.

51 *De Telegraaf* 04-08-1898.

52 *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant* 15-08-1870; *Algemeen Handelsblad* 05-10-1898.

53 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 02-12-1900.

54 *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser courant* 31-10-1888.

55 *De Telegraaf* 27-07-1898; idem 04-08-1898.

56 *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* 08-08-1896.

57 *De Maasbode* 15-07-1897.



FIGURE 16.2 Tombstone of Tjark Derks Visser

PHOTO: [HTTPS://WWW.DEVERHALENVANGRONINGEN.NL/ALLE-VERHALEN/ROBBENJAGERS-EN-MONNIKENWERK-IN-WESTERNIELAND](https://www.deverhalenvangroningen.nl/alle-verhalen/robbenjagers-en-monnikenwerk-in-westernieland)

shot animals were skinned on the spot, and the skins were salted and given to the hunters as a hunting trophy.⁵⁸ The Visser family also caught living animals, which were sold as pets.⁵⁹ They were also sold or given to zoos (the Artis Zoo in Amsterdam, and the zoos of Cologne and Basel)⁶⁰ and to the University of Groningen. At the instigation of a certain G. Steenhuis, who also lived in Westernieland and who published well-argued letters in the national press,⁶¹ a contact was made between the Visser family and G.F. Westerman, the director and co-founder of the Artis Zoo, who was enthusiastic about the idea of

58 *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser courant* 05-06-1898.

59 *Het nieuws van den dag: kleine courant* 16-01-1891 (advertisement).

60 *Het nieuws van den dag: kleine courant* 30-06-1897; *De standaard* 25-06-1885.

61 E.g., *Algemeen Handelsblad* 04-02-1898; *De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad* 14-12-1898.

processing seal meat for animal nutrition.⁶² The plan failed because the distance between Westernieland and Amsterdam was too great to preserve the meat of the seals, killed in the summer.⁶³ A counterpart of the Visser family was the Van de Klooster family from Burghsluis (Zeeland). This family was much less known, but interestingly, their capture of 118 seals in 1899 was reported in great detail: 41 of the captured seals were sold alive to Belgium, 12 to the Netherlands, and 8 to France; 57 were killed for seal oil.⁶⁴

In some cases the Dutch seal became an object of dispute with neighbouring Germany. The Germans attributed the decline of the salmon to the large numbers of seals in the Dutch coastal waters, while the Dutch blamed the German nurseries of pike-perch (sander) on the great rivers: they believed that these sanders fed upon young salmon.

Another example concerns cases of food-fraud when seal meat was sold as pork;⁶⁵ later it became clear that this meat was imported from the Netherlands.⁶⁶ However, according to a letter from Steenhuis, published in several newspapers, it is difficult to sell seal meat as pork: this is only possible with very heavy animals, which are non-existent in the Netherlands. He therefore suspected that the German reports were fake news, aiming to discourage the Dutch import of pork into Germany.⁶⁷

4 Inland Seal Spotting

The local press frequently reported inland sightings and catches of seals (especially on the large rivers, the Rhine, the Lek, and the Maas, and in the Zeeland ports). Invariably it was said that those sightings were rare.⁶⁸ Once in a while a meteorological explanation was suggested, for instance stormy weather.⁶⁹ And often the violent reaction of the local people was described, who hunted down the spotted seal 'out of antipathy towards the animal'.⁷⁰ Sometimes, however, the animal was captured alive to be displayed as a curiosity, as happened with

62 Ongoing reports in *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 24-10-1888, *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser courant* 31-10-1888, *De standaard* 17-01-1889.

63 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 15-09-1895.

64 *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 29-09-1899.

65 *Het nieuws van den dag: kleine courant* 23-07-1895.

66 *De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad* 12-09-1895.

67 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 15-09-1895.

68 *Leeuwarder courant* 02-03-1776; *Groninger courant* 25-02-1825; *De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad* 06-03-1885; *Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en 's Hertogenbossche courant* 03-0-1892; *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant* 14-12-1895.

69 *Het nieuws van den dag: kleine courant* 17-11-1881; idem 29-11-1881.

70 *De standaard* 15-03-1878.

a seal caught in the Rhine near Xanten (Germany).⁷¹ During several weeks in 1899 two seals that escaped from a basin in Liège (Belgium) made the news. The animals swam for days in the Meuse. The fishing tenants, who feared for their fish stocks, were roused to action. The hunted animals were driven into a lock, and one was captured alive by way of a net made of bed linen sewn together. The second escaped but was later shot dead. The incident ended tragically: one of the hunters hit the water and drowned. A watching lock keeper died of a stroke.⁷²

5 Empathy and Amusement

The image of the seal, as is apparent from the above points, is two-fold: the seal as an object of the hunt and as a competitor of man. In the course of the 19th century other attitudes of the public in relation to seals can be seen. In addition to the above-mentioned reactions against animal cruelty in the case of sealing in the Bering Sea and on Jan Mayen, the reports on seal hunting on the island of Lobos must also be mentioned.⁷³ All these reactions were consistent with an empathy for seals, and even a certain humanization of these animals. An article noted the similarities between a human head and a seal's.⁷⁴ A feuilleton talks about the seals' 'groote, ronde zwarte, vochtig glanzende oogen' (great, round, black, moist, shining eyes).⁷⁵ Critical for the positive image regarding the seal are the news reports on the intelligence of these animals. In the first half of the 19th century, this coverage was still incidental. A newspaper article mentioned a monk seal in Italy that was trained and could speak a few words: dad, mom, and thank you.⁷⁶ Another report is about seals trained to draught vessels.⁷⁷ Occasionally there were reports of tame seals, both abroad (a tame Baikal seal)⁷⁸ and locally.⁷⁹ Domesticated young seals were sometimes offered for sale per ad.⁸⁰ An American ordered young seals from Dutch fishermen in order to teach them tricks.⁸¹ Reports were published repeatedly about an

71 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 19-07-1831.

72 Continuous news coverage: *Middelburgsche courant* 06-05-1899; *Venloosch nieuwsblad* 06-05-1899; *Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en 's Hertogenbosche courant* 17-05-1899; *Middelburgsche courant* 18-05-1899; idem 20-05-1899; idem 26-05-1899.

73 *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 13-03-1897.

74 *De Curaçaosche courant* 03-08-1833.

75 *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 03-04-1884.

76 *De Curaçaosche courant* 03-08-1833.

77 *Vlissingsche courant* 02-02-1844.

78 *De Sheboygan Nieuwsbode* 09-06-1857.

79 *Het nieuws van den dag: kleine courant* 24-08-1883.

80 *Het nieuws van den dag: kleine courant* 27-07-1886.

81 *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser courant* 01-06-1895.

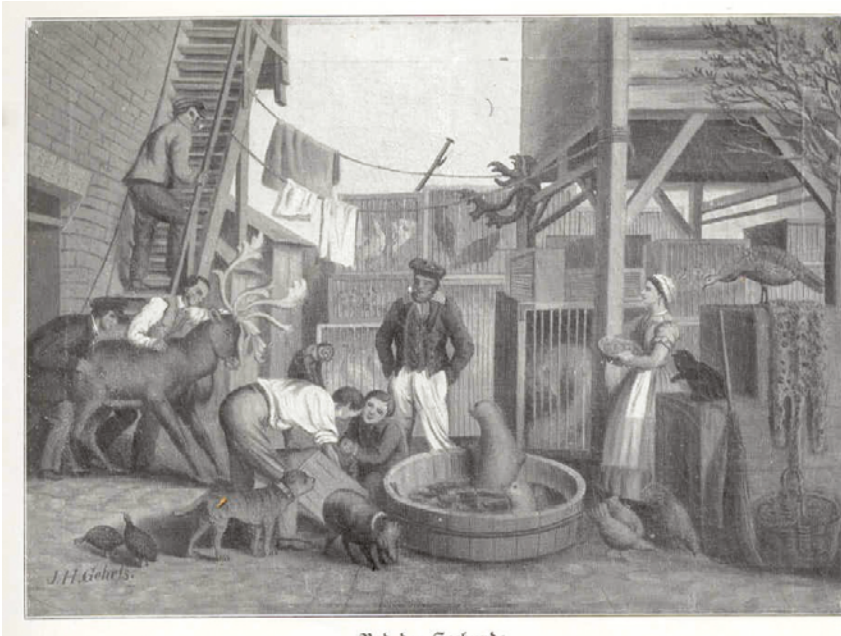


FIGURE 16.3 J.H. Gehrts after Heinrich Leutemann, “Bad der Seehunden”, in C. Hagenbeck, *Von Tieren und Menschen* (Berlin: 1908) 51 <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fc/Hagenbeck4.jpg>

Englishman (one Lord Murphy) who hunted in the Dollard with seals, dressed to retrieve the culled fowl.⁸²

From ca. 1860 there are recurring news reports about performances with tamed seals,⁸³ first abroad in the major European cities of London and Vienna.⁸⁴ In Germany the animal dealer Carl Hagenbeck (1844–1913) organized variété programmes with dressed seals; other companies followed.⁸⁵ In 1887, the first seal performance in the Netherlands was reported.⁸⁶ Later circus companies had great success with seals in the Netherlands. In 1892 Hagenbeck’s shows received much publicity and attention in the Netherlands.⁸⁷ In a long interview Hagenbeck told how he had come to his current profession: thanks to three seals that his father had given to him when he was a boy [Fig. 16.3].⁸⁸

82 *Het nieuws van den dag: kleine courant* 09-09-1884.

83 *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 26-01-1885.

84 *Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en 's Hertogenbossche courant* 11-06-1885; *Bataviaasch handelsblad* 09-04-1887.

85 *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant* 14-09-1885.

86 *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 12-05-1887.

87 E.g., *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 31-08-1892; *Algemeen Handelsblad* 09-09-1892.

88 *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* 28-05-1895.

Several reviews reported the tricks performed by the seals: they made music, sang, juggled, smoked pipes, etc. These tricks showed that in almost all cases the animals concerned were in fact sea lions rather than seals. In 1899 for the first time it was clearly stated that a show with Captain Webb was with 'sea lions and seals' [Fig. 16.4].⁸⁹ Another successful American seal trainer, Captain Wills, put on many shows in the Netherlands before entering the service of the Barnum and Bailey circus.⁹⁰ In 1900 an interview was published in which he explained the differences between seals and sea lions (i.e. the California sea lion (*Zalophus californianus*)).⁹¹

The positive appreciation of the seal undoubtedly accompanied the 19th-century interest in the peoples of the Arctic. Frequent were the travel reports, often in feuilleton form, to northern areas, in which seals were an obligatory topic.⁹² There are detailed descriptions of seal hunting by the Inuit, invariably called 'Eskimos'.⁹³ The newspapers reported extensively on the great ethnological exhibitions in which seals also were exhibited. These exhibitions were to be seen in Paris, Brussels, and Cologne, and had a huge success. It was stated that the Paris exhibition on the afternoon of All Saints' Day alone drew more than 20,000 visitors.⁹⁴ This ethnological interest in the seal is certainly connected with a certain historical interest in the animal: there is coverage in the archives of Middelburg,⁹⁵ archaeological finds in Wisby (Gothland, Sweden),⁹⁶ and in New Zealand.⁹⁷ This interest is undoubtedly the result of a sentiment of superiority on the part of the 'civilized' Dutch, who looked down upon the 'barbarian' eating habits of other people from past eras and the present day. The Dutch did not eat seal meat. The meat of the killed animals was thrown away, even by the above-mentioned Visser family.⁹⁸ The Dutch esteemed eating seal meat to be medieval (the eating habits of their medieval ancestors

89 *Het nieuws van den dag: kleine courant* 22-12-1899.

90 *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 09-04-1900.

91 *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 15-03-1900.

92 For example, *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant* 15-08-1883.

93 *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 14-03-1887.

94 *De Gooi- en Eemlander: nieuws- en advertentieblad* 11-11-1877.

95 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 20-05-1888. One reads in the newspaper: 'Zeehonden vond men in die tijd smakelijk eten. In 1501 ontving mw. Van Ravenstein een zeehond van 110 pond, en gekocht was voor 5,5 gr. het pond' (In those days seals were considered tasty food. In 1501 Mrs. van Ravenstein received a seal of 110 pounds, which was bought for 5.5 gr. the pound).

96 *Delftsche courant* 30-09-1888. The newspaper reports that the excavation first revealed 'beenderen van paarden, ossen, schapen, varkens, vogels en vissen. Hoe verder naar beneden, hoe meer beenderen van zeehonden' (bones of horses, oxen, sheep, pigs, birds, and fish. The further down, the more seal bones), amid 'brokken vuursteen en priemen van been' (chunks of flint and bone awls).

97 *Bataviaasch nieuwsblad* 03-05-1890.

98 *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* 24-10-1888.



FIGURE 16.4 *Captain Webb's Seal and Sea Lion Band*, Courier Co., no date (American, 19th century) <https://emuseum.ringling.org/emuseum/objects/9973/unknown-captain-webbs-seal-and-sea-lion-band?ctx=6452c4c5-6bbc-45fa-8ada-ad2b5f9adfod&idx=26>

were mentioned, as these can be drawn from old accounts)⁹⁹ and uncivilized, matching the barbarian peoples from the North, and acceptable only out of dire necessity, e.g. when it is done to survive after a shipwreck.

99 *De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad* 17-03-1899.

6 Conclusions

The following nuanced picture of public opinion on the subject of seals emerges from the present newspaper analysis. From the 18th century on, seal hunting in the far north was considered economically attractive because of the skin and oil of the animals. The Dutch newspapers kept their readers well informed about the economic and later political consequences of the international seal hunt. The domestic seal hunt, for skin and tears, but also the pleasure hunt received ample attention in the newspapers. From the beginning of the 19th century, seals were mainly hunted domestically because the animals, preying on herring, plaice, and salmon, were considered formidable competitors of the fishermen. Reports of seals in the interior regularly made the headlines. The public's response to these stray seals was mostly negative. But in the second half of the 19th century, seals also aroused empathy among the general public, both internationally and in the Netherlands. The seal became the symbol against unregulated seal hunting and animal cruelty. From the 1880s, trained seals were a source of entertainment in zoos and itinerant shows (although reporting did not always distinguish between seal and sea lion). The newspapers thus show that Dutch public opinion on the seal was multifaceted, contradictory, and changeable – a situation that would continue well into the 20th century. It goes without saying that the results of my newspaper analysis are only a starting point for further research. Verification of my conclusions is required through the consultation of other sources: one can think of ego documents, such as travel reports, and literary works and visual art.

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