



*IWMC World Conservation Trust*



# **SEALS AND THE MARINE ENVIRONMENT**

**The Benefits of Trade in Seal Products**

Dear Reader,

Both the utilization of natural resources and their international trade provide mankind with important benefits in terms of our way of life. At the same time, for various reasons, they also can lead to disagreements about how, or whether, these resources should be utilized.

After spending most of my life being involved with conservation issues, most notably as Secretary General of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) between 1982 and 1990, I know full well what emotions can be ignited on both sides of these debates. My experience is that in many cases international trade, when properly regulated and managed, can assist with wildlife conservation.

It is with this perspective in mind that this brochure has been produced. I hope that it will contribute to a more informed consideration of the issue of seal harvesting and trade in seal products.

Thank you for taking the time to read it.



A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'E. Lapointe', written in a cursive style.

Eugène Lapointe  
President  
IWMC World Conservation Trust

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# AT ONE WITH NATURE

Visitors to the northern reaches of the world are struck by the natural beauty of the rugged landscape, the purity of the air, and the abundance of sea life in the oceans.

Canada, Greenland, Norway, Russia, Finland and Sweden lay claim to some of the most unspoiled lands and waters.

The north of North America, the Barents Sea, the White Sea... This is where man and nature live side by side, cohabiting in a harsh, remote, cold – and beautiful – environment.

There are cars and trucks and boats and some modern amenities but the underlying way of life is largely the same as it was for earlier generations.

There are no large factories, no skyscrapers and no interminable traffic jams. Strip malls and shopping centers do not litter the landscape. Hotels and office blocks do not conquer the skyline. Packs of taxis do not race noisily along the streets.

These small settlements are not known for attracting law firms or investment banks, car manufacturers or computer chip developers, bureaucratic centers or retail giants.

Here, local resources are utilized to support livelihoods. Fishermen and hunters tackle the seas and the ice to bring home their catch. What they don't consume, they sell.

**The natural beauty in remote northern regions continues to exist because people maintain traditional ways of life. Central to this is utilizing local natural resources, including seals.**



# SUSTAINABLE USE

Seals are common in these areas, just as deer and wild boars are common in rural areas to the south.

They have been harvested for over a thousand years for their pelts, oils and meat.

Seal pelts are made into jackets, vests, hats, sporrans, shoes, boots, furniture, rugs and carpets.

Leather is used to produce belts and bags.

Oils are processed into Omega-3 pharmaceuticals that reduce the incidence of coronary heart disease.

And seal meat provides communities with protein that is vital to human well-being.

In Greenland, native Inuit hunters take seals in a traditional subsistence hunt for food and clothing, as well as selling pelts to meet their daily expenses.

**And the land and oceans maintain their natural beauty.**



# GLOBAL BENEFITS OF TRADE

Whether the market for a product is big or small, consumers and producers benefit when it is sold and traded. Trade helps communities get the best from their resources. And trade enables consumers to make purchases that otherwise would not be available to them.

The two most important seal products are pelts and oil. There is demand for them locally, nationally and internationally.

Clothing made from seal pelts is warm and attractive, making it both functional and a desirable fashion statement for many consumers.

Omega-3 seal oils provide health benefits to people, particularly as they age, helping to maintain healthy hearts and joints.

Demand for these products in Europe, North America and Asia supports jobs and livelihoods. In turn, this trade in pelts and oil provides fishermen with direct incentives to maintain healthy seal stocks for the future.

While alternatives such as synthetic fibers and fish oils do exist, many people continue to prefer purchasing seal products due to their high quality and strong reputation.

Questions are also raised about alternatives to seal products. For example, what is the impact on the environment of using clothing and footwear developed from petroleum and chemical products?

While some people today opt out of eating meat or using animal products, most prefer to maintain more traditional diets and choices.



# SEAL ABUNDANCE

While trade continues to flourish around the world, there are always some who object to it. Some may oppose all trade for philosophical reasons while some may try to limit a particular trade to gain a competitive advantage for their products.

In the case of wildlife, a central consideration is the impact trade has on animal populations.

Seal populations today are at historically high levels. Scientists estimate that there are some eight million harp and hooded seals in the north Atlantic region.

Data on seal numbers is gathered by carrying out visual and photographic aerial surveys. Satellite telemetry and DNA analyses provide information about the role of seals in the marine ecosystem.

The harp seal population that migrates in Canada between the Davis Straits, the Gulf of St. Lawrence and east of Newfoundland accounts for more than half of total seal numbers. These herds have expanded from 1.8 million animals in 1983, to over five and a half million in 2008. Harps are the most commonly harvested seal species.





## SEAL MANAGEMENT AND REGULATION

Seal hunting is subject to strict and detailed regulations covering participation, hunting seasons, vessels, quotas, seal age and methods of slaughtering.

Hunters are trained and instructed in rules and regulations as well as harvesting techniques – killing, bleeding, skinning and shooting. Most hunts are monitored by independent inspectors.

Atlantic nations cooperate over the numbers of seals that may be taken in each area, and when seasons are open and closed.

Quotas are set by national governments at levels that ensure that the overall populations continue to thrive. Scientists estimate the seal population and then calculate a quota that will maintain the population at an established level for future years.

In addition to the harvests themselves, the process of setting quotas takes account of other factors that impact seal populations, ranging from annual ice thickness and the impact of storms to fishery bycatch.

Intergovernmental bodies such as the North Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) and the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), together with national bodies such as Norway's Institute of Marine Research (IMR), make scientific assessments of harp and hooded seal populations that are used to set quotas in Canada, Russia, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Norway.

In addition, the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO) takes an active role in assessing seal population abundance and health. It also reviews harvesting methods.

With abundant populations and a reliance on science to set quotas, overall seal numbers are maintained at sustainable levels.

# A BALANCED MARINE ECOSYSTEM

There are many harvestable components of the marine ecosystem. Because seals consume commercial fish and forage species, and sustain others such as sharks and orcas, sealing nations are increasingly focusing their research on the impact of seals and seal harvesting on the ecosystem as a whole.

This approach reflects a need to ensure that seal populations will continue to thrive. It also ensures that we live up to a moral responsibility to understand the impacts of harvesting choices on other species.

This can mean limiting seal harvesting or encouraging it, depending on particular regional circumstances.

Finding the right balance between prey and predators makes the marine ecosystem more productive and preserves its biodiversity.





# HUMANE HARVESTING METHODS

In addition to regulating catch numbers, governments have legislated to ensure that harvesting methods used by fishermen are quick and humane.

While some people will object to killing any animal for any reason, and may regard all animal harvesting as inhumane, veterinarians from sealing nations have evaluated the methods used in seal harvests.

The most common method for harvesting seals is using a rifle. Use of the «hakupik», a traditional harvesting tool, is increasingly rare today. Veterinarians consider both to be humane killing methods because they consistently cause instant unconsciousness before death.

Before taking any further steps to harvest the animal, hunters must examine each seal for any sign of consciousness.

Sealing nations regulate the harvests through a process of monitoring and evaluation.

Whitecoated seal pups, whose images are popular in some advocacy group fundraising campaigns, are not hunted.



# SUMMARY

- The natural beauty in remote sealing regions continues to exist because people maintain traditional ways of life. Central to this is utilizing local natural resources, including seals.
- Many people in these rural communities have lower than average income levels and limited employment opportunities.
- In northern Canada, sealing provides work for 6,000 fishermen, providing up to a third of their income.
- Seal populations today are at historically high levels. Scientists estimate that there are some eight million harp and hooded seals in the north Atlantic.
- Seal hunting is subject to strict and detailed regulations covering participation, hunting seasons, vessels, quotas, seal age and methods of slaughtering.
- Seal hunters are trained and instructed in rules, regulations and harvesting techniques. Most hunts are monitored by independent inspectors.
- Seals have been harvested for over a thousand years for their pelts, oils or meat. Pelts are made into jackets, vests, hats, sporrans, shoes, boots, furniture, rugs and carpets. Leather produces belts and bags. Oils are processed into Omega-3 pharmaceuticals.
- The total retail value of all seal products is approximately \$100 million per year – but this depends on the ability to trade. For the fishermen who harvest seals, it is important that consumers continue to have the right to choose to purchase their products.
- Trade restrictions on seal products would hit some of the poorest members of society whilst also negatively impacting the marine ecosystem. Finding the right balance between prey and predators makes the ecosystem more productive and preserves biodiversity. Seal harvesting, based on detailed scientific assessments, protects the marine ecosystem.
- With sustainable harvests, seal products are renewable resources. Synthetic alternatives developed from petroleum and chemical products have negative impacts on the environment.
- Market distortions caused by anti-sealing campaigns have already caused under capacity of harvesting resources in some countries, such as Norway and Russia.
- Whitecoated seal pups, whose images are popular in some advocacy group fundraising campaigns, are not hunted.

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# IWMC WORLD CONSERVATION TRUST

**IWMC is a global non-profit organization that promotes the conservation of wildlife resources.**

Headquartered in Switzerland and with offices in the USA, Canada, Argentina, China and Japan, IWMC works to strengthen international cooperation, protect sovereign rights and advance public education through the sustainable utilization of wildlife resources.

IWMC advocates the use of science-based management techniques and seeks to develop broader understanding, greater respect and increased tolerance towards all peoples whose customs, traditions and livelihoods are based upon the sustainable use of wildlife resources.

IWMC is a global coalition of wildlife conservation experts and managers.

For more information, visit [www.iwmc.org](http://www.iwmc.org)

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