



Parliamentary Information and Research Service
Library of Parliament

IN BRIEF

François Côté
Marcus Pistor
5 April 2007

Background Information on the Canadian Seal Harvest

INTRODUCTION

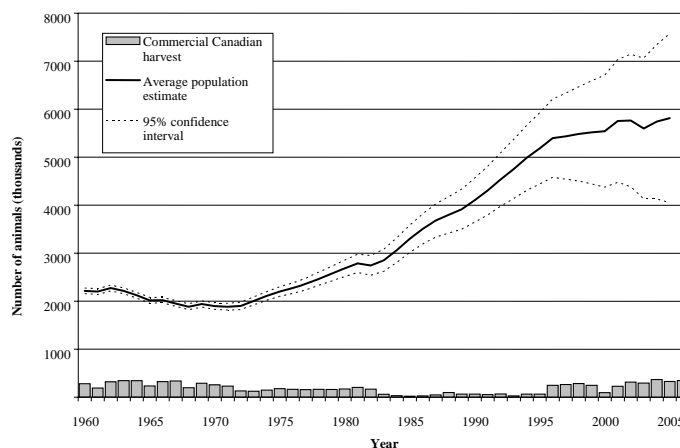
Seal harvesting has been a contentious issue for more than three decades and continues to be so, particularly in Europe, where legislative or regulatory actions against the import of seal products have been proposed or announced in several countries, including Belgium, Austria, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Croatia, Italy, and Germany. In addition to these national initiatives, a resolution and a declaration have been discussed and adopted at the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. These developments pose a threat to export markets for seal skins in Europe, and Canada's image continues to be attacked by the campaigns of international and local animal rights organizations against the seal harvest.

SIZE OF THE HARP SEAL POPULATION

Largely because of the activities of animal welfare groups and the effect of a European Union ban on the importation of products made from whitecoat and blueback pelts (those of young harp and hooded seals), the market for sealskins collapsed in 1983. With the loss of the market, Canadian harvests of harp seals from 1983 to 1995 were much lower than the total allowable catches. This period coincided with a steady increase in the size of the harp seal population in the Northwest Atlantic, from about 1.9 million in 1970 to almost 5.2 million in 1995 (see Figure 1). The latest estimate (2005) put the population at 5.82 million.⁽¹⁾ The harp seal population in the Northwest Atlantic may be affected adversely in the next few years by reduced ice cover during whelping, particularly in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.⁽²⁾ The diminished ice cover forces the seal pups into the ocean before they are strong enough to swim. The Canadian Ice Service's seasonal outlook for the winter of 2006-2007 predicted a reduced ice cover in the Gulf of St. Lawrence; this now appears to be confirmed. In 2002, Fisheries and Oceans Canada

(DFO) estimated that there had been a high pup mortality rate in the Gulf of St. Lawrence because of the poor ice conditions.⁽³⁾

**Figure 1 –
Harp seal population in the Northwest Atlantic,
1960-2005, and Commercial harvest of harp seal in
the Front (the waters east of Newfoundland) and
in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, 1960-2006**



Source: Fisheries and Oceans Canada

The current size of the Northwest Atlantic harp seal stock has raised concern about the part seals may be playing in the failure of groundfish stocks to recover despite the moratoria and other fishing restrictions that have been in place since the early 1990s. This has led to calls to increase quotas for the seal harvest in order to bring the population into what some people believe would be a more appropriate ecological balance. However, some biologists argue that, given the complexity and the dynamic nature of marine food webs, it is extremely difficult to predict how an increased harvest of harp seals would affect a fish population such as the northern cod.

MANAGEMENT OF THE SEAL HARVEST

An Eminent Panel on Seal Management⁽⁴⁾ appointed by the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans issued a report in the fall of 2001. The panel was asked to “provide advice on the best strategies for management of seal populations in Atlantic Canada, including a balanced and objective view of scientific information on seal populations and predator-prey relationships and how this information can contribute to development of management strategies.” In response to the panel’s recommendations, the Objective-Based Fisheries Management (OBFM) approach was adopted by DFO for the 2003-2005 seal management plan and will continue to be used in managing the harp seal population. This approach uses reference points (pre-established population levels) and control rules (actions triggered at certain reference points) to establish management measures for a fishery. The approach is designed to ensure that conservation management measures, including significant reductions in the total allowable catch (TAC), would be implemented to bring back and maintain the seal population above 4.1 million animals (70% of the largest observed population of 5.82 million) in the event that the population falls below that threshold.

The rapid growth of the harp seal population has allowed significant increases in the TAC set by the Canadian government and, as a result, in the annual harvest of harp seals (see Figure 1). After the European ban on the importation of whitecoat and blueback seal products, the harvest off Canada’s east coast had declined to less than 20,000 animals in 1985, and had consistently remained below 70,000 animals until 1995. Since 1996, with the exception of 2000, annual catches have been above 200,000. In 2005, reported catches for the Gulf and the Front were at 324,000, and total catches for the Northwest Atlantic (including Greenland) were at almost 395,000. For 2006, the Canadian harp seal TAC was set at 325,000 animals for the commercial sector, with an additional 10,000 for Aboriginal seal hunters, personal use, and the Arctic harvest. It appears that the reported catch for 2006 may have exceeded the TAC by some 19,000 animals, or 6%.⁽⁵⁾

The seal harvest is regulated by the *Marine Mammal Regulations* (MMR).⁽⁶⁾ The MMR were made pursuant to the *Fisheries Act* to manage and control marine mammals harvesting and related activities in Canada. The trade, sale or barter of harp seal pups (whitecoats) and hooded seal pups (bluebacks) has been prohibited since 1987, effectively ending the

harvest of these animals. The MMR have been amended several times, most recently in 2003, to ensure that seals are killed more humanely. DFO issues both seal harvesting licences and seal fishery observation licences.

The Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, the honourable Loyola Hearn, announced in March 2006 that DFO “is looking at long-term changes in order to further improve on humane hunting practices and overall management of the hunt.”⁽⁷⁾ In particular, it is working toward the implementation of the recommendations made by the Independent Veterinarians’ Working Group on the Canadian Harp Seal Hunt in its report, *Improving Humane Practice in the Canadian Harp Seal Hunt*.⁽⁸⁾

ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE OF THE SEAL HARVEST

Thousands of seal harvesters and their families in Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec and Canada’s North depend on the seal harvest. DFO states that in Newfoundland and Labrador alone, over 5,000 individuals (approximately 1% of the total provincial population) derive some income from seal harvesting, which in some cases can represent over 30% of a sealer’s total annual income.⁽⁹⁾ Similarly, according to a recent documentary on the seal harvest, sealers from the Magdalen Islands earn on average \$7,000 from that activity, representing 25% of their annual income.⁽¹⁰⁾

The main three products derived from the seal harvest are pelts, meat and oil. Pelts are by far the most important product. Harvested seals are underutilized, as the market for seal meat is limited; however, the market for seal oil is developing rapidly. Seal oil, which is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, is marketed in capsule form. In 2006, Canadian exports of marine mammal oil were worth \$1.5 million. The main importers were South Korea, the United States, Norway, and Italy.⁽¹¹⁾

Since 2002, demand for seal pelts has increased significantly, and prices have risen correspondingly. According to DFO, the landed value of harp seal pelts from the 2006 season totalled \$29.2 million, compared with \$17.5 million in 2005.⁽¹²⁾ Harp seal ranked sixth in terms of landed value among all species harvested in 2005 in the Newfoundland and Labrador region, far behind the shrimp and crab fisheries, but at a level similar to those of cod, mackerel, and clams.⁽¹³⁾ In 2006, sealers often received more than \$100 per pelt.

By comparison, the average price per pelt received by sealers in 2005 was approximately \$52, which was itself an 18% increase over the 2004 average value.⁽¹⁴⁾ In 2006, Canada exported sealskins for a total value of \$16.4 million. Exports to Norway, Finland, Germany and China accounted respectively for 61%, 18%, 13% and 6% of the total.⁽¹⁵⁾ A considerable number of sealskins from the northern harvest are sold in international markets. In 2006, over 6,000 sealskins were exported from Nunavut, providing a total income of \$530,000 to Inuit hunters.⁽¹⁶⁾

The Canadian government does not subsidize the seal harvest, as sealing is considered an economically viable industry. All subsidies ceased in 2001. According to DFO, subsidies were provided before that time “for market and product development, including a meat subsidy, to encourage full use of the seal,”⁽¹⁷⁾ as well as core funding to support the operation of sealing associations. There are government expenditures related to the sealing industry, but the government does not classify these as subsidies. They include funding for monitoring and enforcement, for management of the seal resource, and for Canadian Coast Guard vessels involved in the seal harvest and other activities in the area (multi-tasking) such as ice-breaking and Search and Rescue.

- (1) The 95% confidence interval for this estimate is 4.1–7.6 million. M.O. Hammill and Garry Stenson, *Abundance of Northwest Atlantic harp seals (1960-2005)*, Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat, Research Document 2005/090, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Ottawa, 2005, http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/csas/Csas/Publications/ResDocs-DocRech/2005/2005_090_e.htm.
- (2) Greenpeace argued in a 2005 report that “if population estimates and projected trends under exploitation fail to take account of the likelihood of climate-related increased pup mortality (and hence a progressive failure of young to enter the breeding population 4-5 years later), the harp seal population could decline rapidly, perhaps even below threshold values, well before such declines could be reliably detected under current monitoring regimes.” Paul Johnston and David Santillo, *Canadian Seal Hunt: No Management and No Plan*, Technical Note, Greenpeace International, The Netherlands, 2005, <http://www.greenpeace.org/raw/content/canada/en/documents-and-links/publications/canadian-seal-hunt-no-managem.pdf>.
- (3) M. Hammill and G. Stenson, *Harvest Simulations for 2003-2006 Harp Seal Management Plan*, Research Document – 2003/068, Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Ottawa, 2003, http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/csas/Csas/publications/ResDocs-DocRech/2003/2003_068_e.htm.

- (4) Ian McLaren, Solange Brault, John Harwood, and David Vardy, *Report of the Eminent Panel on Seal Management*, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Ottawa, 2001, http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/seal-phoque/reports-rapports/expert/repsm-rgegp_e.htm.
- (5) For 2006, total catches were at 354,344 animals, 97.6% of which were beaters (stage of development of a young seal at around 25 days of age).
- (6) SOR-93-56, <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/ShowFullDoc/cr/SOR-93-56/20070319/en>.
- (7) Fisheries and Oceans Canada, “Hearn Announces Multi-Year Seal Management Plan,” News release, Ottawa, 15 March 2006, http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/media/newsrel/2006/hq-ac05_e.htm.
- (8) Independent Veterinarians’ Working Group on the Canadian Harp Seal Hunt, *Improving Humane Practice in the Canadian Harp Seal Hunt*, August 2005, 26 pages, available at <http://ivwgonline.org/IVWGReportAug2005.pdf>.
- (9) Fisheries and Oceans Canada, “Socio-economic impact of the Atlantic Coast seal hunt,” Fact sheet, 9 March 2006, http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/seal-phoque/reports-rapports/facts-faits/facts-faitsSE_e.htm.
- (10) Raoul Jomphe, *Phoques: le film*, documentary presented at RDI, 29 March 2007.
- (11) Industry Canada, *Trade Data Online: Trade by Product (HS codes)*, http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/sc_mrkti/tdst/engdoc/tr_homep.html (accessed on 22 February 2007). The Harmonized System (HS) code for marine mammal oil is 150430. It has been assumed that marine mammal oil was mostly obtained from seal blubber.
- (12) Fur Institute of Canada, *Fact Sheet on Seals and Sealing*, <http://www.fur.ca/index-e/news/news.asp?action=sealing&newsitem=factsheet> (accessed on 19 March 2007).
- (13) Fisheries and Oceans Canada statistics.
- (14) Fisheries and Oceans Canada, “Socio-economic impact of the Atlantic Coast seal hunt,” Fact sheet, 9 March 2006, http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/media/infocus/2006/20060309_e.htm.
- (15) Industry Canada, *Trade Data Online: Trade by Product (HS codes)*, http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/sc_mrkti/tdst/engdoc/tr_homep.html (accessed 22 February 2007). The Harmonized System (HS) code for whole raw sealskins is 430170.
- (16) Raymond Ningeocheak, House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, *Evidence*, 1 February 2007.
- (17) Fisheries and Oceans Canada, “Atlantic Canada Seal Hunt – Myths and Realities,” March 2006, http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/seal-phoque/myth_e.htm.