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Lack of Ice Kills Thousands of Seals but Cull Will Continue

by Jerome Taylor

Thousands of harp seal pups are assumed dead in Canada's Gulf of St Lawrence due to the lack of ice floes, which mother seals require to nurse their pups successfully.

Experts with the [International Fund for Animal Welfare](#) (IFAW), who have been carrying out daily surveillance flights over the region, report that the Gulf of St Lawrence - the annual birthing ground for hundreds of thousands of harp seals - is devoid of both ice and seals. Their report came as Canada announced a seal cull quota of 270,000 - down 30,000 from last year. Canadian officials said that hunters will be allowed to kill a quarter fewer seals on the east coast this year mainly because of poor ice conditions where the animals give birth.

But campaigners in Charlottetown, on Canada's Prince Edward Island, expressed outrage that the cull was going ahead in the face of the devastating mortality rates of young seals. Sheryl Fink, senior researcher with IFAW's seal campaign, said: "In the nine years I have observed the seal hunt, I've never seen conditions as bad as those I've witnessed in the past few days. Nothing could have prepared me for this devastation." Ms Fink has spent the past two months flying over ice floes for up to three hours at a time, counting the seal population. She said: "The seals' habitat is melting away and we are anticipating nearly 100 per cent mortality among more than 260,000 seal pups the Canadian government indicates were born this year in the southern Gulf of St Lawrence."

Yesterday Ms Fink spotted a couple of hundred adult



A lone harp seal rests on an ice pan while sealers move into the area for the annual seal hunt in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, in this March 25, 2006 file photo. Canada will cut back the number of harp seals that hunters can kill this year to 270,000 from 335,000 in 2006 because of bad ice conditions off its East Coast, Fisheries Minister Loyola Hearn said on Thursday. REUTERS/Paul Darrow

seals over the northern Gulf near the Strait of Belle Isle, but no pups. The solid ice pack expected at this time of the year has been reduced, she said, to “tiny pans surrounded by areas of open water”.

More than 250,000 pups were estimated to have been born in the southern Gulf of St Lawrence this year. But the ice they were living on was swept out of the Gulf and into the Atlantic Ocean earlier this month. As the ocean swells and high winds smash up the ice even more, the pups, who are too young to swim, are being forced into the water.

At a press conference in Ottawa yesterday, Canadian officials conceded there were poorer ice conditions than usual in the southern Gulf, but said it was only “one small piece of the overall hunt”. Kevin Stringer, an environment ministry spokesman, said: “The decrease [in the seal cull quota] this year is very substantial... we think it’s an important move and is sustainable.” This is strongly contested by campaigners who complained that the Canadian government was also flying over the ice floes, conducting free surveys for the sealing industry to find the seal pups.

The hunt around the Magdalen Islands usually accounts for around 20 percent of the overall catch. Most seals are killed off the coast of Newfoundland, further to the north.

Rebecca Aldworth, of the Humane Society of the United States, said: “It’s appalling... they’re actually talking about allowing the hunt in the southern Gulf to proceed to wipe out the few remaining seal pups there.”

Mr Stringer admitted that around 90 per cent of the pups born in the southern Gulf this year could die but said if this were the case, it would not necessarily have a big impact on overall seal herd health.

Ms Fink said: “With harp seals facing a growing threat from global warming and poor ice conditions, continuing the hunt at the unsustainable level announced today is nothing short of irresponsible.”

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1. luna March 30th, 2007 2:23 pm

It is appalling to me that anyone would even contempate a seal hunt w/ this going on. (hunting them is appalling to begin with). are we, as human beings that irresponsible??? being that thousands of the pups are dead BECAUSE of global warming, why would anyone, in their right mind even consider this hunt?????? we need to save the ones we can now. I am speechless.

2. montemerrick March 30th, 2007 6:26 pm

i agree with above statement - fully. and more besides.

3. Ana D March 30th, 2007 6:36 pm

FYI restrictions are put on the number of seals hunted, and without the hunt the seals feed on too many cod fish off the coasts of Newfoundland, Labrador, and Prince Edward Island - which waters are already severely suffering from overfishing of cod by people. (And there has been a moratorium on cod fishing for 10 or more years in the province of Newfoundland due to overfishing by non-Canadian ships. The fishing industry has been the mainstay for a majority Newfoundlanders and without it many have had to emigrate.) This seal hunt has been and is a way of life for the majority of those involved in it AND it has managed to keep a necessary ecological balance in that region of the world. Let's not be too quick to judge without all the facts.

4. mark March 30th, 2007 7:25 pm

Exactly. Right on!

montemerrick, luna, if you lived in NL you'd understand what it means to be the wolf. Those who would call the cull irresponsible must get out into the wilderness more often in general and learn about population crashes in particular.

Ana D, you've just won a great deal of respect from this Newfie.

If the cull were to be halted we'd see many more seal dead from starvation as their numbers reached the limits of what the environment can allow. The same thing has happened in Ontario with the deer a number of years ago.

I am all for animal rights, but the reality is this: some one must play the part of the wolf for the balance to sustain itself. Human beings have long hunted many top predators into extinction. The human has therefore a serious responsibility to take the place of the extinct predator.

5. jp March 30th, 2007 8:46 pm

So who decides when seals are eating "too many" fish or when there are "too many deer?" And what did all these poor prey species do before we godlike humans came along to put everything back "in balance"? What is the one species that does more damage to the natural world than all these other species combined? We are the ones that need to be controlled, not seals or deer.

If, in order to preserve "our way of life," we have to engage in mass brutal slaughter of creatures who don't have a choice of habitat, then we need to find a new and different way of life. Perhaps we need to start living in a way that respects the rights of other beings to live, rather than to simply assume that everything is a "resource" there for us to exploit.

We are the species that has a choice, we are the ones with the power to choose to live in ways that

minimize the damage we do to the earth, to other beings, and to our own species. Let's not pretend that the mass, bloody, brutal skull bashing of innocent young creatures, often in front of their mothers, and then skinning them, sometimes while they are still alive, is anything other than a celebration of violence.

Shame on anyone who tries to justify this with cold rationalizations.

6. Ana D March 31st, 2007 4:11 am

JP:

Let's have a cooperative discussion rather than blaming and shaming to make a point. I agree in part with some of your points - e.g. that people can behave in godlike ways (overstepping boundaries). And, speaking as an environmentalist and an animal rights advocate, I too am outraged at issues like global warming and aerial shooting of wolves in Alaska.

However, I also believe in respecting traditions and others' ways of life without imposing our own (American) ideas on cultures different from ours. As an American, I am embarrassed by how some of us brazenly impose our ideals on cultures outside of our own. The seal hunt has been a way of life and part of the culture of the Atlantic provinces for a long time. It has and continues to keep an environmental balance in this region and it was not an issue until recently when people began judging it without looking at the entire picture.

I once was against a deer hunt here in New Jersey because deer are gentle and adorable looking animals. However, without any natural predators their populations have become too large and area forests are being adversely affected by their foraging.

I believe that keeping checks and balances on some animals populations is humane and necessary and helps maintain the complicated web of life.

7. jp March 31st, 2007 9:08 am

Ana D

It is ironic that you are accusing me of imposing my American values on other cultures. What could be more "American" than the brutal and violent exploitation of the natural world that Americans have raised to a new level.

As for your argument that "keeping checks and balances on some animals populations is humane and necessary and helps maintain the complicated web of life." you must recognize that it is we humans who make these determinations, and further, it is our own actions that have disrupted checks and balances. As for claiming that mass slaughter and torturing of newborn animals by bashing in their skulls and skinning them is "humane" I cannot respond to that level of denial.

I do not believe that any human activity is sacrosanct, and that much harm has been caused by people trying to maintain a "way of life." I believe slavery was justified on those grounds, as well as innumerable practices that have been deemed wrong for any number of reasons. I am not talking here about indigenous

people whose actions are limited in the damage to other species, but about the kind of mass slaughter that is claimed to be “necessary” in order to preserve the “way of life” of commercial fishermen. They need to find another “way of life” if this is what it takes to continue their “tradition.”

You re right, I refuse to respect other traditions that are violent and cruel and produce this kind of mass suffering. This is suffering that we cause, we do this, our actions. It is not the result of natural processes, such as overpopulation or disease. We need to recognize that we cause massive suffering to beings who cannot protect themselves. WE HAVE THE POWER TO REFRAIN FROM INFLECTING TORTURE ON OTHER BEINGS. WE CAN CHOOSE TO LIVE IN EAYS THAT MINIMIZE THE HARM WE DO.

8. dingoboy March 31st, 2007 11:21 am

I think we need a shift in consciousness on this issue. Humans now outnumber all the other mammals combined.

We are too many. We are unsustainable. And we are still so arrogant that we keep on trotting out and defending

our “proud old traditions” that (depending on where you live) include things like female “circumcision”, the exploitation of native peoples, (yes, even the Newfoundlanders who killed off all of the Beothuk Indians)

the exploitation of women, and so on. Just because a thing is a “tradition” doesn’t mean it’s defensible.

Things were different when there weren’t so many of us. Now that we are everywhere, we have to start changing our

old, outdated ways. And that means all of us, even those who carry on with the old, traditional ways of life.

Perhaps a small number of seals, humanely killed by those who would use their meat and fur might be defensible.

A “cull” is no longer defensible. We have already spoiled nature’s balance.

Killing more innocents isn’t going to fix the cod fishery.

9. Peter Smith March 31st, 2007 3:35 pm

Before Europeans came along the cod and seals lived in balance and the sea was full of both. Having overfished the cod almost to extinction it makes no sense to now kill the seals in the misguided belief that this will bring the cod back. Nor is it acceptable to claim that it is the only way to make a living or part of some traditional way of life. Can you imagine an inner city drug dealer getting off by claiming that selling drugs is the only way to make a living in the inner city, or because they come from a long line of dealers and it’s a family tradition? We have to stop accepting these types of excuses for this barbarism. Killing animals for their skins and penises is wrong, no matter how many years you’ve been doing it or how much you rely on it for income.

Peter Smith

10. cg71 March 31st, 2007 4:13 pm

Ana D and Mark,

Your “keeping nature’s balance” argument requires some explanation. You have acknowledged that cod population levels are way down, largely due to human overfishing. And nearly everyone agrees now, even the science-hating speciesists who recently changed their pro-pollution argument from ‘global warming doesn’t exist’ to ‘global warming is natural and unavoidable,’ that the world is going to continue to get exponentially warmer and warmer in coming decades. And you don’t deny that warming has already killed thousands of seals, right? Please explain what is going to enable the seal population to replenish itself, and how killing them is an integral part of this recovery effort.

Nearly all natural historians and evolutionary biologists agree that we are presently experiencing the world’s sixth mass extinction, and the first that is due to the actions of one species. Hunters always talk about controlling the population of whoever they want to hunt. They thought there were too many dodo birds and passenger pigeons, too. Why aren’t they concerned about the ‘overpopulation’ of squirrels? We killed and drove off their natural predators, and they are everywhere. They have high disease rates, too. How come only the animals with commercial value require culling?

11. cg71 March 31st, 2007 4:18 pm

I meant ‘replenish.’

12. tranquility March 31st, 2007 9:36 pm

I find it absolutely appalling that the hunt will still continue if they are expecting 100% mortality of the seal pups. Don’t they recognize that this is likely the beginning of the end? If no pups are being raised, then the seal will likely die out completely soon!

“Ms Fink has spent the past two months flying over ice floes for up to three hours at a time, counting the seal population She said: “The seals’ habitat is melting away and we are anticipating nearly 100 per cent mortality among more than 260,000 seal pups the Canadian government indicates were born this year in the southern Gulf of St Lawrence.”

What a bunch of complete morons who are defending the hunting of such a threatened animal. Its so sad to read these stories about arctic creatures biting the dust because of global warming, and they are just a representation of the beginning of the devastation.

13. clupus March 31st, 2007 9:48 pm

What will those who ‘rely’ on seals for their way of life do when they are gone?? Will they die too?? Maybe, instead of continuing with this stubborn ‘it’s our way of life’ talk they should start thinking about the future and how they will survive. Alter these ‘ancient’ practices toward a sustainable existence for the coming millennium. Otherwise, today’s payday will be your children’s death sentence.

14. [walkingbear](#) April 1st, 2007 4:58 am

“Please go here:

<http://www.nativeradio.com/seals/slideshow/slide1.html>

and watch the slide show.

We have been, are, and continue to be a very poor species on this world. Our treatment of supposedly “less intelligent” species than our own for the wrapping up “5th Avenue Whores” has to be the worst of our crimes.

An ad by Bailey from the 80s....at the time it was quite a strong message (perhaps we need something stronger now)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXw-v60wwt0>

There are two worlds here and now..we are either for or against there is no middle ground anymore. You are either for the Earth or Against it. There is a way to live with Earth and a way not to live with Earth.

Choose Earth!

Ho

WalkingBear

15. [walkingbear](#) April 1st, 2007 5:04 am

“It takes up to 40 ‘dumb’ animals to make a fur coat. But only one to wear it.”

Was the slogan for the ad in the 80s

16. Paul_G April 1st, 2007 12:57 pm

My grandfather was from Nova Scotia and so while I detest the brutal hunt, I do not want maritimers to starve either.

So, to clarify for some misguided folks.

Even government studies have proven that it is NOT the seals that is the problem with the fisheries.

What they do not explain is why the government continues to allow foreign fisheries to bottom trawl in Canadian waters, destroying our ecosystem and could spell the end of the canadian industry.

I cannot understand why so many on the east coast Canadians so stubbornly support killing baby seals (they are babies even without their white coats!) while allowing this destruction to continue.

The Seal hunt is not a way of life as no one makes their living by killing seals only. Rather it is an outdated barbaric practice sponsored by the government to turn the good folk who live by fishing to fight seal defenders rather than them.

So I would ask people to, rather than insult people who defend seals, try to see seals as valuable in themselves and as potential tourist attractions, and put pressure back on the government where it belongs in order to save the fisheries.

All too soon it will be too late and what will we do when there is no more fisheries at all and what little is made slaughtering defenceless baby seals truly becomes a way of life!?!

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