

Seal hunt is really clicking!



Talk about cuddly!

Baby seals are still attracting attention but now it's tourists armed with cameras who are stalking them. Atlantic Marine Wildlife Tours hopes to show there's money in patting baby seals ... not just killing them.



MICHAEL PEAKE

Sun Photographer Michael Peake spent the last week in Prince Edward Island covering the birth of the baby harp seals. Part One looks at the new industry of seal tourists and Part Two will examine the sealers and the controversy behind the seal hunt, then and now.



Pelted with photo orders

Don't step on me! A baby seal could get trampled by the hordes of tourists (left), but it's much more fun to roll over and have your tummy scratched (lower left). But photographers or not, when you're hungry, you're hungry and mom's just the thing (lower right).

By MICHAEL PEAKE
MAGDALEN ISLANDS — They're still hunting baby seals in the Gulf of the St. Lawrence.

The difference is the hunters are now armed with cameras, not clubs.

The annual miracle on ice is happening now in the frozen gulf as half a million harp seals birth their young on the solid pack ice — unhindered by the clubs of sealers. The only visitors are tourists who helicopter in for a few expensive hours on the ice from nearby P.E.I.

Atlantic sealers can legally kill 186,000 seals this spring, but they won't. There's no market for the pelts anymore.

Banned by Europe in 1983, the traditional consumer, the seals and the sealers are in a truce that appears to be permanent, thanks to the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

The IFAW led the fight to stop sealing and were among those who succeeded in having the importing of seal pelts banned by the European Economic Community.

To re-enforce their point this week, the IFAW is paying the way for several journalists from France, Britain and Germany

to cover the seals, viewing them with a new sealing industry Atlantic Marine Wildlife Tours.

Atlantic Marine, run by University of New Brunswick professor Eugene Lewis, takes tourists from Charlottetown out to the gulf ice to touch, pat and photograph the cute, cuddly newborn harp seals.

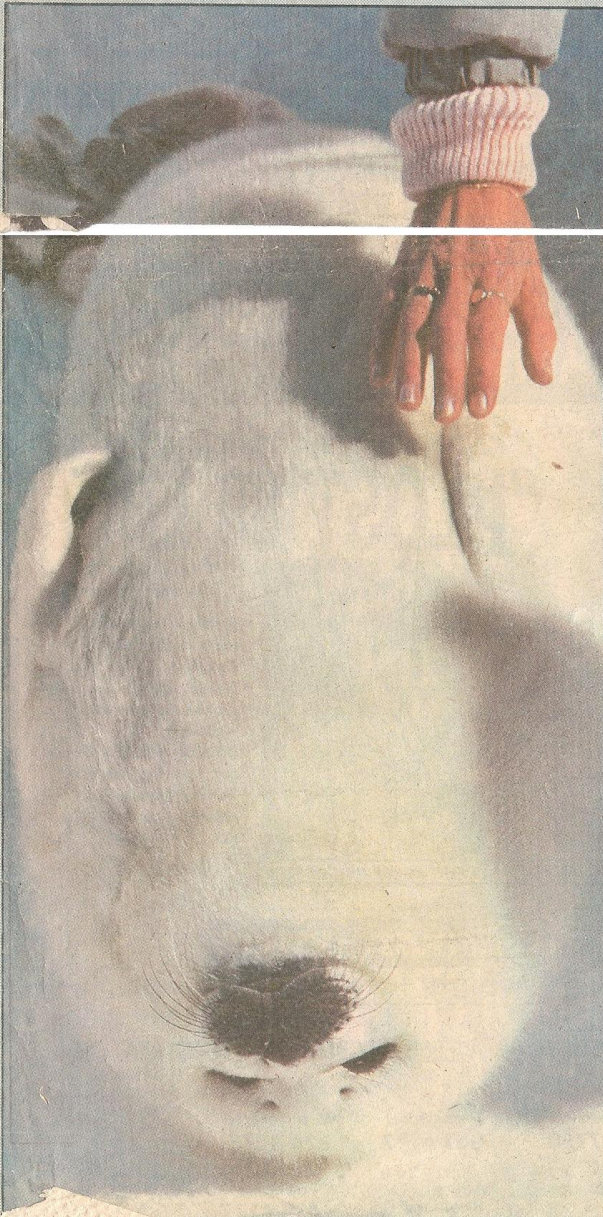
The idea is to show that there is money to be made by just looking at the seals ... not just killing them. Dr. Lewis feels there is room for both activities to exist.

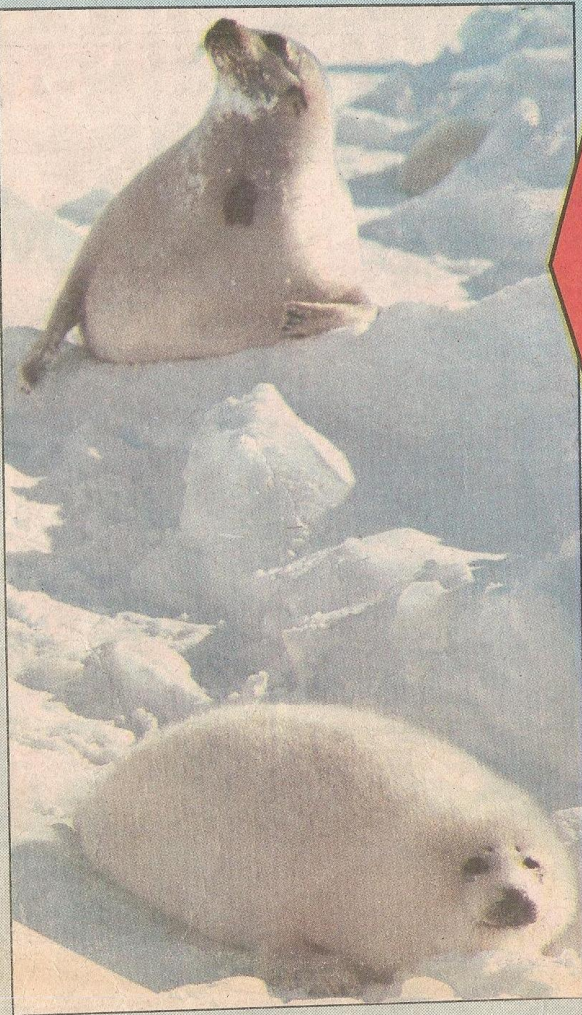
It is an argument the sealers don't buy — some are very bitter at their traditional living being taken away.

The sealing season is short. The gulf ice will break up around the end of March and the seals will soon begin their migration up the coast of Labrador to their summer feeding grounds in the Arctic.

The gulf hunt is the first of what was a two stage hunt. The second will start in Newfoundland in mid-March.

Atlantic Marine can only run tours for about one month. A five-day tour package costs \$1,000 from Charlottetown and 90% of the tourists are Americans.





Cuddly babies on ice

Photos like these, sent around the world during the last decade by animal rights groups, helped kill the overseas market for the pelts of Harp seal pups — and Canadian seal-skin in general.



Anger lingers over campaign

Fishermen Lester Lewis, left, and Glen Matthews spent 20 years sealing out of Northport, P.E.I., from 1955 to 1975. These tools of the hunt now hang from the rafters of their fishing shed. Gulf fishermen are bitter about the International Fund for Animal Welfare / Greenpeace campaign that finally finished the commercial hunt, saying it cut into their incomes both from sealing itself and because adult seals damage the fish stocks that are the mainstay of their livelihood.



Meet your image maker

Former sealer Jean Poirier introduces a group of camera-toting tourists to an inquisitive whitecoat. A few years ago, this pup would have been bludgeoned. But Poirier says the experienced sealers weren't cruel, they were just trying to make a living in a traditional occupation: "I have no hate against any animal."

'BLEEDING HEARTS SEALED OUR FATE'

CHARLOTTETOWN, P.E.I. — It used to be our only business. Then it became our dirty one.

The saga of the seal hunt debate holds a strange irony for Canada. The pursuit of beaver pelts to make European hats was the primary reason settlement first spread across this vast country.

For 200 years the killings were managed by firms like the Hudson's Bay Company. It was the cornerstone of that "Honorable Company" and the key element of the romantic life of the voyageurs.

But today, the cute and placid face of the baby Harp seal continues to fuel an international controversy that still raises hackles in the Maritimes.

Harp seal herds, in search of the broad, flat pans of ice they need to give birth on, migrate down the Labrador coast in time for the March whelping.

For generations, hunters waited for them.

It was only a dozen years ago that the media turned it into an issue. Greenpeace and the International Fund for Animal Welfare decried the hunt as cruel and barbaric.

Today, most of the killing has stopped. But the controversy continues.

Former P.E.I. sealing captain Fred Paynter says the International Fund for Animal Welfare did to him what he used to do to seals. Paynter, his wife and two young sons, were forced to move to another town to escape the harassment that followed his vocal opposition to IFAW's attempt to ban sealing.

"I was left hung out to dry by everyone," he said. "The IFAW say there are no winners in this thing. But just look at them with all their donations and look at me on welfare."

Paynter refused to have his picture taken for fear of stirring up more trouble. He says he is afraid.

The annual Gulf of St. Lawrence Harp seal hunt was a small but reliable part of his income.

"I wasn't out there for the love of it," he said. "I have a family to feed and that helped put groceries on the table."

Like Paynter, some P.E.I. fisherman supplemented their income with pelt money during the slow season.

The Harp seal is only one of several species that inhabit Atlantic coast waters. Seals are no friend of fishermen who say the seals eat too many fish,

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foul their nets, and spread disease to the fish.

The seal hunt was an integral part of the history of the Magdalen Islands and Newfoundland. They were proud of it and the men who risked their lives. They still are.

But in 1981, everything changed forever.

It was a winter of little ice, and the pack clung tenuously to the island shores. Historically this was the time, with the seals giving birth on their doorstep, that experienced P.E.I. sealers went out to hunt.

In that winter of heightened unemployment, many novice hunters also grabbed a weapon and headed out to the nearby quarry.

With experience, sealers know how to kill quickly with a single blow to the thin skull of the pup. Many of these men did not.

It was a bloodbath.

For years camera crews had been stopped by law from getting close enough to film the hunt. This time they had no such access problems. They stood on the beach and recorded a sea of slaughter.

Police reacted, confiscating film and cameras.

Little more than a year later Europe banned the import of seal pelts, and the industry withered.

But seal hunting is still legal. The 1986 quota, set by the department of fisheries and oceans, is 186,000 pelts for all Canada including 40,000 for the gulf hunt.

Estimates are that fewer than 15,000 across Canada were harvested last year.

That still doesn't satisfy the IFAW who arrive each year to monitor the activity in the gulf.

Their newest campaign includes sponsoring European media junkets to the area to draw tourists onto the ice floes instead of hunters.

Controversy aside, the spectacle on the gulf ice is a marvellous one. Huge floes stretch flat and almost solid to the blue horizon with only the occasional jagged ice-fence. The wind speaks with a sharp Arctic voice.

In the -40 wind chill, passive baby seals lie snugly and inspect their new world. The threat of sealers' clubs is being replaced by the soft hands of tourists gingerly touching one of nature's most famous victims.

"Sealing was and is still a way to make a few bucks," says Jean Poirier, 36, a carpenter and former Magdalen Islands sealer who last week guided a group of six Quebec tourists to pat and photograph the same Harp seal pups he used to harvest.

He gets upset at what he considers unfair tactics on the part of anti-hunt groups. He says charges that many seals were skinned alive are false.

"In the first place, you can't skin a live animal without a great risk of cutting yourself. I have no hate against any animal," he said.

"We're grateful to the seals. They're one of the reasons why people could live on these islands."

Sealing continues on the Magdalens, a group of rocky outcrops 100 miles off the coast of P.E.I.

Attempts to salvage a dying trade have begun.

This month, a few hundred seals will be taken by 'landsmen' — small groups of hunters going out from the islands — to the nearby seals.

The islanders are trying to cultivate a cottage industry, making small items from sealskin to sell to tourists.

A tanning expert from Ottawa will arrive later this month to instruct residents on how to prepare sealskin for commercial finishing — when the program was launched last year, the islanders had to send to Norway for sealskin because they had none.

The future of the commercial hunt is fading.

But the debate between sealers and those opposed to the hunt will go on. Two hundred years of history is not easily erased.

In the meantime, unaware of the controversy and stormy feelings they arouse, the seals will keep coming to the Gulf of St. Lawrence as they have for generations. And continue a tradition even older than the hunt.