



# SEAL WARS

Hunters, protesters, press and politicians converge and clash on the Atlantic ice annually. Can anyone stop the March madness?

BY RAY GUY

**W**E LEAVE ST. JOHN'S airport at eight in the morning on March 18, 1999, in a small plane bound for St. Anthony, 500 kilometres away on the northern tip of Newfoundland. Provincial fisheries minister John Efford has collected several dozen journalists. We are going to be shown why millions of seals must be slaughtered to save what is left of the cod fishery and Newfoundland. The minister is far ahead of even the radio open-line programs in his zeal on the matter.

Below passes Bonavista Bay, Notre Dame Bay, White Bay. The sea is white with ice to the horizon, the land white with snow. Only long black fingers of bare rock sticking through show where land ends and water begins.

There are occasional clusters of tiny houses among the black rocks, with a frail thread of road leading away from them. A cameraman in the seat ahead claims he's spotted some seals on the ice "like black pepper sprinkled on a tablecloth." I think if anything, or anyone, persists in a place like this, it is passing sinful to trouble them further.

In most of Atlantic Canada before the early 1970s, no one would have bet a plugged nickel on the future of the centuries-old practice of clubbing wild animals to death. A few hundred fishermen from Prince Edward Island, Îles de la Madeleine, Que., or the northernmost bays of Newfoundland still killed



seals on the ice of March to augment their annual incomes by a few percentage points. But their several weeks of gory work each spring was scarcely noted, or else these sealers were disparaged as seal butchers for the Norwegians. Then, as now, the furrier Rieber and Company of Bergen, Norway, bought nearly all the pelts of seals killed in Canada, took them overseas in a raw state and transformed them into fashion statements. Sealing was scorned, especially in Newfoundland, as the bottom of the employment barrel, the embarrassing dregs of a desperate past best forgotten.

Joseph Smallwood, premier of the new province for 23 years following Confederation in 1949, held as his core mandate, from first to last, the task of "dragging Newfoundlanders

A skinned seal carcass is scrutinized by British journalists flown out to the sealing grounds by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). The harp seal population — estimated at 4.8 to six million — is at the heart of a vociferous debate: some argue the seals are preventing a cod comeback and should be culled. Others say they are already in decline due to overhunting.

## Seal shorts



MIKE BEEDELL

The harp seal is one of the more abundant seal species. It is widely referred to as *Phoca groenlandica*, the Greenland seal, but some still call it *Pagophilus groenlandicus*, the Greenlandic ice-lover. Its common name is from the harp-like black wishbone-shaped markings on the adult's back.

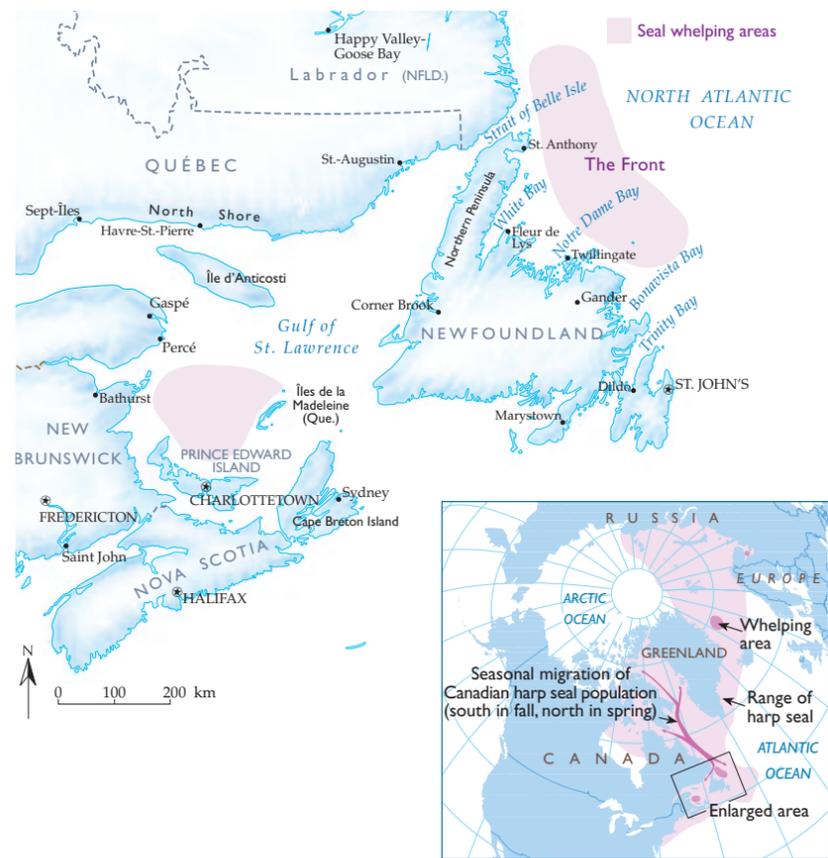
Life for harp seals revolves around the pack ice: their spring migration can take them northward 2,500 kilometres to summer feeding waters; they return south ahead of the fall ice. Each spring, vast ice floes teem with adult female harps, which give birth in February and March. After two or three weeks, the pups lose their white fur and sealers are allowed to harvest the juveniles along with the adults.

The seal hunt has long played a vital role in Newfoundland's economy and culture. In the 19th century, sealing was second only to the cod fishery in economic importance. Before the Second World War, whitecoats accounted for nearly 90 percent of the Newfoundland sealing fleet's catch.

Seals are also hunted off Labrador, Îles de la Madeleine, the Quebec North Shore, Cape Breton Island and at aboriginal communities in the North. Sealing provides income to about 11,000 sealers in Eastern Canada.

Today's commercial hunt is divided between landmen (who travel to the hunt on foot or in boats under 20 metres) and large-vessel hunters (hunting from boats longer than 20 metres).

In 1996, 11,221 sealing licences were issued. The total allowable catch since 1997 has been set by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans at 275,000 animals a year. The recorded catch, numbering 282,000 harps in 1998, does not account for seals killed in the hunt but not recovered.



MAPS: STEVEN FICK/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC; SOURCES: FISHERIES AND OCEANS CANADA, INTERNATIONAL MARINE MAMMAL ASSOCIATION; PHOTOS: ABOVE: BRIAN ATKINSON; ABOVE RIGHT: FRED BRUMMER

kicking and screaming into the 20th century.” Smallwood believed industrialization through megaprojects was the way forward and so downplayed even the cod fishery, let alone sealing, as a thing of the dismal past. So great was Smallwood's hold on the electorate, and so little was his political opposition, that by the start of the 1960s, Newfoundland parents were warning their offspring to eschew the fishery as the devil would holy water.

In the communal consciousness, sealing was relegated to folk song and story of a bleak and tragic cast. Newfoundlanders Cassie Brown wrote her masterpiece, *Death on the Ice*, about a sealing disaster in which sealers' frozen corpses were stacked on a St. John's pier like winter firewood. E. J. Pratt's poetry was taught in the schools. His doleful lines on sealing tragedy — “ring out the toll for a hundred dead, who tried to lower the price of bread” — were to be memorized. In local legend, at least, the Pope had once declared the seal to be a fish, so that during Lent and on

meatless Fridays, starving Roman Catholics had a little better chance to preserve both body and soul. The only virtue salvaged from a couple of centuries of seal killing was stoicism in the face of misery and calamity.

**A**IRPLANES do for my head what the English claim horseback riding does for the liver: shakes it up nicely. I sit with my forehead against the vibrating triple-plastic window enjoying the view of low-flying seraphim.

We fly over Fleur de Lys, where the fish plant burned down in the mid-1990s. When the cod moratorium was imposed, many insured fish plants went up in smoke. The province's fire chief said that if fish plants kept burning down at that current spanking rate he would investigate with a sharp eye indeed.

At St. Anthony airport, we are joined by Gary Lunn, Member of Parliament from Saanich-Gulf Islands in British Columbia and the Reform Party's then-

Waiting to whelp, female harp seals congregate on the pack ice (ABOVE) in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in spring. Each will give birth to a single white-coated pup. A Coast Guard icebreaker (ABOVE LEFT) opens a lead for longliners carrying sealers to the birthing grounds.

## The harp seal population

had been kept in decline by hunting pressure after the Second World War and until the 1970s, when numbers reached their lowest: fewer than two million animals. Numbers appear to have increased steadily since. The last survey of harp seal pup production, conducted by DFO in 1994, estimated the herd at 4.8 million.

**Tools of the hunt** carried by sealers on the ice include a hardwood club similar in size and appearance to a baseball bat, a sculping knife, and a sharpening steel. Those hunting from large vessels may carry a hakapik (BELOW), a long, wood-handled weapon originating in Norway. It has an iron



BRIAN ATKINSON

head with a curved spike on one side and a blunt projection on the other.

Under federal regulations, marine mammals can only be hunted in a manner designed to kill quickly and only with a club, hakapik, high-powered rifle, or shotgun firing slugs.

**The economic value** of the seal hunt is \$12 million annually, according to DFO. The Newfoundland government and the Canadian Sealers Association say the 1998 hunt was worth \$25 million, with pelts, meat and oil products taken into account. IFAW says the hunt's value has been exaggerated and that after subtracting government subsidies, it is worth about \$2 million.



GREG LOCKE

shadow fisheries minister. He had been visiting several coastal communities offering sympathy for their socio-economic distress and trying to sign up converts to his party. "You've got one hell of a fine lifestyle and culture here on this little island," he says, "and those damned seals shouldn't be allowed to mess it up."

After three or four hours of waiting around, my group of five seal viewers, including Lunn, Efford's public-relations person, Mary McNab, and her assistant, steps aboard the helicopter and takes off. From half the kitchen windows in Newfoundland you can see seals on the ice every March, but nothing like this. There are, of course, no sealers in view, just some of the "six million ravenous, marauding, cod-destroying seals," as Efford puts it. Still, the ice is bloody. It is the birth blood and the afterbirth of this whelping patch of harp and hooded seals. Our helicopter is so low that when some 350-kilogram "dog" hoods inflate the bladder of skin on their heads and gape angrily up at us, I can see their white teeth.

I ask McNab if there are any requests from tourists to come and see the spectacle. "None. Absolutely none," she says quickly. Seal tourism is taboo here, it having been suggested by Greenpeace and others.

Suddenly, Lunn shouts at the pilot through our communal headsets: "Get down. Get right down on top of 'em ... let's see those bastards really scuttle." The helicopter suddenly lurches side-

ways and drops. Everything goes white. Lunn looks white, too, and says little further.

We head back to the St. Anthony airport to wait some more and catch a plane to St. John's, where Efford greets us at the airport for a press conference. Wearying of what seem to be many toadying questions, I ask: "Minister, has Viagra cut into the market for seal penises?" Efford lasers me with a frightful glare, pivots 180 degrees on his heel toward another camera and later implies that I am a traitor to Newfoundland.

**B**Y THE 1970s, sealing in Atlantic Canada had taken a sudden turn. What followed has been called many things: the March madness, the 30-year war, the duelling helicopters, the annual ice follies, and the new Crusades. One form of cynical zealotry seemed to spawn another and so began the three-decade devil's dance over an industry whose value to Canada's gross national product has been equated to two Macdonald's hamburger outlets. What once seemed to be a perishing relic instead split into three: the original European sealing industry with headquarters in Bergen; the pro-sealing industry subsidized by the Canadian taxpayer; and the anti-sealing industry dominated by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW).

Two events may have sparked this turn: in the 1960s, a languishing



BRIAN ATKINSON

Welsh immigrant living in Fredericton viewed a Quebec documentary film containing seal-killing scenes and was shocked into founding, in 1969, what was to become IFAW; and, in 1972, a former fish-plant owner replaced Smallwood as Newfoundland premier and surveyed the social and economic chaos resulting from Smallwood's great industrial dreams.

Brian Davies came to Canada in 1955 and, as an indigent college dropout, joined the Canadian military and achieved the rank of lance-corporal. He settled in Fredericton and did student teaching and volunteer work for the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. One summer evening in 1967, Davies saw a film on CBC television that showed scenic and old-fashioned activities from remote corners of Quebec — outdoor bread ovens, horse and wagon haymaking, and some brief scenes of seal hunting on Îles de la Madeleine in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Reports of these "picturesque" scenes of three-week-old whitecoat seals being clubbed to death in a slurry of blood and ice prompted a

public outcry in Canada, the United States and Europe. Davies took a trip to the ice to see for himself and found his new mission in life.

In 1972, Smallwood's grip on Newfoundland was finally broken by Frank Moores, a federal MP before becoming leader of the provincial Progressive Conservative Party. Moores' answer to the failure of Smallwood's modernization drive was to reverse directions. What was old was good again. It was time to turn back to the future.

The course was never sharply defined but phrases such as "our precious heritage," "our fine old traditions," and, especially, a return to the fishery as "the backbone of this province" were well drummed home. Even the seal hunt was rediscovered by Moores' administration.

By this time, Davies' fledgling organization had tapped into a reservoir of international animal-rights supporters which, by his own account, astonished and inspired him to radical and reckless publicity tactics. In Europe, Atlantic Canadians were portrayed by IFAW and the press as bloody barbarians. The

**Pelts and carcasses abandoned by sealers (ABOVE) draw press photographers in for a close-up. The journalists, accompanied by IFAW's Canadian director, Rick Smith (at left), by law must remain at least 25 metres away from working sealers. A helicopter pilot (ABOVE LEFT) gives safety instructions to journalists and scientists before they board a Newfoundland government chopper bound to view seal herds in the Strait of Belle Isle.**

A subsidy for seal meat products was introduced in 1995. The 1999 federal meat subsidy was capped at \$250,000. All direct subsidies to the industry will be eliminated this year.

The cod versus seal debate rages on. Since the 1992 cod moratorium was imposed, there have been only modest gains in the status of most groundfish, while the harp seal population appears to have increased dramatically. Some argue that since seals eat fish, including cod, and since there are many seals and not many cod, then



FRED BRUBAKER

predation by seals is preventing recovery of cod stocks. A further argument is that the large number of seals compared to cod is a symptom of an out-of-balance ecosystem and that failure to act risks extinction of cod stocks.

The Fisheries Resource Conservation Council reported in 1999 that seals kill more cod from Canadian stocks north of Halifax than any other factor. It advocated reducing herds up to 50 percent in areas where cod stocks are scarce.

Others believe cod make up only a small part of the harp seal's diet. According to DFO, harp seals in Canadian waters consume an estimated three million tonnes of food a year: 1.1 million tonnes of capelin, 600,000 tonnes of arctic cod, 340,000 tonnes of flatfish, 150,000 tonnes of Atlantic cod, and other fish. Adult harp seals consume one to 1.4 tonnes of food a year.

## SEALING BY THE YEARS

**2000 BC** Archaic Indians on Newfoundland's Northern Peninsula hunt seals on the sea ice.

**Early 16th century** Basques, French, Portuguese and British begin sealing for oil and pelts off Atlantic Canada. Early settlers, like today's descendants, hunt seals for income in the fishing off-season.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA/PA-121934

**1914:** in the company of danger on icy killing fields.

**1750s** European demand for oil and skins expands the commercial seal fishery. Oil is used as fuel for lamps, as lubricating and cooking oil, in the processing of leather and jute, and as a constituent in soap.

**1818** Beginning of the golden age of sealing as sailing schooners take men to hunt on the whelping grounds. As a record 200,000 seals are landed, the industry grows, bringing foreign investment and work for shipbuilders, carpenters and processors.

**1863** Larger, steam-powered vessels with thick sides — called wooden walls — are introduced, raising the



COURTESY OF CARL VINCENT

**1880:** harp seal featured on stamp.

stakes in the sealing industry. As the expense of acquiring and operating steamers leads to domination of the industry by

wealthy boat owners, employment conditions deteriorate for the men on the ice: they are underfed and given little or no warm clothing or safety gear. Since 1800, some 1,000 men have perished and 400 vessels have been lost,



CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES, MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

**1920s:** St. John's skimmers face replacement by machines.

crushed by ice or sunk en route to and from the killing grounds.

**1899** The century ends with a recorded kill of 33 million seals, primarily whitecoats, the newborn harp seals.

**1914** Seventy-eight sealers die stranded on the ice in the Great Newfoundland Sealing Disaster, while another 173 men are lost at sea with the SS *Southern Cross*. Despite the dangers, legions of men still go "o'er the side" and march across the ice in search of seals for badly needed extra income.

**1921** Aircraft are first used to locate the depleted seal herds. Contemporary critics argue this will ensure the seal's annihilation.

**Late 1920s** Machinery replaces skimmers who remove fat from skin after pelts are landed. In a 10-hour workday, these craftsmen could skin out about 450 young harp pelts.

**1933** The SS *Imogene* lands some 56,000 seals, the biggest single-voyage catch.

**1949-1961** After declining during the Depression and the world wars (when sealing ships were pressed into wartime service), the hunt becomes profitable again, primarily due to demand for fur and leather products. An average of 310,000 seals are taken annually off the East Coast.



NATIONAL AVIATION MUSEUM/IZ85

**1920s:** Avro used in seal hunt.

**1950s** Humane society observers first go to the hunting grounds and express concerns about the cruelty involved in the killing.



SS IMOGENE LEAVING FOR THE ICEFIELDS BY DAVID BLACKWOOD, 1973

**1933:** SS *Imogene* steams from St. John's to hunting grounds.

**1950-1970** The northwest Atlantic harp seal population declines by 50 percent.

**1964** The anti-sealing movement is born and the issue of cruelty to the animals explodes internationally when CBC-TV's French network airs *Les Phoques de la Banquise*, with footage from Îles de la Madeleine, Que., in which a seal is skinned alive. Debate continues as to whether some of the scenes were staged.

**1965** Spurred by public outrage, the government implements the Seal Protection Regulations, setting annual quotas, dates of the hunt, controls on the methods of killing, and requiring, for the first time, that vessels, aircraft and sealers be licensed.

**1969** The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), dedicated to ending the commercial exploitation of seals, is established by Brian Davies in New Brunswick. In four years, IFAW's global revenue exceeds \$500,000.

**1974** IFAW hires the same New York advertising firm used by Coca-Cola to coordinate the \$100,000 "Stop the Seal Hunt" campaign.

**1977** Celebrity protest of the hunt takes off as French actress Brigitte Bardot visits the ice in Newfoundland, stirring up anti-sealing sentiment in the French media. As international opposition intensifies, the Newfoundland government launches a global campaign in defence of the hunt.

**1979** Activists are arrested for spraying red dye on more than 200 whitecoats on the ice in Canadian waters.



WAYNE LYNCH

**Late 1980s:** eco-tourist face to face with a whitecoat harp seal.

**1983** European Community, which had been importing close to 75 percent of Canadian seal pelts, bans products

derived from whitecoats. Seal-skin market collapses. Pressure from IFAW and the public leads 570 Tesco and Safeway grocery stores in Britain to phase out all Canadian fish products in protest of the seal hunt.

**1987** The commercial hunt for whitecoats is banned by the federal government.

**Late 1980s** IFAW launches seal-watching eco-tours in Îles de la Madeleine, Que., as an economic alternative to the hunt. It now adds \$1 million a year to the islands' economy.

**1992** The northern cod fishery moratorium begins.

**1995** A subsidy for seal meat products is introduced to assist in developing markets. All direct subsidies to the sealing industry are to be eliminated after 1999.

**1999** 244,552 harp seals are killed in the spring hunt. Only modest gains are made in the status of the cod stocks. Newfoundland fisheries minister John Efford argues harp seals are ravaging the cod stocks. In its 30th year, IFAW has a record 1.8 million members and annual revenues over

\$60 million (U.S.). Protests against the hunt continue.

**December 1999** Sealers await announcement of 2000 quota.



WAYNE LYNCH

**1983:** whitecoat products are banned in Europe.



ADRIAN WYLD/CP PICTURE ARCHIVE

**1998:** protesters at Liberal Party convention in Ottawa.

Seal products today include pelts, oil and meat. The average price paid for a pelt is \$25 and they account for more than half the processed product value. Seal oil is the second-most valuable product. Sales are expected to grow with increased marketing of seal oil capsules containing Omega-3 fatty acids, believed to help reduce blood cholesterol levels. The Newfoundland government says such new products, including protein concentrates and pepperoni and salami, could increase the industry's worth to \$100 million in the next two to three years.



GREG LOCKE

Fears about the future of communities on the Newfoundland coast are addressed in a 1999 report of the federal Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans: "There is a very genuine fear among coastal communities in Newfoundland and Labrador that the expansion of the harp seal threatens the recovery of cod and other groundfish stocks and thus any prospect of a return to fishing as an economic activity. This, in turn, undermines the viability of coastal communities. Without the prospect of work, the youth have no option but to leave and seek employment elsewhere. Without young people to carry the tradition, the communities will die out and a way of life will disappear."



IFAW

whitecoat, with its wide lustrous eyes and fluffy white fur, became an animal-rights symbol. Its "murderers" were thoroughly demonized. Moores, in turn, dipped into a reservoir of insular chauvinism. For most of the 1970s, it became us against them, a political tactic well-proven by Smallwood to be a useful diversion when the provincial treasury grew low.

A ritual from half a century before was resurrected in which the province's religious leaders proceeded to the St. John's waterfront in early March for the Blessing of the Sealing Fleet. When that died out again after a few years, Moores' main promotional tactic was to collect members of the local press and selected cabinet ministers and fly off in a government jet to lobby in Frankfurt, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and all points between.

Bob Wakeham, now a regional CBC executive producer, went on two of those jaunts and says this official Newfoundland pro-sealing campaign was notable for its well-liquored bonhomie. He also admits that reports back home invariably told of "the team's tremendous reception in Munich ... Cincinnati ... Birmingham yesterday."

**I**N CHARLOTTETOWN last March for its annual presentation of sealing barbarities to the international press, IFAW has booked me a room in a Great George Street hotel where a bedside pamphlet

Protests in Europe peaked in the early 1980s, due in large part to IFAW's anti-sealing campaign. Demonstrators in London's Trafalgar Square (ABOVE) demanded — and got — a ban of products made from newborn seals.

suggests the place was a knocking shop for the assembled and bibulous Fathers of Confederation.

I head off immediately to a small conference room at the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) building where Rick Smith, IFAW's Canadian director, and a group of IFAW officers are, by turns, bantering and blustering with some DFO official at the other end of the speaker phone. It is a long wrangle over the minutiae of federal regulations and IFAW's seal watch: how many per helicopter, exactly where, exactly when, exactly how...

This is the intense, week-long highlight of the group's Canadian activities. I sense a strange mixture of zeal and mischief, and more than a small dash of overall paranoia. The IFAW contingent is mostly under 30 and gender-balanced.

Smith, tall and with a slightly sardonic air as well as a doctorate in marine biology, receives the personal message John Efford has given me for him: that Smith's Newfoundland granny is turning in her grave "like a whirling dervish" because of his anti-sealing gambits. Smith replies that Efford's turn to spin in his grave will come, at which time a spinning Efford



BRIAN ATKINSON

might be harnessed for electricity.

Next evening, there's a briefing at the hotel for a fresh load of international press. Many of them are nodding with jet lag as marine mammal biologist David Lavigne finishes his slide show demonstrating how restoring the North Atlantic cod involves many complexities, the diet of seals being but a small part.

It is hard to tell who is really press and who is not. Someone introduced as a British TV cameraman turns out to be under contract to shoot the hunt for IFAW; a purported Dutch journalist is actually a writer for IFAW in Holland. But Helmut of *Die Welt* seems legitimate, as does James of *The Scotsman*.

"Isn't sealing the main economic activity of this part of Canada?" Helmut asks.

"About the same as cuckoo clocks are the main economic activity of Germany," I answer.

"Ah, but cuckoo clocks bring joy and happiness into the world, don't they?" says Smith, hovering.

I ask James of *The Scotsman* if he had spoken at all to the other side.

"What 'other side' do you mean?" "The government of Canada," I say. "Facts, scientific facts, have no sides and we have them all here," Smith adds.

**I**N 1983, the European Community banned products derived from seal pups. In Trafalgar Square, a huge animated figure of a brutish sealer repeatedly clubbed an ersatz whitecoat while dozens of IFAW supporters in fuzzy white seal suits squirmed and keened on the pavement. British supermarket chains Tesco and Safeway swept Canadian fish products from their shelves.

The threat to Canada's \$1.5-billion fish exports sent Ottawa into a tizzy. DFO, backed by members of Parliament from the Atlantic Provinces, was at loggerheads with the departments of trade and commerce and foreign affairs. Regulations were introduced to make the seal hunt more humane, but also to keep protesters and the press well away from scenes of blood on the ice.

In 1987, it became illegal to kill whitecoats, the newborn harp seals. This had some propaganda benefit,

The back-breaking toil of sealing is enjoyed by none yet forced by economic hardship. Sealers today do their grisly work under the gaze of fisheries officers, anti-sealing activists, journalists and politicians.

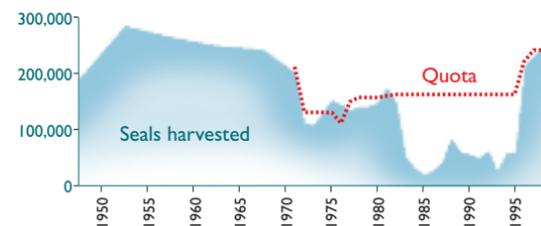
but it merely gave the young seals another week or so of life. Within three weeks, the pup sheds its white coat and is then fair game for sealers. By this time, Norway had voluntarily pulled its large ice-breaking sealing ships from the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the seal hunt was being conducted from shore or from smaller Canadian fishing boats, with the Canadian Coast Guard breaking paths through the ice. A depot was set up at Dildo on Trinity Bay to collect and process pelts in abandoned buildings where, years before, Smallwood had established a plant to turn whales into mink food.

The back-to-the-future policies of Frank Moores and his successors eventually contributed to the overfishing and collapse of the North Atlantic cod fishery. Offshore gas and oil, Voisey's Bay nickel (CG Sept/Oct

1995) and Labrador hydro (CG Nov/Dec 1998) are the current concerns of the Liberal administration.

Some 20,000 people have left the province since 1996. Newfoundland's population of 540,000 will fall by a further four percent by 2003, according to Statistics Canada. Forty thousand Atlantic fish workers have become jobless since the collapse of the cod fishery. In Newfoundland, the same whales and icebergs that used to be a menace to fishing nets are now the province's top tourist draw. And the value of tourism to the province — more than \$500 million annually — far exceeds the value of the seal hunt, which itself is hard to pin down.

### Historical harp seal landings



**New quota management in the 1970s, public opinion in the 1980s, and market conditions in the 1990s caused shifts in quotas and landings, and fluctuating returns for sealers at outports such as Twillingate, Nfld. (RIGHT).**

Canadian government figures say the recent annual processed value of the seal industry is \$12 million. IFAW says the net value to Canada is \$2 million, after accounting for federal and provincial subsidies. According to the Canadian Sealers Association, the value of the industry in 1999 was \$25 million. Ottawa has announced it will drop all direct subsidies to the sealing industry this year, including funding of the Canadian Sealers Association, although other costs, such as patrolling the hunt and enforcing regulations, will still be borne by taxpayers.

Ottawa sets the total allowable catch each year according to science, the market or perceived world opinion. In 1999, it was 275,000 seals. Anti-hunt observers say the actual number killed in Canadian waters may be many times greater, if fatally injured seals left behind or unreported kills are counted.

**C**ANADA'S record of marine management, including the seal kill, has been roundly condemned in several books. Cutting closest to the quick is *Over The Side, Mickey* by Newfoundland sealer Michael Dwyer. In his account of a 1997 trip to the ice off Newfoundland in a longliner with a crew of eight, Dwyer mercilessly describes the miseries and hardships of the sealers and the brutal and sickening business of killing:

The sculpting of a seal takes an experienced sealer about two minutes. It involves nearly one hundred precise cuts, slashes, gashes, slits, slices, splits and hacks. It involves bending over and straightening up six times. It involves three shifts around the profusely bleeding body.... It involves placing one's face into the cloud of pungent, warm steam that rises from the blood-dripping conglomerate of entrails that ... could weigh sixty repulsive pounds.... It involves grabbing the black, warm, twitching carcass, lifting it and tossing it down in the swath. It is, in every sense of the word, bloody, backbreaking, repulsive, revolting, gory work in the "beast" of times... before dawn and after dark, for sometimes less than \$12 a day....

The book had an impact on many, coming as it did from one of the "working class," but not on Efford, who pronounced it "a load of whining crap."

This condemnation by a fish merchant consistently revealed through statement-of-assets regulations to be the wealthiest member of the province's House of Assembly, and the personal experience of Dwyer, one of Newfoundland's seasonal workers, underscores the two opposites of public opinion in the province today.

Efford claims seals prevent a comeback of the cod fishery in the North Atlantic and that this is responsible for the swelling exodus of young Newfoundlanders from coastal towns and villages.

On May 4, 1998, in the provincial House of Assembly, Efford declared: "I would like to see the six million seals or whatever number is out there, killed

and sold, or destroyed or burned. I do not care what happens to them.... The more they kill the better I will love it."

Efford's extravagant demonization of seals has been editorially chastised in the Newfoundland press, rebuffed by marine biologists, abhorred by many sealers, and bemoaned by the Canadian Sealers Association. Most tellingly, his extreme attitude has had little public support from Premier Brian Tobin.

"John Efford has been giving us a lot of headaches lately," says Tina Fagan, executive director of the Canadian Sealers Association. Fagan says the minister's insistence that seals be exterminated contradicts the association's policy that there must first be a market for "every part of every seal killed." The association promotes items such as seal salami, protein powder and seal-oil capsules to a slowly growing market.

The seal population and its impact on cod has been analyzed to death by, among others, the Fisheries Resource Conservation Council (FRCC), which advises the federal fisheries minister on quotas and other Atlantic marine matters. The council, chaired by fish-plant owner Fred Woodman and including fishermen, sealers, scientists and politicians, reports on environmental and ecological matters despite the strains of inadequate science and strenuous politicking.

The failure of the FRCC to endorse his seal-extermination policy in 1998 enraged Efford, who said: "I was never so betrayed in my life ... it cut the legs right out from under me. I thought all I had to do was to convince [then federal fisheries minister] David Anderson not to be afraid of IFAW and Greenpeace ... but my backup has let me down."

In May 1999, the FRCC changed its mind and recommended culling the seal population by up to 50 percent in specific waters where fish are scarce and using the reductions as a basis for scientific study. "Seals are indisputably a key factor in reducing the recruitment of cod to the fishery," the council said.

Reactions were predictable. IFAW's Smith said "if the ramifications of such short-sighted recommendations weren't so tragic, this would all be laughable." Anderson said he would decide



GREG LOCKE; CHART: STEVEN FICK/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC; SOURCE: FISHERIES AND OCEANS CANADA

whether to allow a cull once several studies on the seal hunt are finished. Efford said Anderson had no choice but to act on the council's recommendation. "If he sidesteps that responsibility, he has no right to be minister of fisheries and oceans for Canada," Efford said. The federal Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans recommended the status quo. Anderson's successor, Herb Dhaliwal, MP from Vancouver South-Burnaby, sided with the standing committee.

Contrary to all of this is a study released in November saying the Northwest Atlantic harp seal population is likely in decline. Conducted by scientists (including IFAW's advisor Lav-

see it as a choreographed event, with IFAW's helicopters carrying celebrities and foreign press, wafting forward and backward above the bloody ice in a minuet with Coast Guard helicopters carrying DFO staff and RCMP officers. Each year brings charges and counter-charges springing from clashes between sealers and foreign reporters on the ice.

**W**EARING orange rubber survival suits, we debouch from the IFAW chopper onto the ice somewhere between the north shore of Prince Edward Island and Îles de la Madeleine. It is a warm day for late March, well above freezing, and under a blazing sun you can imagine a low

## On this bright day, at least, killing seals looks as challenging as stomping snails on a garden path

igne) from the International Marine Mammal Association in Guelph, Ont., the study concludes that the total of landed catches, seals killed but not recovered, and seals caught incidentally in commercial fisheries exceeds what the population can sustain.

**I**FAW's worldwide activities range widely, from protesting commercial exploitation and trade of wild animals (seals fit here) to rescuing animals in distress and protecting wild spaces. In Canada, for example, IFAW has lobbied for new endangered species legislation and opposed the spring bear hunt in Ontario. Its international war chest and roster peaked in 1998 with \$62.3 million (U.S.) in revenue and 1.8 million members. It spent \$500,000 on its 1999 seal-watch campaign, for which Canadian notables such as Margot Kidder, Norman Jewison, Cynthia Dale, William Shatner, Michael Ondaatje, Farley Mowat, Timothy Findley and Clayton Ruby signed a public anti-sealing petition. The year before, IFAW's campaign had focused on the sale of seal penises as an aphrodisiac.

Each year at the whelping grounds, the duelling continues. Reporters who have covered the story for three decades

hum of ultraviolet radiation reflecting off the endless ice.

In sight are a Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker, a trawler-size sealing vessel, half a dozen snowmobiles, five helicopters hovering or landed on the ice, a small plane on patrol higher up, and seals and sealers.

Sound over ice is clear at a remarkable distance and a three-metre elevation atop an ice chunk provides a great panorama over the white, flat frozen sea. A heavy smell permeates the sparkling air, a mix of raw meat and fish oil overlaid by the stink of gas and diesel exhaust. "Yes, Ray, that is the dreadful smell of the slaughter of the innocent," Smith says.

Smith and others carry electronic rangefinders, monocular instruments with neck straps, to keep their party at least 25 meters away from working sealers, as the federal regulations require.

From the top of the hummock, I watch as IFAW's guides usher the visiting press closer to where some sealers are at their gory work. The British tabloid photographers, lugging lenses of the kind seen at football games and moon shots, need no encouragement. I clearly hear and see one of them ask a sealer to put one foot on a dead seal, "sort of

like Tarzan, that's right" and to take off his gloves and "sort of bloody your hands a little bit, would you?" At that, the sealer turns and walks quickly away.

From my prudent perch, I hear the soft, melon-smashing thumps of the bats as the sealers give the young harps the regulation one-two killing blows.

Several seals hump slowly past me and I have the fanciful notion of warning the poor brutes telepathically: "Duck down that hole in the ice, you fool, and be quick about it." None do.

I wonder why they call it a seal hunt. On this bright day, at least, a few kilometres from the neat farms and elephantine beach houses on the P.E.I. shore, killing seals looks as challenging as stomping snails on a garden path. In the past, in a time of wooden ships and before airplanes and radar and radio, the frozen corpses of men, caught on the ice by a sudden turn of weather, had often been returned by the score to the St. John's waterfront. Or never found.

I also wonder why the seal wars will not end, why no reasonable solution is in sight. Do the helicopters signal, more than anything else, entrenched interests? IFAW's seal campaign is critical to its image, if no longer to its business success. What will it take for them to stop protesting? Efford's heavy-duty rhetoric serves to keep outport economic development on the public agenda. But what else, besides bluster, can be done to improve the lot of outport dwellers?

The action at ice level takes on the movement of a formal three-hour dance. The orange-suited photographers and reporters are ushered closer to the sealers until one of the sealers advances to meet them. There is some discussion between Smith and the sealers' spokesman and the orange suits are pulled back, only to be slowly nudged forward again and again. Time and again, the strange gavotte is repeated. Finally, there is a toot from the sealing boat, the sealers congregate and scramble on board, and the ship moves away through a channel in the ice. The seal-hunt observers scramble back aboard IFAW helicopters and off the choppers waft in pursuit, flying low over the red ice. ♦

*Ray Guy is a writer living in St. John's.*