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OPINION

An Enviro's Case for Seal Hunt

Opponents prefer sentiment to sustainability.

By [Terry Glavin](#), 7 Mar 2007, [TheTyee.ca](#)

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I saw something the other day that made me sick to my stomach. It was in the February edition of *The Grocer*, a British retail-food magazine.

There was an article about a campaign that a group called Respect for Animals is waging to convince consumers to boycott Canadian seafood products. The magazine also carried two huge advertisements from the same outfit.

One of the ads consisted of a photograph of a masked man on an ice floe, and a seal lying prone at his feet. The man was brandishing a club with a spike on the end of it. The words *You Can Stop This* were superimposed upon the picture. The other advertisement proclaimed "Boycott Canadian Seafood & Save the Seals," with a picture of a can of Canadian salmon.

The Canadian fishing industry exports more than \$100 million worth of products into Britain every year. The point of the campaign is to squeeze those sales until the industry begs our government to end the seal hunt.

Here's what makes me sick.

The Newfoundland seal hunt is transparently and demonstrably sustainable and humane. There are roughly half a million people in Newfoundland and Labrador, and nearly six million harp seals, which is almost three times as many seals as when I was a kid.



Free range seals

Roughly 6,000 fishermen, mostly Newfoundlanders, but some are from Quebec and the Maritimes, take slightly more than 300,000 harp seals annually. The fishermen share more than \$16 million from the hunt at a critical time of year when there's little in the way of fishing income to be had. The seals are harvested for their pelts and their fat, for a range of products, mostly for clothing and for Omega-3 vitamins.

The killing is as about as clean as anything you're likely to find in an abattoir. Seals don't spend their lives cooped up in

paddocks or feedlots. They live free, and in all but the rarest cases, the ones that die at the hands of a swiler (a sealer) die instantly. The hakapik (a spiked club) is an effective instrument.

Even so, most seals are first shot with rifles. The killing of nursing whitecoats was banned 20 years ago.

Exploiting empathy



Here's one of those obligatory disclosures: over the years, several environmental organizations -- the Sierra Club, the David Suzuki Foundation, Greenpeace, etc. -- have subsidized my preoccupation with things that move in the water by having me do research projects for them and so on. With that out of the way, I can now say, if it isn't obvious already, that it's the seal hunt's opponents who turn my stomach.

It's not just that anti-hunt crusades like this are especially foul in the way they dishonestly misrepresent facts. It's also that they dishonestly manipulate one of the most redeeming traits the human species has inherited from hundreds of thousands of years of natural selection and cultural evolution -- our capacity to expand the embrace of our empathy to include other forms of life.

But far worse than all that, boycott campaigns like this muddy the important distinction between sustainability and sentiment, and between broadly co-ordinated acts of social responsibility and mere lifestyle choices. When we fail to make these distinctions we undermine everything worthwhile that environmentalism has accomplished since it emerged in the early 1970s.

As citizens and consumers in free societies, we are burdened with the duty to make important decisions at the ballot box, in the work we do, and also in the marketplace. Boycotting Canadian seafood to try and stop the seal hunt is the consumer-choice equivalent of deciding to buy a tie-died shirt, move into a Volkswagen van and subsist solely on lentils and tofu.

Serious stakes

Just as the excesses of postmodernist relativism have enfeebled the left over the past quarter-century or so, a corrosive strain of fact-distorting, science-hating, Gaia-bothering obscurantism has enfeebled environmentalism.

It was there from the beginning, and it persists most noticeably in animal-rights crusades. It is the environmentalist equivalent of anti-evolution, rapture-seeking Christian zealotry. It has to be attacked wherever it rears its head. There's too much at stake to pretend we can be innocent bystanders here. This is a fight we all have to join.

Here's why.

The last time the planet was in the throes of an extinction spasm this cataclysmic was when the dinosaurs disappeared 65 million years ago. One in every four mammal species, one in eight bird species, one in nine plants, a third of all amphibians and half of all the surveyed fish species on earth are threatened with extinction.

When Greenpeace was born in Vancouver in 1971, the single greatest cause of species extinction was understood to be habitat loss. Now, the greatest threat to biological diversity is global warming. The last time the atmosphere was accumulating greenhouse gases this fast was 650,000 years ago. The prospects look exceedingly grim -- broad-scale ecological disruption, crop failure and famine, desertification and the mass dislocation of some of the most heavily-populated regions of the world.

A key reason environmentalists found themselves so ill-prepared to convince the world to take global warming seriously was that their movement had been corrupted by precisely the same

trippy sentiment-mongering that has animated the holy war against the Newfoundland seal hunt, which now turns its sights on Canadian fisheries products.

Where was Greenpeace?

When the founders of Greenpeace were being born, back in the 1950s, the world's fishing fleets were taking roughly 40 million tonnes of marine biomass from the world's oceans every year. By the 1980s, it was 80 million tonnes. Then the seas just stopped giving. Fully 90 per cent of all the big fish in the sea -- the tunas, the marlins, the sharks, the swordfish -- are now gone.

Of the many fisheries collapses that have occurred around the world in recent years, it is sadly ironic that the greatest single collapse occurred in the seas around Newfoundland, where the bulk of Canada's Atlantic seal hunt takes place. The Grand Banks cod fishery was the largest and oldest pelagic fishery in the history of the human experience.

The cod were mined from the sea by the same big-boat offshore fleets that had caused such devastation everywhere else. A way of life disappeared, and by the early 1990s, tens of thousands of workers were reduced to welfare. While all this was happening, what were environmentalists doing on the Newfoundland coast, in the country where Greenpeace was born, at a time when Greenpeace was at the height of its powers?

They were out cavorting with rich hippies and snuggling up to harp seal pups on the ice floes. They were meditating cross-legged in the snow and posing for the television cameras and demonizing the good people of Newfoundland, while the seas around them were being emptied of cod.

Rational agreements

When you go looking for the good that environmentalism has accomplished, you'll find it in such covenants as the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, the Montreal Protocol on ozone-depleting substances, and the Kyoto Accord. It's in the sustainability provisions of elaborately negotiated efforts such as the Brundtland Commission on the Environment and Development, and the UN Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing.

The toughest global instrument to protect biodiversity is the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species. Fuzzy eco-drivel has already severely damaged CITES by forcing non-threatened species, such as North Atlantic minke whale, onto the CITES appendices. Now, in Germany and Belgium, animal-rights activists and their friends in the European Parliament are attempting to override CITES, and the European Union's own rules, with an outright ban on products from Canada's perfectly abundant harp seal population.

Similarly, seal-hunt opponents are dangerously undermining the historic victory that flowed from the Brundtland Commission. The commission established a commitment to sustainability as the key universal value to guide natural-resource harvesting policies for all the peoples of the world, regardless of their distinct cultural practices and sensibilities.

The whole point of sustainability is to ensure that people can exercise the rights and accept the responsibilities that come with sustainably harvesting the natural resources of the ecosystems within which they live. The harp seal hunt is a living embodiment of that principle. That's why

environmentalists should not just give the boycott a pass, or stay neutral, but should actively support and defend the seal hunt.

The one consolation we can take from the recent hullabaloo is that it's faltering. Last year, when animal-rightists in the United States boasted that they'd convinced more than 200 restaurants and seafood retailers to boycott Canadian products to protest the hunt, it turned out that only a small minority were doing so. Most of them didn't even know they'd been listed as boycott-compliant.

Also, the European Commission, citing the absence of evidence to support contentions that the hunt is inhumane, has refused, for now, to enforce the European Parliament's proposed ban on seal products.

Contested Council

But the consumer boycott campaign that's just begun in Britain is particularly insidious. Its aim is all Canadian fisheries products, and its targets are Tesco, Sainsbury's, Somerfield and other major retail chains that have already made a commitment to eventually carrying only those seafood products that have been certified by the [*Marine Stewardship Council*](#).

The MSC standard remains hotly contested by responsible environmentalists, but its coveted "eco-label" holds out the hope of forcing improvements to fisheries-management policies around the world. In Canada, those improvements are increasingly driven by the fishermen themselves, because they want the MSC label on their product.

British Columbia's halibut fishery was turned down once, and has since re-applied, because groundfish management has significantly improved -- thanks in no small part to halibut fishermen. Other fishermen are now lobbying federal fisheries officials to improve stock-assessment research to give B.C.'s dogfish fishery a shot at the MSC label. British Columbia's sockeye salmon fisheries have just undergone an arduous certification examination, and a decision is imminent.

If the cuddliness of a particular species harvested in a particular country is allowed to become the factor that determines whether that country's products are considered environmentally acceptable, then everything we won at CITES and in the Brundtland Commission is lost. If those are the kinds of choices we present to everyone from major retailers down to ordinary seafood consumers, then we'll have wasted all our efforts to marshal consumer power to force the sustainable use of the oceans.

It's long past time for conservationists to make a clean, clear, open and unequivocal break with crystal-gazing animal-rights eccentrics and all their camp followers. For them, the conservation of wild resources was always just a flag of convenience. They're dead ballast, so over the side with them.

On the question of the Atlantic harp seal harvest, there's only one defensible and honest position for a conservation-minded citizen to take.

Support the swilers.

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Terry Glavin's most recent book is *Waiting for the Macaws and Other Stories from the Age of Extinctions* (Penguin). His column for The Tyee, *Dissent*, appears twice monthly. You can find previous ones [here](#).

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