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## A Vegetarian's Defence of The Seal Hunt

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Normally I am a fan of Bill Maher. For an American he seems to have an unusual amount of common sense, awareness of the world and he isn't afraid to call out any side in a debate if they stray into the territory of the absurd. Given all of that, I was a little surprised and saddened to learn that he had [taken on the seal hunt](#) as a pet cause.

First, his position smacks of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). Maher probably isn't aware of this but, in most of Canada PETA has a reputation rivaled only by the [Westboro Baptist Church](#).

Some don't like PETA for their [blatant](#) and [repeated racism](#). Other people dislike them for their [attacks on people](#) who are overweight, their patriarchal celebration of thin, nude, [often abused women](#) and the implication that meat is somehow the difference between the two.

Still others were offended by the singer Morrissey's comparison of [dead children in Norway to fried chicken](#). That statement from PETA's "[U.K. Person of the Year](#)" tied in nicely with PETA's advertising following the [murder of Tim McLean in 2008](#). As an aside, it is perhaps not entirely coincidental that the Westboro Baptist Church also had an [opinion on McLean's murder](#).

Personally I do not even consider PETA a credible organization. They claim to be supporters of animal rights, but they do not get involved in issues around disappearing habitat, or protection of endangered species. They do not even seem interested in the thousands of animals euthanized at animal shelters daily. What I see is an organization that shows pictures of cute animals to wealthy, gullible young people and rakes in donations. I have been a vegetarian since 1991 but, thanks to PETA's influence, I now tell people that I don't eat meat, except for seal.

All of that though is about the organization, not the issue. On the issue of the seal hunt, Maher is simply ignorant. Seals are hunted for food, fur, fat and bone in parts of the world where very little agriculture is possible and where very few things live. They have been a part of the Inuit diet for thousands of years, at a minimum. The people who hunt seal "commercially" primarily in Labrador also have a long history with the seal. Most of the individuals involved come from families that have been hunting seal since the dawn of North American settlement and whose families have earned their living from the sea for [longer](#)

[than that.](#)

In the areas of the world where seals are hunted there are few, perhaps no, viable alternatives. There are limited economic opportunities and few other food sources. Food imported from southern regions, by small planes when weather permits, is [prohibitively expensive](#). With "\$105 cases of water, \$28 heads of cabbage and \$55 boxes of infant formula," a week's groceries might cost as much as a seal skin coat.

Maher said in his [letter to Bob Rae](#) that:

The fact that seals have been killed for hundreds of years is no excuse for continuing to kill them. For thousands of years, people held slaves and treated women and children like property, but tradition is no justification for cruelty.

I agree with the sentiment, tradition does not justify cruelty, however there is absolutely no basis to make a comparison between the situation Maher describes and the seal hunt. In the case of slavery, there was the option of paying people for their labour. In the case of treating women and children as property there was the option of simply not doing that. For the people who hunt seal there are few viable options short of the government paying them a substantial salary to not hunt seal. Maher's comparison of the seal hunt to slavery is simply another example of the kind of over-the-top, ignorant rhetoric that has caused PETA to be vilified, even among many vegetarians and animal advocates.

The reality is that the seals being hunted are not an endangered species and are not being hunted in numbers that might cause them to become endangered. I find it sad that someone with the profile and obvious intelligence of Maher has chosen this issue to become vocal about. Personally I think America's endless wars, culture of violence, domestic and international human rights record, the shredding of its constitutional protections, its vast disparity of wealth, growing poverty rate and record rates of incarceration seem more worthy of attention.

However, if he wants something to criticize Canada over, the current government's [environmental record](#), the [Alberta tar sands](#) or the deplorable conditions under which many of its [First Nations people live](#) would be a better place to start.

If it is animals that he is concerned about Maher might want to get involved with organizations working to preserve habitat and protect endangered species. He might work to raise funds for shelters and sanctuaries or simply encourage people to spay and neuter their pets. He might even decide to work on global warming, as an issue because it poses a [greater risk to seal populations](#) than hunting does. It is his decision to make, obviously, but choosing the seal hunt as an issue from his home in Los Angeles simply makes him look like another out-of-touch, over privileged and entitled Hollywood celebrity.

I personally have never been to Nunavut, or Labrador. They are not easy places to get to and I would need a good reason to go. However, before I asked the people there to dramatically change their lifestyles, traditions, occupations, incomes and diets I would feel obligated to go, to meet the people and to talk to them about the seal hunt first. I would encourage Bill Maher to do the same.

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