

Unintended Consequence? Traditional Inuit Ring Seal Hunt

Posted on [June 29, 2012](#)

While the intentions of the anti-seal activists are laudable, in at least the case of the Inuit people, the indiscriminate strategy of undermining the market for sealskin has had a profoundly negative impact on the Inuit people who do not really have an option to move to a second income source. This has resulted in an increased loss of income and added to food insecurity for the Inuit people.

Commercial seal hunting has a conflicted reputation. Atlantic coast fishermen hunt harp seals to supply tanneries with skins and pharmaceutical companies with Omega-3 fatty acid-rich blubber. Seals off Namibia are also hunted for commercial purposes and that government emphasizes killing pups to prevent population increase because the government suspects the seals add to the mortality in other fisheries. Unlike the Atlantic coast seals, the seals off Namibia are also a tourist attraction. The tourists bring in approximately \$2 million per year whereas the commercial harvest only brings in about \$500,000.

The conflict is not about excessive harvest, it is about perceived cruelty because the seals are clubbed to death in both countries. Neither the Canadian nor the Namibian governments are ready to ban the commercial seal hunts because in both cases it represents a significant income for some people. Both countries claim to make an effort to prevent cruelty, but that is not easy to accomplish or demonstrate. Activists who oppose the cruelty or oppose hunting in general have opted for an indirect approach to reducing the seal hunt because governments are not responding to their requests to ban the hunt. They embarked on a strategy to undermine the market for sealskin by campaigning to change people's attitudes so that seal skin products are no longer desirable because they are presented as the result of cruel practices. This was very effective as a strategy and many countries now ban the import and sale of sealskin and sometimes related products such as skins of sea lions and walruses. This year a new strategy has emerged; a coordinated boycott of all Canadian fisheries "until the seal hunt is banned."

The target is really the large-scale commercial seal hunts, especially because they are perceived to be cruel and unnecessary because the fur is used for fashion, not utilitarian purposes, while for the most part (although not entirely) the meat is wasted. The presumption by the activists is that the commerce could be replaced by some other activity that would be equally or more lucrative.

In the Namibian case, the replacement of the hunt by an expanded tourist industry is reasonable as a replacement for the loss of revenue. If the Namibian government is correct, some added mortality might result to the fisheries as a result of the greater survival rate of the seals but the studies are so far inconclusive, so that remains a vexed question. The tourist trade in contrast to the seal hunt is stable and growing. The seal hunt is unstable and declining while threatening the tourist trade and attracting intense criticism from activists. It is a logical choice to stop Namibian seal hunting and emphasize seal watching.

In the case of the Atlantic harp seal fishery, a replacement income is not easy to find, although in very recent times, oil income has increased the overall economy of the east coast of Canada. Perhaps a means of retraining could be found for the people who earn part of their income currently from harp seal hunts, but that is not certain. Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that the income could be replaced by some other activity.

[edit: Since the cod collapse in 1992 and until recently seals were thought to be a factor in preventing the recovery of the cod stocks. That remains the prevailing thought, but in very recent time the cod appear to be recovering while seals are at their highest population since the 1800s. Is it significant that cod and seal were both abundant in the same waters before European and local fishery became extensive? Perhaps the relationship is a bit more complex than we earlier thought. Time will tell.]

A special case is found in Canada. The loss of the sealskin market for harp seals spilled over to the ring seals as well. The Inuit people traditionally hunt ring seals (not harp seals) for food to feed their communities. In their traditional approach, the skin is also used for clothing and other purposes. In today's reality, Inuit are not able to earn the same level of income as the average Canadian yet face much higher costs for food and shelter. Until the anti-seal hunt campaign, excess sealskin was sold for much needed income to eke out an often marginal lifestyle. In the words of one Inuit, Lise Tapio Pittja: "I understand that animals must not be tortured or even hurt, and must live free and happy lives. But I would like to invite vegans to take part in a working day at minus 37 degrees, in clothes not made of skins or fur. They would not survive very long." The Inuit ring seal hunt is not conducted with clubs. Instead it is usually a high powered rifle bullet that kills the seal.

Some countries such as the European Union have recognized this distinction. The EU regulations prohibit the import and sale of seals, sea lions and walruses unless they result from traditional hunts conducted by Inuit and other indigenous communities and contribute to their subsistence, are for personal use of travellers and their families and are of a non-commercial quantity, or result from hunts regulated under national law with the sole purpose of sustainable management of marine resources and where the products are marketed on a non-profit basis. The EU ban does not include sealskin products that are obtained by Inuit natives hunting for their livelihood. So it would seem there is a market for ring seal fur acquired as a by-product of normal seal hunting by Inuit people. But the Inuit seal hunters have shown that this exception is meaningless, since the ban has caused the collapse of the seal market in general, and they are now finding it difficult to make a living. This has made worse the food security of the Inuit families who must rely on food imported from the south of Canada at exorbitant prices or augment the food by hunting. In the far north, agriculture is just not possible. Inuit average income fell sharply with the success of the anti-sealing campaign.

In both strategies (market undermining and fishery boycott), a sledge-hammer approach is being used to carry out what should be a surgical operation — that is to remove the cruelty from the hunt. Because of the broad strokes being used to combat the seal hunt, the Inuit are caught unnecessarily in the attack on the commercial seal hunt. The EU ban has effectively destroyed the sealskin market. Very few if any Inuit caught seal pelts are being purchased, for example, at the Fur Harvesters Auction house in North Bay, Ontario. The Inuit people have been dealt some very damaging blows: most Inuit families have been forced by government fiat to give up their semi-nomadic lifestyles and instead live in settlements provided by the government. The provided housing is of poor standards and there are relatively few opportunities to make a living in their "modern" settlements so most Inuit families are living a substandard Canadian lifestyle.

As many as can afford the equipment continue to hunt seals and other animals to supplement their diet and income. But in the face of the anti-seal hunt activist's success in undermining the marketplace for seal skin, a ring seal pelt that previously brought \$100 now is lucky to bring \$15 to \$25. Thus, although the EU provides an exemption, it is effectively meaningless to the Inuit. Food prices in the Canadian Arctic are three or four times higher than in the south, so seal meat is essential to supplement the Inuit diet. Country food is often the only healthy nutrition Inuit families can afford, but without the supplemental income, the Inuit hunter cannot afford to hunt — a kind of cath-22.

The government of Nunavut created the Fur Pricing Program in which the Nunavut government purchases about \$500,000 in seal pelts. It is some income for hunters but much less than they would have received if the seal skin market hadn't collapsed.

Inuit have a difficult time understanding why people in the south want to save an animal while killing a human culture and adding to the burden of an already difficult food situation in which almost 70% of Inuit kids go hungry every night.

One wonders if there is a strategy that could be used to maintain the anti-cruelty campaign, but recover the income for the Inuit.

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4 THOUGHTS ON “UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE? TRADITIONAL INUIT RING SEAL HUNT”



Gil

on [July 3, 2012 at 6:14 pm](#) said:

It is true Inuit have even less other viable option than sealers of the East Coast of Canada. Nonetheless, the options are getting more and more limited. Oil? Definitely not a long term option. Fishery? Yes, but there won't be any left if the seal populations are not controlled. The decline is already drastic. On the Magdalen Islands, in 1991, the fishing fleet caught 21 000 tons of fish. In the last years, less than 1 000 tons.

Tourism? We already have tourism, but nobody will come here to visit if the fishing community is gone.



AlanEmery

on [July 3, 2012 at 8:05 pm](#) said:

Thank you for your observations. I would like to follow up on one of your comments: “but there won't be any [fish] left if the seal populations are not controlled.” I was a fishery biologist in the mid 60's on the east coast when some truly drastic declines were happening. They were mostly caused by fishing mortality. That continued until most fisheries collapsed. Some have been partially rebuilt, but all have had the base ecology eroded. You imply the seals are now the most important mortality factor, not fishery harvest mortality. Can you point to some work to demonstrate that relationship?



Mimi

on [July 3, 2012 at 11:40 pm](#) said:

In the 60s you were looking at overfishing problems however Seal populations were at around 2 million. 2 million seals do not eat nearly the amount of food that the current estimated 9 million seals will eat.

Overfishing may have put us in this fishery collapse but current seal populations prevent it from recovering at the rate it could.

It is widely known that seals eat between 6%-8% of their body weight in fish/seafood per day. How much fish will 10,000 seals eat in a day? Well, if those 10,000 seals weigh 500 pounds each, they would consume 350,000 lbs. of fish per day or 2.45 million pounds of fish per week....



Alan Emery

on [July 4, 2012 at 1:28 am](#) said:

Very interesting comment — thank you. There are in fact research results to support your contention that seals impair cod recovery.

The collapse of the cod fishery in 1992 by massive overfishing meant the fishery shifted to groundfish and other species. It was assumed that with cod fishing severely restricted the populations would rebound. That assumption disregarded the significant damage done to the ecosystem. Since that time grey seal populations on the Scotian Shelf have doubled about every 7 years. Caihong Fu, Robert Mohn, and L. Paul Fanning (Can. J. Fish. Aquat. Sci. Vol. 58, 2001) concluded that increasing seal predation had hindered the recovery of cod up to 2001.

Robert O'Boylea and Michael Sinclair (Fisheries Research Volumes 115–116, March 2012, Pages 1–13) come to a similar conclusion as far as cod recovery is concerned. They conclude: "Model results infer that seals have contributed to increases in natural mortality since the late 1980s, and have contributed to the lack of recovery of the stock since 1993."

They go on to note that there is a recent (last two years) significant recovery of cod in trawl surveys. Noting this recovery, they state: "However, predictions by the functional models are not consistent with estimate of recent increases in abundance of cod in trawl surveys. Present levels of grey seal abundance have not occurred on the Scotian Shelf since at least the 1800s." So while the relationship appeared to be an increased predation by seals, very recent events may prove to be confusing that relationship. It will be fascinating to watch what happens in the next few years. One possible scenario is that the cod will recover and we will find that the apparent seal predation (which was

inferred, not observed) was not the cause of the slow recovery of the cod stocks.