

## Parasite blamed in seals' deaths

Published on May 18, 2012

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**SYDNEY — The deaths of about 400 young grey seals on Hay Island in February is being blamed on a microscopic parasite.**

Topics : [University of Prince Edward Island](#) , [Scatarie Island.Fisheries and Oceans Canada](#) , [Hay Island](#) , [Cape Breton](#)

However, Dr. Pierre-Yves Daoust, a professor of wildlife pathology at the University of Prince Edward Island, says he has not yet been able to identify the parasite.

"It may be a new parasite," he said. "I have pursued that in the past number of weeks, sent specimens here and there and so on.

"It's quite a challenging kind of pathogen to try to identify."

Daoust said until he knows what the parasite is, he would only be speculating about where it comes from, why it appeared in the Hay Island population of seals and whether it may appear again.

Grey seals that whelp on Hay Island won't be back until next year so it's not like studying domestic animals like cows that are around all of the time, he said.

The dead seals were discovered in February by seal-hunt opponents in the Humane Society International/Canada who regularly travel to Hay Island to document and oppose any seal hunts.

Hay Island lies off the eastern coast of Cape Breton near Scatarie Island.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada has estimated that about 2,500 grey seal pups are born on Hay Island each year, said Daoust.

A biologist who travelled to Hay Island said the majority of the dead seals were weaned pups that looked to be in fairly good body condition.

Daoust said necropsies on 10 of the seals showed liver damage, although he suspects the parasite also attacked other organs.

The parasite could have been passed on to the young pups through the placenta of mother animals, he said.

"Why in such large numbers?" Daoust mused. "The bottom line is that it is a very intriguing parasite and that's why some colleagues and I are very interested in pursuing it."

Daoust said he and colleagues may soon take a try at isolating the parasite in a lab situation but he is uncertain about having the right cell cultures.

"I don't know at this stage whether it is something we can do or not. If we can, we certainly will."

When it comes to whether the parasites could pose a health hazard to people eating grey seal meat, Daoust said parasites are part of the life history of many wild animals.

"Whether it be ducks, whether it be bears, whether it be moose, whether it be seals, what do you do? You cook this meat particularly well and then you avoid any potential contamination.

"Having said that, we don't even know with this parasite, again it is speculation, we don't know whether even if you

ate raw seal meat whether it will go into you. “

chayes@cbpost.com