

Canadian seal hunt is humane, study argues

Published on Friday November 09, 2012

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When Robert Courtney smashes a seal in the head with a club, it dies humanely, experts say.

Courtney, a hunter who's participated in the Atlantic seal hunt for 20 years, said when he hits a seal in the head, it quickly dies or becomes unconscious without any pain.

It's an opinion shared by two veterinary science professors who penned a study in June 2012 that concluded, if proper killing methods are followed, the annual Canadian harp seal hunt is humane.

Pierre-Yves Daoust, a professor of anatomic pathology and wildlife pathology at the Atlantic Veterinary College in P.E.I., and Charles Caraguel, a professor of veterinary epidemiology at the University of Adelaide in Australia, joined the hunt for five years to conduct their study.

Their conclusions were quickly met by a counter study — conducted through video observation of the hunt, by Andrew Butterworth, a professor of animal sciences at the Bristol Veterinary School in Britain, and Mary Richardson, a veterinarian in B.C. — that argues the hunt is inhumane.

The killing method, a three-step process recommended in 2005 by the Independent Veterinarian's Working Group and adopted by Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) for the hunt in 2008, is at the heart of the battle.

First, hunters must stun seals by smashing them with a hakapik or club in the head, or by shooting them in the head. Hunters must then check if the seal's skull is crushed, meaning it's dead or unconsciousness. Then, hunters can bleed seals knowing they're feeling no pain.

"We've put thousands of hours into making sure it's done in a humane way," said Courtney, 61, the president of the North of Smokey Fishermen's Association in Nova Scotia.

Courtney, who also hunts deer, moose and ducks, says the seal hunt is the same as any other hunting season.

"You only kill it if you can use it, that's the whole reason," said Courtney. "No matter what we do it'll never be accepted by some people."

Caraguel says the action of smashing a seal in the head elicits strong emotions that cloud people's judgment.

"What is difficult to understand is to remove the emotional part from the scientific part," said Caraguel. "If you turn off the brain, destroy the brain, the animal will not be able to feel any pain."

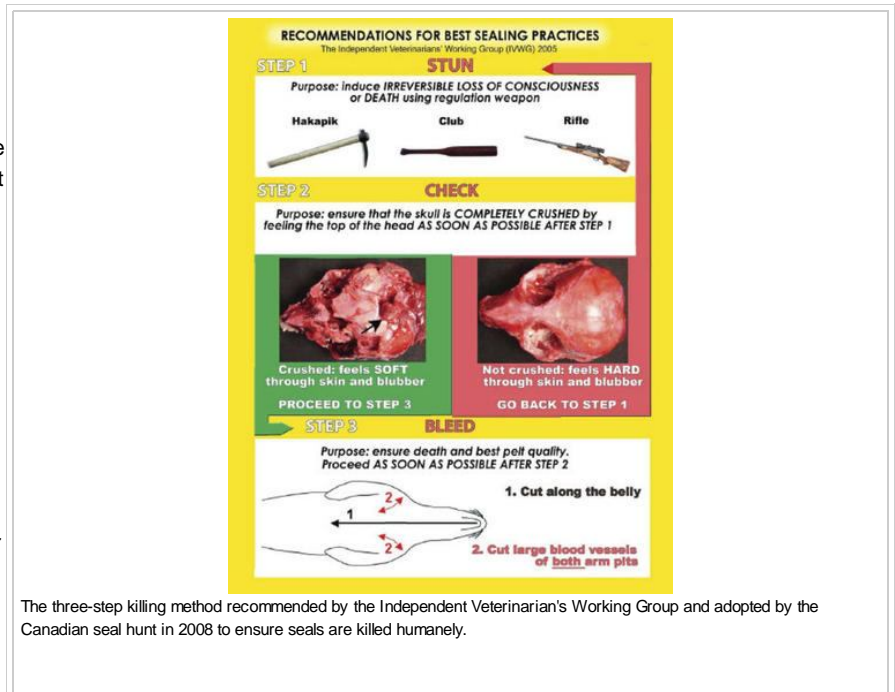
Caraguel said when a hunter strikes a seal's skull, which is very thin, the seal's dead or unconscious within a split second. And usually, hunters deliver a single, fatal blow, he said.

"The majority of the seals are perfectly, humanely killed," said Caraguel, adding there's always human error. "You may have a few of them suffer, unfortunately, due to human error."

Richardson said that's absolutely backwards because she reviewed hours of video footage that showed the majority of seals suffer.

"Humanely means quickly and painlessly," said Richardson. "It's very clear from the footage that hunters keep hitting the seals again and again because they aren't knocked out yet."

Rebecca Aldworth, the executive director of the Human Society International Canada, said Caraguel's findings were tainted.



“Just as you probably won’t speed when passing a cop, you’re more likely to adhere to regulations when you know you’re being observed,” said Aldworth, who supplied some video footage for Richardson’s study.

Aldworth and Richardson argue the speed at which the hunt is conducted prevents the killing method from being used humanely, or consistently

Aldworth said she has seen battered seals crawling through their own blood in agony because hunters scramble to hit other seals before ensuring the first one they hit is unconscious.

“You have one blow in which to knock the seal unconscious otherwise that kill becomes inhumane,” said Aldworth. “That cannot constitute a humane kill by any standard.”

Courtney thinks it’s an injustice to label the hunt inhumane because it misleads the public and crushes the seal industry, his livelihood.

He said his profits from the seal hunt have accounted for 30 per cent of his income in the past, but lately it’s been closer to 5 per cent.

Under pressure from public opinion, the EU has banned Canadian seal products, chipping away at Canadian exports.

Canada’s seal exports have dropped from a high of \$18 million in 2006, to just over \$2 million in 2010, according to the DFO, which is battling the EU ban through the World Trade Organization.

“People that say it’s inhumane should be looking in their own backyards,” said Courtney. “How do they think their chicken or beef is killed?”