

WORTHINGTON

# Culling seal to save cods is nonsense



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A young grey seal. (AFP photo)

It's a predictable response, replete with arrogance, ignorance, rationalization and insensitivity.

Consider: Because the Atlantic cod has declined drastically in numbers and can no longer sustain a once-flourishing fishing industry, a Senate committee wants to cull some 70,000 grey seals "to preserve remaining fish stocks."

This last quote from P.E.I. Sen. Elizabeth Hubley at Fisheries and Oceans committee hearings.

Isn't that a typically human response — blame seals for the demise of the cod and other food fish in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the Grand Banks and North Atlantic?

From the days of the Vikings, a thousand years ago, the cod was the fish that was the staple of Europe. It was so abundant that the supply seemed inexhaustible — like the bison once seemed on the Prairies of North America.

Yet cod fishing in Newfoundland collapsed, and in 1992, Fisheries imposed an indefinite moratorium on cod fishing.

In 2000, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) declared the cod to be an endangered species, whose numbers had dropped by 70% in 30 years. Unless something was done, the cod would be extinct in 15 years.

So what is to be done? The Senate proposal blames seals — both harp seals and grey seals. This is nonsense. In past centuries, there were infinitely more seals in the fishing areas, yet the fish were in seemingly limitless supply.

We all acknowledge that overfishing has caused the demise of cod numbers (and haddock and flounder and hake), but we still prefer to blame seals. Perhaps this is because there is a small profit in killing seals for their pelts — and pretending we are doing it to save the fish!

As if to justify killing seals, there is the proposal that seal oil, with its omega-3 content, should be introduced into the

human diet and thus help prevent heart problems.

The benefits of consuming seal oil may yet appear in future editions of the Canada's Food Guide, published by Health Canada.

The sorry story of the Atlantic cod has been known for years. In 1956 some 1.3 million tons of cod were processed, while in 1990 that total had dropped to 2,700 tons.

Canada, to its credit, went through the motions of trying to cut back on its fishing (while still blaming seals for reducing cod numbers). Norway and Russia seemed to ignore concerns and continued to plunder huge numbers of fish.

Until the 1960s, Newfoundland was apparently netting some 300,000 tons of cod a year — and then it upped its total to around 800,000 tons in 1968. The decline set in and fishing was shut down. It re-started in 2010, landing some 2,700 tons — 1% of what it was processing in 1977.

Gone forever are the days in 1600 when according to Canada's Environmental Magazines, English fishing captains reported cod shoals off Newfoundland "so thick that we hardly have been able to row a boat through them."

The fishery has been slow to recover and speculation is that it may never fully because of changes in the food chain. The reduction of large predator fish like the cod and haddock that fed on the herring, shrimp and snow crab has resulted in a population explosion among the prey, which have become leading predators.

There is room in the ocean for both fish and seals — so long as we humans can temper our lust to kill, eat or wear them.

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