

Hunting for the hunters



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Climb aboard the activists' chopper as it searches for seals and sealers

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First in a two-part series

The sun is blindingly bright early Saturday morning in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and Sheryl Fink is huntin

Fink is director of the sealing campaign for the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), and aboard a charterec

After leaving Deer Lake around 7 a.m., the chopper flew low over Gros Morne before turning west, out into the Gulf. activists where they're going, which means Fink and her compatriots spend more time searching for hunters than any

The chopper is armed with a gyroscopically stabilized omnidirectional Cineflex camera which lets the operator scan t direction.

In addition to the helicopter, the IFAW hires a twin-engine plane that can fly faster and farther, scanning for boats. Th forth.

Fink is also in contact with Rebecca Aldworth, executive director of the Humane Society International, who's in anotl

Right now, though, both the plane and Aldworth are on the northeast coast, so we're on our own.

Armed with ice charts, Fink and her camera operator scan the ice for seals. Mostly, they just find shadows.

"They're either chunks of ice shaped like boats, or pools of water shaped like seals," Fink says.

After about an hour of searching, they get lucky.

It looks like just a red speck on the LCD display in the back seat of the helicopter, but it's a boat, weaving slowly thro

The chopper approaches, but according to DFO regulations it has to stay at least 1,000 feet away. As the chopper c Cook pore over their screens. Given the 48x magnification, they can see a lot more detail than they ever could just li

The back of the boat is red with blood. There's also a blood stain on the roof of the wheelhouse - the hunter keeps cl a better vantage.

"He's got blood on him," Fink observes.

The hunter has his gun out. The camera misses the kill, but follows the direction he's pointing in, to a seal that isn't m
As the boat approaches, the hunter hops out, hits the seal with a gaff to confirm the kill, hooks it and drags it back to
Back on the boat, he expertly skins the animal and tosses the carcass into the water.

Then he takes a smoke break.

This isn't what Fink and her crew are looking for. The kill is grisly, but it's by the book. They're hoping to document vic

"It was legal," Fink concedes. "He looks like a nice guy. Old-timer."

From above, there are no more seals anywhere within sight. The boat below steams through the ice, and after a min
There's no more action to see here.

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The IFAW spent more than \$760,000 on its campaign to end Canada's commercial seal hunt in 2009, according to t
available on their website.

In the same year, according to the provincial government, the seal hunt was worth \$857,000.

The overwhelming majority of the money spent by the IFAW goes to the helicopter, the plane and the staff, to observ
footage of seals being slaughtered on sea ice.

Fink says that the video footage provides "direct evidence" of what the killing looks like on the ice.

"As you know, the government says the hunt is humane and it's well-regulated, and they've got their talking points. Fi
say, 'No, that's not true.'

"In the past few years, the video evidence taken by both us and Humane Society International, I think, has played ar
Union to ban the import and trade of seal products."

But while members of the IFAW present their video evidence as irrefutable, there are plenty of seal industry advocat

Federal Fisheries Minister Keith Ashfield dismisses the anti-sealing campaign as "pure misinformation."

Pierre-Yves Daoust, a professor of anatomic pathology and wildlife pathology at the University of Prince Edward Isl
rigour and objectivity.

"It's insufficient to go by helicopter and follow some of the sealing vessels in the hope that they will break the rules o
can show examples of an animal that is not dead right away," Daoust says.

"Yes, in five per cent of the cases the animal did not die as quickly as it should have and there was an issue there. C
compare that with a number of slaughterhouses which can vary between zero and 10 per cent when the animals are
hunting waterfowl, hunting deer, hunting antelopes in Africa."

Fink acknowledges that they do "take the (kills) that cause the most concern and put those together."

One consistent criticism of the IFAW and its ilk by seal hunt advocates is that they are only using the footage and th

"It's one of the most enforced and regulated hunts of its kind in the world, and they're here undermining that and forw
their bank accounts, to keep their high salaries, to keep their residence and their travel," says Frank Pinhorn, presid

"That's their main goal."

Fink dismisses that idea completely, saying they also conduct campaigns on endangered tigers, elephants and Japan. "There's this perception, I think, that seals is our bread and butter, and it's the only reason IFAW survives, and that's "It's our founding campaign, it's something we're committed to, but it's just one of a number of issues that we work on ...

It's late afternoon, and about 30 or 40 kilometres northeast of Fogo Island, the chopper sets down on a piece of "ice. The pan is five or six metres across and the helicopter never actually lands. The pilot just comes down until the skids touch the ice, the rotors going at full speed while Fink and Cook and this reporter scurry out.

Three or four ice pans away, there's an adult harp seal basking - one of only a few dozen animals Fink and her crew have seen. With the animal over her shoulder in the background, Fink attaches a microphone to the lapel of her survival suit and says, "I'm actually quite relieved that we didn't see very much seal hunting going on today - we only saw a couple boats out there, we've seen in other years," she says.

"It appears that the commercial seal hunt as we once knew it just isn't happening this year."

The helicopter hovers overhead.

Cook reminds her that there's a seal directly behind her, so she probably shouldn't say she hasn't seen very many seals. "We've landed on an ice pan where we've found a couple of adult seals in the area, but other than that, we haven't really seen any pups. It's a very different situation out here," she says.

"This is the way I like to see it. I like to be here on the ice with the seals, this is the way it should be. It's peaceful, it's quiet, the seals might be safe this year."

Cook bursts out laughing.

"It's quiet? There's a f---ing helicopter going above!"

They try again, and after another couple of flubbed takes, Fink tries the direct approach.

"Please help IFAW to protect seals like the one here behind me. Visit IFAW.org to learn how you can help."

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Monday: Neither side ready to call it quits

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