

## Musician defends seal hunt, activist calls for its end



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CORNER BROOK — For more than a decade Con O'Brien has sang "Go to Sea No More," these days it is his message about the seal hunt.

The lead singer of the Newfoundland celtic band the Irish Descendants, engaged in a Twitter dispute with International Fund for Animal Welfare director Sheryl Fink Tuesday.

"The history of the seal hunt has been very important to us being able to stay here," he said via cellphone from a wharf in Corner Brook and the seal hunt has been hand-in-hand in allowing us Newfoundlanders to be what we are.

"It is an industry that is very much required on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, and it has been for 500 years. I don't see how we can change it."

Many people throughout the world make a living from the killing of animals for food and other products. O'Brien called on the people of Newfoundland every year to protest the seal hunt.

"You look at the history of it over the years — from Brigitte Bardot showing up here for 15 minutes to protest something, down to Paul McCartney and his wife — you have these do-gooders who all know very little about the issue," he said. "You go to protest, to stir up trouble for the moment, and they come and go."

He claims these animal rights activists care more about raising money than they do the animals, and are using the seal hunt. They certainly don't care about the impact they are having on families in this province.

Standing on a wharf in Bay Bulls, the musician said he was looking at a young seal across the harbour. It is a sight he hasn't seen in recent years, according to the 46-year-old. He attributes it to an "explosion" of the seal population, which he considers a sign of recovery.

"Once the oil is gone out of this place, and we are back to square one, it won't be in my time or your time, but those are the conditions to place again," O'Brien said.

He commended the provincial government for the \$3.6-million loan to Carino Processing Limited for the purchase of a new processing plant.

Meanwhile, Fink — whom O'Brien told on Twitter to pack up and go home — spent the opening day of the northern Gulf of St. Lawrence helicopter getting footage of the few sealers who ventured out to the ice flows. She said the Department of Fisheries and Oceans vessels participated, but they saw just three. Also, lacking from the fishery on opening day were the seals themselves. Fair-sized ice pans, there were few animals to be seen or harvested. The crew were out again Wednesday, without Fink's "Front" for the opening of the hunt off the northeast coast today.

The wildlife biologist, who has been documenting the seal hunt for 14 years, said she is often called a protester of the hunt. She said their goal is to document and observe.

"Basically, when the government of Canada says the seal hunt is humane, it is well regulated ... we have the video of the hunt, it is humane, and there is not a lot of regulation out there," she said.

The organization provides Department of Fisheries and Oceans officials with footage they collect of perceived illegal seal hunting.

Fink says she recognizes and appreciates the importance and historical significance of the hunt, but is starting to see the need for change.

"I think that is great, and is important — and it is important to keep that part of tradition, history and culture — but, I do think something we need to continue into the future, especially if there is no market demand for seal products and especially if they require government funding," she said.

Fink described herself as not thick-skinned, and said she does not like being yelled at or labelled. She does not think the hunt is "barbaric," she said, and that it is not an attack on the people, but an attempt to better industry practices.

She considers seal products a "luxury," and said it is time alternatives for the sealers still involved are discussed.

"Sure, the industry might come back," she said. "My personal feeling is that it is not."

Fink believes there will always be a seal hunt in the province for local consumption, and said that is not what the anti-commercial hunt and the role in international trade that is campaigned against.

The seal hunt is the founding campaign of the International Fund for Animal Welfare, and will continue to be its primary focus along with other campaigns against animal cruelty in the world — elephant ivory, tiger parts, and whaling.

"The level of emotion around this issue is disproportionate to the actual value and size of the industry as we know it. The country's global reputation must be considered when weighing the costs versus economic benefits.

Separating from the rhetoric, she believes everybody should work together to find a solution to benefit people in the industry and the culture. However, she said that resolve must recognize the seal industry is no longer required.

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