Remarks on Eskimo Sealing and the Harp Seal Controversy

Most inhabitants of the North today are employed full time or part time in the harvesting of biological resources. Until World War II, earnings from the production of renewable resources in nearly every major region of the circumpolar North exceeded incomes from nonrenewable-resource based industries. In general, the most important producers have been the commercial fisheries of subarctic waters, followed by furs of wild and domesticated land mammals, again predominately from subarctic areas. Since the heyday of European and American northern hunting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the economic importance of marine mammals has often been highly underrated.

One reason that marine mammals are usually relegated to a secondary economic role is that many species have been decimated by decades of overexploitation. The walrus has been nearly exterminated in the northeastern Atlantic and drastically reduced in numbers in the northwestern Atlantic and northern Pacific. The Greenland and right whales, in both oceans, reached such low population levels that international prohibition of hunting was instituted. Similar international agreements also saved the sea otter and northern fur seal from extinction. Recently, concern for the steady decline of Greenland or harp seals in the White and Barents seas led the Soviet Union and Norway to proclaim a five-year closed season in these areas and restricted hunting in Jan Mayen waters. In order to protect the breeding of the harp seal population in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Canada has taken steps to strengthen conservation practices. Also at Canada's request, seals are now considered one of the responsibilities of the International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries.

In the twentieth century, the two northern marine mammal species considered most important, in terms of cash value, have been the newborn harp seal, or "whitecoat," and the northern fur seal. But direct income to northern native peoples from the harvest of these animals has been negligible. In the first case, harp seal pups are taken almost exclusively by nonaboriginal hunters, and in the second case, comparatively few native people receive wages from the government-controlled fur seal industry. To the average Eskimo hunter of Alaska, Canada, or Greenland, therefore, cash income from the sale of marine mammal products has been minimal and usually much less than that earned from terrestrial animals such as the fox, land otter, muskrat, wolf, wolverine, or polar bear.

Beginning in about 1962, advanced techniques in the preparation of hair-seal pelts and the increased use of sealskins in clothing, especially in Europe, combined to create a rapidly expanding market for skins from all seal species. For the first time, the ringed seal, or jar, of the far north reached market values which made Eskimo seal hunting highly lucrative. For example, in eastern Baffin Island, young ringed seals sold for $4.00 per skin in 1955 and $17.50 in 1963. Mature ringed seals increased in value from $1.50 to $12.25 during the same period. Exceptionally good skins often sold for well over $20.00 in Alaska and Canada during 1963 and 1964. Average sealskin prices in Greenland, carefully controlled by the government, rose from $2.80 in 1958 to $8.30 in 1965.

Response to the improved market for hair seals was widespread throughout the North. In the Northwest Territories, the number of sealskins traded increased from 10,470, valued at $48,689 in 1961-62, to 46,962 skins worth $691,707 in 1963-64. In Alaska, the number of pelts sold increased from 15,000 in 1962 to 60,000 in 1965. Alaskan hair-seal production in 1965 was valued at $1,000,000. In Greenland, the seal harvest increased from 52,763 in 1954 to over 76,000 in 1964. The average value of skins produced in Greenland in 1963 and 1964 was about $800,000 per year.

Starting in 1964, individuals associated with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, especially in New Brunswick and Quebec, became increasingly concerned with the manner in which newborn harp seals were killed in the annual Gulf of St. Lawrence and Newfoundland hunt. These critics contended that seal pups were skinned alive. Evidence in the form of television films and eyewitness accounts were widely disseminated in many of western Europe and eastern North America. A book, *The Last Seal Pup*, by Peter Lust also focused attention on the purportedly inhumane killing of whitecoats.

Results of the campaign to prevent cruelty in the harvest of harp seal pups have ranged far beyond the killing grounds of eastern Canadian waters. The highly charged emotional overtones of the issue apparently caused the average female consumer to boycott all sealskin products. By the spring of 1967, the market for sealskins in Switzerland had dropped to 5 per cent of its former level, sales in West Germany were down by 50 per cent and one quarter of the Greenlandic skins placed on auction in April went unsold.

Although world sealskin prices have dropped since 1965, the most catastrophic decline has come, not in whitecoat and fur-seal pelts, but in other species, especially the ringed seal. During the summer of 1967, most buyers in Alaska refused to purchase ringed-seal skins at any price; in Canada, the Hudson's Bay Company announced that it would buy pelts at $2.50 each in order to prevent total economic collapse in many northern areas, and in Greenland the Royal Greenland Trade Department has had to review its price structure, which was originally set on 1965 market values.

It is ironic that the efforts to prevent inhumane killing of newborn harp seals have had their greatest impact on seal hunters who use the most humane killing methods and who seldom, if ever, encounter a harp seal pup. These sealers are the Eskimos of Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Because they hunt with high-powered rifles the seal is usually killed instantaneously with a head shot. Ecological conditions and migratory habits of the harp and other seal species cause the composition of the average Eskimo seal take to be 90 per cent or more ringed seals. The irony of the situation is further emphasized by the fact that retail market reaction has been strongest against skins which the consumer can obviously identify as seal. Both the whitecoat and fur seal provide high quality pelts that undergo specialized tanning and dying processes to produce a finished product quite unlike the stereotyped version of a sealskin. The appearance of the ringed seal and other hair seal species, however, remains unchanged as a result of tanning. These skins, therefore, are easily rejected by perspective buyers influenced by any stigma surrounding sealskins in general.

To a great many Eskimos in the northern Western hemisphere the drop in sealskin prices has been a calamity. It has meant destruction of a viable industry badly needed in an economically depressed region. In 1956, for example, the Eskimo population of Cumberland Sound earned a total of $14,526 from furs and white-whale hunting. This gave an average per household income of $115. In 1964, the estimated value of the area's fur take was $163,573, or about $1,434 per household. At Clyde River, in northern Baffin Island, the total value of furs traded in 1957 was $3,678, or about $111 per household; in 1964, a total of $28,000 worth of furs were sold, giving an average income of approximately $609 per household. The increased value of furs in both areas can be attributed almost exclusively to higher sealskin prices.

Although the final outcome of the depressed sealskin market is difficult to forecast, there are indications of its probable impact on many Eskimo groups. In Greenland, it has been estimated that one quarter of the population stands to lose its livelihood, with no alternative in sight. This figure is probably much higher in most parts of arctic Canada and in coastal northern Alaska. To a number of Eskimo hunters, the present situation is critical because they have already invested profits from the seal hunt in modern equipment. In eastern Baffin Island, for example, most hunters used their earnings of the early 1960's to purchase low-calibre high-powered rifles with telescopic sights, outboard motors, canoes or flatbottom boats, and motorized snow machines. The Cumberland Sound region in 1962 had only 1 native-owned snow machine. By 1964, the number had increased to 17 and in 1966 there were 36 machines in use. During the summer of 1953, the Clyde River area Eskimos had only 2 small, unpowered wooden boats and one 18-foot canoe with an outboard motor. In 1966, the same region was serviced by 25 canoes, 27 outboard motors, and 1 large, powered whaleboat. Broughton Island, in 1961, had 2 canoes and 3 whaleboats, whereas in 1966 the community had 9 canoes, 12 rowboats, and 6 whaleboats.

Modernization of the Eskimo seal-hunting industry has meant an increase in operating costs. A study of gasoline, motor oil, and ammunition expenditures for the period August 1965 through July 1966 for eastern Baffin Island showed the cost per sealskin sold, for all species, was $6.29 in Cumberland Sound, $5.45 at Broughton and Padloping Islands, and $4.46 at Clyde River. It is clear from these figures that the present value of sealskins in no way covers basic operating and depreciation costs.

The controversy over killing methods of harp seal pups has produced consequences far beyond those intended by the well-meaning persons who first publicized the issue. But if accusations are true that television films were intentionally falsified in order to create public outrage, then the campaign to prevent cruelty to animals has been doubly tragic. At the moment, the individual who has suffered most is the isolated Eskimo seal hunter of the Arctic who can no longer earn enough from a basic way of life to utilize his newly acquired equipment and support his family.

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