# Comments

# The Canadian Harp Seal Hunt: A Moral Assessment

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The population of the harp seal, *Pagophilus groenlandicus,* is divided into three distinct breeding groups, which are centered on the White Sea, the Greenland Sea, and the northwest Atlantic. The last of these three populations, by far the largest, summers in the Arctic waters of Canada and west Greenland. In the autumn the animals in this group begin to migrate southward ahead of the advancing ice pack. By late February or early March, the females reach the breeding grounds off the coast of Newfoundland-Labrador (the Front) and near the Magdalen Islands (the Gulf). They then haul themselves out onto the ice to give birth to their young. After 2 weeks the pups are weaned and begin to moult, and by the age of 1 month they leave the ice for the open water. It is during this month that both the pups and the more mature seals are extensively hunted.

Other seal species are hunted in Canada, and harp seals are hunted at other times and places. However, the scale of this annual hunt on the ice of the Front and the Gulf has conferred upon it the status of *the* Canadian seal hunt. The hunt is managed by the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans, which imposes quotas on the annual catch and enforces the provisions of its Seal Protection Regulations. Sealing on the east coast of Canada has a continuous history of at least four centuries, but the harp seal hunt has attracted its present level of publicity only within the past two decades. During this period it has become the occasion of an increasingly hostile annual confrontation between sealers and government officials on the one hand and various animal welfare groups on the other. To date, the propaganda war between these two sides has resulted in a stalemate. The Canadian government still maintains that the hunt conforms to the usual standards of humaneness and conservation, while the protesters remain convinced that it is cruel and unnecessary.

An objective treatment of these issues is difficult because of the high level of emotion on both sides, but it is also necessary to attempt it if uncommitted and reasonable persons are to be provided with some guidance about what to think concerning the morality of the hunt.

## *Objectivity*

Many people, especially within the scientific community, question the very possibility of an objective moral appraisal of a practice like the hunt. In their view, any such appraisal must be "merely a matter of opinion," *i.e.,* subjective, biased, and emotional. We must begin, there-

fore, by showing that moral positions can be defended on rational grounds.

Usually it is the opponents of the hunt who are accused of being biased or emotional. But it is clear that if all moral beliefs are *inherently* subjective, then this impediment afflicts equally the arguments of both sides to the debate. For each side is defending a moral position: abolitionists contend that the hunt is morally wrong, while retentionists argue that it is morally justified. If the former view is "merely a matter of opinion" *just because it is a moral view* then, obviously, so is the latter. The only way to escape this particular net would be to hold no view whatever concerning the justifiability of the hunt.

The skeptical challenge to the objectivity of moral beliefs usually rests on an implied contrast between moral and scientific questions: it is presumed that the latter are answerable by rational methods. Thus, in this way of looking at things, whether the hunt has caused a decline in the harp seal population admits of an objective answer because this question is strictly biological, while a judgment about whether the hunt has overexploited that population does not, because this question contains an evaluative component. But this strict separation of the scientific and moral dimensions of the hunt is oversimplified, since no one on either side holds a moral view of the hunt without having some reasons for his or her view. Abolitionists tend to oppose the hunt *because* (in their view) it threatens the harp seal population, contributes little to the economy of the Atlantic provinces, and causes a good deal of suffering. Likewise, retentionists tend to support the hunt *because* (in their view) it protects the east coast fishery, provides a needed income source, and is carried out in a humane manner. The hunt's factual, scientific dimensions thus serve as the *reasons* that substantiate the moral assessments of it. We can decide whether a moral assessment of the hunt is well founded by determining whether it is based upon an objective (unbiased, impartial) view of the facts of the matter. The objectivity of the supporting reasons will contribute to the objectivity of the moral assessment.

Scientific objectivity is one ingredient of an objective moral belief. But perhaps this is as far as we can go; perhaps the best information available about the hunt, the most accurate picture we can construct of it, will still support divergent asessments of it. If so, then there will still be some bite to the skeptical contention that any such assessment is "merely a matter of opinion."

However, we can go further by recognizing that there are parallels between scientific and moral objectivity. In the sciences, objectivity requires transcending all partial points of view so that the world is seen from a detached or impersonal perspective; it is therefore compromised when the investigator's view of the facts is distorted or corrupted by some special interest or commitment. Objectivity in morality likewise requires the adoption of an impersonal standpoint. This standpoint imposes two constraints: (1) a moral assessment must be *complete, i.e.,* it must take into account all of the morally relevant features of its subject, and (2) a moral assessment must be *impartial, i.e.,* it must weigh or balance these features in an unbiased manner. A moral view that is both complete and impartial can therefore be said to possess moral objectivity.

We may now say that an objective moral assessment of a practice is one that is both scientifically and morally objective. Both demands are difficult to meet, with the result that most of our moral views are likely to be tainted with some degree of partiality or bias. But neither demand is impossible to meet.

Objectivity in our moral beliefs is an ideal that we should pursue and that we can, in principle, attain. The skeptical challenge is therefore mistaken.

## *A Moral Framework*

When we consider the morality of the seal hunt, it is clear that scientific objectivity requires that we not fiddle with or suppress any of the available evidence to suit our case. But what exactly does moral objectivity require? What are the morally relevant features of the hunt, all of which must be given impartial consideration? The answer to these questions is supplied by the special characteristics of the moral point of view. A moral evaluation of a practice must take into account the impact of the practice on the interest or welfare of those it affects. Thus, such an evaluation is complete if it includes all interests affected by the event, and it is impartial if it accords equal importance to equal interests.

The requirements of moral objectivity yield two important implications for a moral assessment of the seal hunt. The first is that the proper form for such an assessment is a balancing of its costs and benefits. The second is that in such a balancing both human and nonhuman interests must be included. The consequences of this second implication are far-reaching. Cost/benefit analyses of the seal hunt are commonly restricted to its impact upon human (and usually economic) interests. But if we are seeking an objective moral assessment of the hunt, then this restriction is plainly indefensible, for it builds into our evaluation procedure the special point of view of our own species. Only a framework that takes account of the hunt's impact on *all* affected species can claim to be objective. And the seals seem clearly to be affected.

To accord consideration to a creature's interest is to treat that creature as having intrinsic moral importance. This perspective rules out the chance that the creature may be regarded as a mere commodity, to be used just as we please for own purposes. For an example of a point of view that fails to be objective in just this way, we need look no further than the Canadian government's stated policy concerning the "management" of seals:

> *Seals are considered a natural resource available to be humanely harvested like many other species. The harvesting of this resource is permitted only within the limits of sound conservation principles, taking into account their role in the ecosystem. The government's objective is to gain the maximum socio-economic benefits for Canadians in general and those who depend directly on the resource in particular.* (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 1981).

The treatment of seals as a "natural resource" to be "harvested" reduces the animals to the status of cereal crops or forest products, that is, to the status of *things*. A certain kind of thinking is operating here: In selecting an agriculture or forestry policy we do not consider ourselves bound to consult the interests of the commodities involved in addition to the human interests that they will serve. Likewise, in selecting a sealing policy (so the government is telling us) we need not consult the interests of the seals.

To be fair, the government's policy *does* include the constraints that the seals be harvested humanely and "within the limits of sound conservation principles." Both constraints may reflect some recognition of the intrinsic moral importance of the seals. The conservation constraint is ambiguous on this point, since its justification might be that it would be bad *for us* if the seals become extinct, just as it might be bad for us to exhaust any non-renewable resource. Only the humaneness constraint

unambiguously recognizes that seals are creatures capable of suffering and that this fact imposes limits on the ways in which we may treat them. The government's policy does therefore contain some concession to the moral importance of the seals, but only as a minor countercurrent running against the mainstream.

Moral objectivity requires that we include all interests, human and nonhuman, in a moral assessment of the hunt. It also requires that we assign equal weight to equal interests, human and nonhuman. But when *are* the interests of different species equal? A full answer to this question would take us too far afield; it will be enough for our purposes if we have some sense of the proper weight of the interests of seals in the moral scales. Here we should recall that pinnipeds, like cetaceans, are marine mammals. We will therefore not go far wrong if we assign to their interests the same weight that we would in other contexts assign to the interests of their closest terrestrial counterparts: dogs, wolves, and bears.

The seal hunt produces human benefits and imposes nonhuman costs. In order to determine whether it is, on balance, morally justified we must balance the former against the latter. But what sort of balance would suffice to exonerate the hunt? And, conversely, what balance would suffice to condemn it? To answer this question, we will employ what might be called the standard of *minimal decency:* The hunt is morally unjustified if it generates slight or trivial human benefits by imposing substantial or serious nonhuman costs, and otherwise it is justified. This standard, for all its imprecision, will be exact enough for our purposes. It is obviously a very weak one, heavily weighted in favor of human interests. The reason for employing such a weak standard is that, paradoxically, its very weakness is the source of its authority, since any practice that fails even to be minimally decent is plainly indefensible.

## The Hunt: Human Benefits

The economic benefits directly generated by the harp seal hunt are shared by the producers and consumers of seal products. The sealing industry is usually divided into primary (harvesting) and secondary (processing and marketing) sectors. The primary sector employs the sealers themselves. Because the seal hunt is a seasonal event, occupying at most 6 weeks of the year, no one is a full-time sealer—most sealers are fishermen who use the seal hunt as a source of additional income before the start of the fishing season.

The number of sealers participating in the hunt fluctuates annually from about 5,000 to over 7,000. Total annual gross income for all participants has varied in recent years from $3 million to $5 million (in Canadian dollars), depending largely on pelt prices. Average annual gross income has varied from $400 to $700 (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 1980). In 1976, the last year for which a detailed economic survey was carried out, the hunt contributed on average about 7 percent of the annual income of its participants (Dunn, 1977).

These global figures, however, conceal the maldistribution of the incomes that are derived from the hunt. Sealers are normally divided into three categories: those working from large vessels (over 65 feet in length), those working from small vessels (between 35 and 65 feet), and landsmen. Incomes are distributed unequally both across and within these groups. Large-vessel sealers have earned the highest average incomes in recent years (varying annually from $2,400 to $4,800) but form the smallest group (about 4 percent of all participants). Small-vessel sealers constitute a slightly larger group (about 9 percent of all participants) but have earned lower average incomes (varying annually from $1,300 to $1,900). The landsmen, however, make up by far

the largest group (over 85 percent of all participants) and receive by far the smallest average returns (varying annually from $230 to $450) (Dunn, 1977; Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 1980).

Income is also unequally distributed within these groups. The 1976 economic survey revealed that of the small-vessel sealers (average income, $1,256) over a quarter earned $200 or less, while another quarter earned over $1,000. Likewise, among the landsmen (average income, $232) nearly two-thirds earned $100 or less (Dunn, 1977). Thus, while the total annual income earned by the sealers may seem impressive, its unequal distribution means that a small minority receive a significant return, while the great majority gain relatively little.

These income figures are, moreover, gross rather than net. In order to gain a more accurate picture of the economic payoffs, we must therefore subtract the costs that are incurred in the process of participating in the hunt. Again, the results of the 1976 economic survey are illuminating. Deduction of expenses lowers the average income of small-vessel sealers by 30 percent and that of landsmen by 50 percent. Collectively, the small vessels actually operated at a loss (Dunn, 1977).

Economic returns in the secondary sector are more difficult to estimate. This sector consists of the purchase of landed pelts, the initial processing of pelts, the rendering of blubber into oil, and the processing of seal meat. Most final processing of pelts is done outside Canada. In 1976 these operations provided employment for a total of 260 people for periods ranging from 3 weeks to 3 months. In recent years, total annual gross income in the secondary sector has varied from $2.5 million to $4.2 million (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 1980). No analysis of the distribution of this income is available.

The total *added value* of the seal hunt comprises the sum of the gross incomes that it generates in the primary and secondary sectors. In recent years, annual added value has varied from about $5 million to about $10 million (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 1980). Most of this added value accrues in Newfoundland, although some is distributed elsewhere, especially in Nova Scotia and Quebec. Some sense of the relative contribution made by the sealing industry to the economy of the Atlantic provinces can be gained by noting that the total added value of the seal hunt constitutes in most years roughly one-half of one percent of the added value of goods-producing industries in Newfoundland.

Against the economic contributions of the seal hunt must be set the costs of managing it. The Canadian government has estimated these costs as approximately $700,000 for the fiscal year 1976-77. This figure includes the funding of research on seals, enforcement of the Seal Protection Regulations by Fisheries officers, publication of literature concerning the hunt, and the costs entailed in running the headquarters in Ottawa. It does not include any subsidies to the sealing industry, the costs of policing coastal communities during the annual confrontation between sealers and protesters, or the funding of government-sponsored public relations campaigns and lobbies. The hunt's total costs, direct and indirect, are impossible to reckon with accuracy. If we estimate them conservatively at $1 million per annum, then the economic benefits of the hunt must correspondingly be reduced by that amount.

Benefits to the consumers of seal products cannot be readily quantified. Three commodities are recovered from the carcasses of harp seals: pelts, blubber, and meat. Processed seal pelts are ultimately marketed as fine furs or leath-

ers. Blubber is rendered into oil, which is used either as a lubricant or as an ingredient in soaps, cosmetics, and various foodstuffs. Meat, including flippers, is either consumed fresh or marketed in frozen or canned form. At one time, harp seals were hunted primarily for their oil, but today they are valued chiefly for their pelts. In 1976 pelts accounted for 77 percent of gross receipts from landings, oil 9 percent, and meat 14 percent (Dunn, 1977). Because of quotas imposed on the hunt, and also because blubber is routinely separated from pelts during initial processing, the quantity of pelts and oil produced annually is fairly steady. Seal meat, by contrast, is very much a by-product of the hunt. Most of the meat recovered is consumed or exchanged privately; the market for frozen or canned seal meat, and for flippers, is limited. No meat at all is recovered from about two-thirds of the carcasses (Dunn, 1977). In addition to the limited market for seal meat, the main reason for this low recovery rate is that three-quarters of the animals killed annually are pups (Barzdo, 1980). The pups yield little usable meat; they are killed primarily for their pelts and only secondarily for their blubber. Overall, it is safe to say that if there were no market for seal pelts, there would be no economic rationale for the hunt.

In addition to the direct economic benefits generated by the hunt, it is also sometimes claimed that it aids the east coast cod fishery by keeping the harp seal population under control. Thus, it is argued, even if the hunt ceased to be commercially viable because of a decline in the market for pelts, an annual cull would still be necessary. The soundness of this argument must be tested against certain features of the biology of the harp seal. These seals appear to feed on cod only in Arctic waters, where no commercial cod fishery exists. So they do not compete directly with us for the same fish stocks. In the breeding grounds the seals appear to be opportunistic feeders, whose diet consists largely of capelin, herring, and other pelagic fish and crustaceans (Ronald and Dougan, 1982). Since capelin are also part of the mainstay diet of cod, there is some direct competition between seals and cod, and thus some indirect competition between seals and us, in the area of the east coast fishery.

However, declining fish stocks appear to be a consequence of overfishing rather than a result of the present level of the harp seal population; when that population was much larger, fish stocks were also much more abundant. One marine biologist has concluded that "if there is a threat to the northwest Atlantic ecosystem it is not the harp seal's competing with man and cod for capelin. The most insidious threat would appear to be the possibility that rapid development of a capelin fishery...will adversely affect cod, harp seals and whales" (Lavigne, 1978).

The present population of the northwest Atlantic breeding stock is believed to be between 1 and 1.5 million animals. If large-scale hunting were to cease, to what level would that population increase? An answer to this question depends on the population dynamics of the harp seal, which are by no means perfectly understood. But most biologists believe that harp seals, being a predator species, are food-limited and possess natural mechanisms that limit population increase (Lavigne, 1978). Thus, for instance, the mean age of sexual maturity for females appears to be sensitive to population density, so that fertility rates decline as population increases. For these reasons there is widespread agreement that in the absence of artificial population controls, "an increasing herd would probably regulate itself, long before it would offer competition to man for food resources" (Ronald and Dougan, 1982).

## The Hunt: Nonhuman Costs

The task of reckoning the human benefits yielded by the hunt is facilitated by the fact that at least some of them can be straightforwardly measured in monetary terms. The hunt's costs for the seals themselves cannot be quantified in this way. Nonetheless, we can identify and classify the main categories of these costs, and also go some distance toward estimating them.

The hunt causes its victims two distinct kinds of harm: death and suffering. The death toll is its most palpable consequences. It is, indeed, misleading to label this event a *hunt* at all: it is a slaughter, a vast open-air abattoir. Until 1961 the slaughter was entirely unregulated; quotas were not imposed until 1971. Since 1977, when the hunt has been conducted entirely under Canadian jurisdiction, the annual Total Allowable Catch (TAC) has been set for most years at a level of 170,000 animals for the Front and Gulf areas. Actual catches have generally been at or near the TAC.

The total quantity of a cost imposed upon a population (whether human or nonhuman) is a function of the number of individuals affected and the gravity of the effect on each. Thus, the annual cost of the seal hunt for the seals is equal to the value of the average life lost, multiplied by 170,000. But how do we reckon the value of a seal's life *to the seal itself*? Although precision is impossible here, since it is impossible to construct any completely reliable scale of value for the various species, we can recall the biological category in which seals belong; the value which we assign to the life of an individual seal must be similar to that which we are accustomed to assigning to the life of an individual bear or dog. We should also keep in mind the fact that the younger an individual at the time of its death, the more of its life it loses. It follows that the cost of killing a seal pup — the cost, that is, to the victim — must be greater, other factors equal, than the cost of killing an adult. As was noted earlier, about three-quarters of the seals killed annually are pups.

Killing large numbers of an animal species introduces a further dimension into the accounts, for it may affect the ability of the species to maintain its numbers, and ultimately to survive. If we mean by an endangered species one that is threatened with imminent extinction, then harp seals are not an endangered species, and the northwest Atlantic breeding stock is not an endangered population (Lavigne, 1978). The position of the Canadian government has been that the annual TAC has been set below the level of sustainable yield, so that the breeding population will increase at a modest rate. On this view, then, the seal hunt is conducted "within the limits of sound conservation principles."

However, a species that is both aquatic and mobile admits of no accurate census, and thus there are few reliable empirical data on the present size of the northwest Atlantic breeding population, nor on whether that population is increasing or declining. Further, while the harp seal is not technically endangered it does possess some biological characteristics that render it vulnerable: it is a large predator, presumably with narrow habitat tolerance, which reproduces once a year at a rate of one pup per dam and whose young take four or more years to reach sexual maturity (Lavigne, 1978). A species with these characteristics cannot easily reverse any downward population spiral that might occur. These facts conspire to urge a cautious management policy.

While the conservation issue is important, it should not be allowed to monopolize our attention. Its force derives from the fact that it assumes as a cost only what virtually everyone would concede as one, namely, the annihilation of an entire species (or an entire breeding population). But a species is

only a collection of individuals, and the extinction of a species is a great loss only if the death of each individual is itself a loss. Eliminating a species of course precludes the possibility of *any* lives of this particular sort being lived again; it is a great loss in part because of its irreversibility. But it is only the extreme case which, though undeniably dramatic, should not tempt us to think that no costs are involved if we kill animals at a rate "within the limits of sound conservation principles."

Death is but one of two harms that the hunt imposes on its victims; the other is the suffering that they may experience. The Seal Protection Regulations specify the methods that may be used to kill seals; among the authorized instruments those that are most widely used at present are the club and hakapik. The regulations stipulate that a seal must be rendered unconscious by a blow on the skull before it is "bled out" and skinned. Signs of unconsciousness include the absence of a blinking reflex when the eye is touched. When the regulations are fully complied with, death would appear to be swift and painless.

How extensive, however, is full compliance? Fisheries officers who enforce the regulations are empowered to suspend the license of any sealer observed to be breaking them. In addition, representatives of some animal welfare organizations have been allowed to observe the conduct of the hunt and have reported their observations. Unfortunately, these reports conflict: according to some observers, 95 percent of all killings are carried out properly, while according to others, breaches of the regulations are much more common. Faced with this contradictory evidence, it is difficult to determine just how humane the actual practice of the hunt is.

However, it is apparent that the hunt is inherently difficult to regulate. A handful of Fisheries officers and authorized observers cannot adequately monitor the activities of thousands of sealers distributed over thousands of square miles of open ice. The landsmen are particularly difficult to oversee. Conditions on the ice, moreover, are far from ideal and sealers must often work very rapidly. Under these conditions, it would be miraculous if shortcuts were not taken, especially when there is little chance of detection. Even under the most optimistic estimate of compliance, thousands of seals every year may bleed to death or even be skinned while still conscious.

One further dimension of suffering must be noted, namely, the impact on dams of having their pups killed. Again, relatively little is known about the dam-pup relationship in the harp seal and, therefore, about the extent to which dams grieve the loss of their pups. Most dams flee at the approach of the sealer rather than stay to defend the pup, and many do not return to the spot where the pup was abandoned. But some do not flee and some do return. We cannot therefore discount the possibility that, at least for these dams and possibly for all, the loss of their pups is a distressing experience.

## Conclusions

It remains only to balance the hunt's benefits against its costs. We can say, on the basis of the postulates discussed above, that the hunt is morally unjustified if its human benefits are slight and its nonhuman costs are substantial. As we have seen, net returns to sealers are both low on average and unequally distributed, so that only a small minority earn more than a pittance. The sealing industry as a whole provides seasonal employment for a limited number of workers and makes only a meager contribution to the economy of the Atlantic provinces. The principal seal products, for whose sake the hunt is actually conducted, are

luxuries rather than necessities. Further, the hunt is unnecessary as a cull to protect the east coast fishery.

By contrast, the hunt's high annual death toll is not only a great loss for the seals themselves, but may also have an adverse long-term effect on the breeding population. Finally, some incidence of suffering appears to be an unavoidable by-product of the hunt.

It would seem that the seal hunt therefore fails to meet even the weak standard of minimal decency we have determined that it must meet to be morally justified. It imposes a heavy cost in death and suffering upon a developed animal species for relatively trivial human gains. Collectively, we can forego it at little cost to ourselves and with enormous benefits for the seals. There is thus no justification for its continuation.

The case that has been constructed here against the hunt differs in two important respects from common abolitionist arguments. It has made no appeal whatever to the fact that harp seal pups are attractive or that the sight of their slaughter is repellent. These considerations have been dismissed by retentionists as aesthetic rather than moral, or as sentimental rather than rational; they have in any case played no role in the argument of this paper. The argument has also rested little weight on either the conservation or humaneness issues. These issues are certainly not unimportant, but the real problem with the hunt is neither its ecological impact nor its methods of killing seals, but rather the *reason* for which the seals are being killed. Most of us would agree that there can be good reasons for killing animals, perhaps even for killing large numbers of animals. But the servicing of a luxury market in fine furs and leathers is the wrong reason for killing a large number of animals. Therefore, the basic fault of the hunt cannot be remedied either by lowering the quotas or by developing new slaughter techniques. A limited and humane hunt is better than an indiscriminate and inhumane one, but better still is no hunt at all.

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