

“Throughout my career as a veterinarian, I have seen animals die in slaughterhouses, research labs, and animal shelters, and I can assure you that the cruelty existing in the seal hunt would not be tolerated in these institutions.”

Dr. Mary Richardson
Animal Care Review Board
Solicitor-General of Ontario

After observing Canada’s 1995 seal hunt

Canada’s Commercial Seal Hunt is Not “Acceptably Humane”

Current discussions about animal welfare issues associated with Canada’s commercial seal hunt essentially revolve around two reports:

- 1) a report of an international veterinary panel, based on observations of the 2001 seal hunt, and a review of video footage of sealing activities recorded by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) from 1998-2000 (hereafter referred to as Burdon *et al.*)¹, and
- 2) a report published by five Canadian veterinarians, also based on observations of the 2001 seal hunt, and a review of video footage obtained by IFAW for the 2001 hunt (hereafter referred to as Daoust *et al.*)² (The Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans constantly claims that this report was “issued by the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association”. In truth, the report carries the caveat (p. 688) that, “The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not constitute an official position of the CVMA.)

In public discussions, the “results” of these two studies are typically presented as follows:

- Opponents of the hunt claim that up to 42% of seal carcasses examined by Burdon *et al.* were likely conscious when skinned and conclude that the hunt is unacceptably inhumane;³
- In contrast, supporters of the hunt, particularly the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), cite Daoust *et al.* and claim that 98% of the seals “are killed in an acceptably humane manner” (Abstract, p. 687).⁴

People who are concerned about the humaneness of Canada’s commercial seal hunt are either left confused by the seemingly contradictory claims of experts, or are forced to choose between the two apparently disparate opinions.

A closer examination reveals, however, that confusion arises largely from the different approaches and criteria used in parts of the two studies to determine whether animals were killed humanely or not. The Burdon *et al.* evidence cited above addresses the question of whether seals were likely conscious or unconscious at the time they were skinned, using

post-mortem examination of skulls. In marked contrast, the figure cited from Daoust *et al.*’s report represents the number of seals clubbed or shot that were brought on board sealing vessels while still conscious. That number ignores any and all animal suffering that occurs between the time animals are clubbed or shot until they eventually reach a sealing vessel, usually on the end of a hook or gaff. It does not begin to measure whether or not seals were killed in an “acceptably humane” manner. The frequently cited figures from both reports ignore the number of seals that escape into the sea as wounded (struck and lost) animals.

A variety of other data presented in the Daoust *et al.* report actually provide support for Burdon *et al.*’s conclusion that Canada’s commercial seal hunt results in “considerable and unacceptable suffering.” The available evidence suggests that tens of thousands of harp seals – mostly pups under the age of three months – die in a manner that is inconsistent with contemporary animal welfare standards.

What do the reports actually say?

Burdon et al. 2001

Burdon *et al.* examined 76 seal carcasses left on the ice by sealers on 27-28 March 2001. The sealers had no prior knowledge that veterinarians would examine the carcasses of the seals they killed, and had departed the area by the time the veterinarians arrived on the scene.

What the veterinarians reported was this: In 13 (17%) of the 76 carcasses examined, there were no detectable lesions of the skull, leading to the conclusion that these seals had been skinned while conscious. An additional 19 (25%) seal carcasses exhibited minimal to moderate skull fractures indicative of “a decreased level of consciousness” but probably not unconsciousness. Combined, these figures are the source of the claim that up to 42% of the 76 seals examined may well have been skinned while conscious. The remaining 58% of the seals examined exhibited extensive fractures that would have been associated with some level of unconsciousness.

Burdon *et al.* also examined video footage obtained by

IFAW from the 1998, 1999, and 2000 seal hunts. The IFAW video footage was obtained using a *Wescam* video recorder mounted on a helicopter. Using this state-of-the-art technology, sealing activities can be recorded from a distance without individual sealers being aware that their hunting practices are being observed and recorded. While noting the difficulties associated with determining loss of consciousness by observation from a distance, the veterinarians emphasized that any killing method that does not include: 1) stunning, 2) checking for an absence of voluntary muscle activity using the corneal (or blinking) reflex, and 3) exsanguination (bleeding), “has an enormous potential to create suffering and is therefore unacceptable”.

Burdon *et al.*'s observations from the videos of the 1998-2000 hunts may be summarized briefly as follows (p. 9 + Appendices 3 -5):

- 179 seals were observed hunted. Ninety-six of these were shot; 56 were shot or clubbed; 19 were clubbed or gaffed [Note: neither gaffs nor boat hooks are legal instruments for killing seals in Canada], and 8 were killed by unknown means.
- In 79% of cases, sealers did not check for a corneal reflex indicating that many of these seals potentially could have been skinned or hooked alive.
- Only 6% were bled immediately after being struck.
- 72 (40%) seals were shot or clubbed and left to suffer.
- At least 30 seals were hooked while still alive.
- At least 5 were bled alive.
- At least 4 were skinned alive.

From their examination of seal carcasses and video evidence, Burdon *et al.* (p. 1) concluded, “the hunt is resulting in considerable and unacceptable suffering”.

Daoust et al. 2002

The abstract of the second veterinary report (Daoust *et al.*) gives a very different impression of Canada's seal hunt. A careful reading of the paper indicates, however, that parts of the abstract are worded imprecisely. Many of the observations presented in this report actually substantiate rather than refute the evidence provided above from Burdon *et al.*

Daoust *et al.* were allowed to make direct observations of the 2001 hunt from sealing vessels, an opportunity not afforded to Burdon *et al.* But like Burdon *et al.*, they also examined video evidence provided by IFAW. The footage they examined, from the 2001 hunt, was not considered in Burdon *et al.*'s report.

Daoust *et al.*'s direct observations were made under very different conditions than those provided by Burdon *et al.* Unlike Burdon *et al.*'s observations, they were made directly from sealing vessels so that the sealers were unavoidably aware that observers were present. As Daoust *et al.* (p 692) admit, the presence of an observer on a sealing vessel “may have incited sealers to hit the seals skulls more vigorously”. Of course, the presence of an observer also has the potential to modify other sealing practices, including checking for a

corneal reflex and bleeding animals immediately after clubbing.

Regardless, Daoust *et al.* observed 167 harp seals struck with a hakapik or shot during the 2001 hunt. Of these, 9 (5.4%) were struck and lost and 3 (1.8%) were still alive and conscious when they arrived on the deck of the sealing vessel.

The number of seals arriving on the deck of a sealing vessel (dead or alive) is not a measure of whether the seals were killed in an “acceptably humane manner”. Such determination can only be made at the location of the killing (either by direct observation, or by post-mortem examination). Only in extreme cases of negligence (such as those apparently observed on 3 occasions by Daoust *et al.*) would one expect to find a seal still alive and conscious on the deck of a sealing vessel. Such seals almost certainly would have been struck with a club, a hakapik, or some illegal weapon like a boat hook or gaff; hooked while still conscious; dragged across the ice floes for some distance; hoisted onto the ship (using the hook imbedded, most likely, in its jaw or eye socket); and thrown onto the deck of the ship. Incidents like these characterize some of the worst examples of cruelty associated with the Canadian seal hunt. The fact that Daoust *et al.* observed 3 such cases in 167 observations (involving sealers who were aware they were being observed) underscores the inherent and continuing cruelty of the hunt.

Burdon *et al.* observed that a small number of seals were struck and lost during the 1998-2000 seal hunts. Daoust *et al.* found that 5.4% of seals were shot or clubbed but not recovered. This figure is similar to the 5% figure currently accepted by the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans for the Canadian seal hunt.⁵ Seals that are struck and lost are wounded animals that escape into the sea before being killed. As Daoust *et al.* acknowledge (p. 689), “some of the animals struck may not have received a lethal blow”. An unknown number of these would die subsequently of their injuries.

Daoust *et al.* also examined video evidence from the 2001 hunt and compared their observations with those provided by IFAW from the same video footage. IFAW's observations of alleged violations of Canada's Marine Mammal Regulations were made by experienced seal hunt observers, curiously and inaccurately depicted in the Daoust *et al.* report as “IFAW members”.

Daoust *et al.*'s evaluation of the video footage is reported in such a way as to maximize the apparent differences between IFAW's observations and theirs. Regardless, a number of similarities are obvious. For example,

- Daoust *et al.* note that in 87% of the 116 cases examined, sealers “failed to palpate the skull or check the corneal reflex before proceeding to hook or bleed the seal or go to another seal.” This figure is similar to, but even higher than, the 79% figure reported by Burdon *et al.*

As Burdon *et al.* noted, determining loss of consciousness from a video is a difficult undertaking at the best of times. It is not surprising, therefore, that differences in interpretation exist among observers viewing the same video evidence. Since there is no way to resolve such differences, I will simply summarize

here the areas of agreement between the two observer groups.

- Taken together, the combined wisdom of the IFAW observers and Daoust *et al.* is that of 116 “interactions between harp seals and sealers”, there were 13 (11.2%) agreed violations of Canada’s Marine Mammal Regulations. All observers concurred that in 8 instances, seals were still conscious after having been shot. All observers also agreed that there were two additional instances where live seals were hooked with a boat hook or gaff, and that 3 seals were struck and lost.

Daoust *et al.* were unable to reject an additional 13 putative violations reported by the IFAW observers, deeming them questionable or possible violations. Daoust labelled two other instances inconclusive.

In total then, both Daoust *et al.* and the IFAW observers agreed that of 116 interactions between harp seals and sealers videotaped during the 2001 hunt, there were:

- 26 (22.4%) definite, questionable or possible violations, where seals were not rendered unconscious prior to hooking or skinning.
- An additional 2 (1.7%) were inconclusive.

In summary, IFAW’s observers detected 55 putative instances where animals were still conscious after being shot or clubbed, or where live seals were hooked, bled, skinned alive, or struck and lost. Daoust *et al.* disagreed with the interpretation in 27 of these instances, but were unable to reject the interpretation in the remaining 28 instances. In other words, there was agreement that up to 24.1% of 116 pups were not killed humanely, or in a manner consistent with Canada’s Marine Mammal Regulations.

Discussion

Since 1998, the Canadian commercial seal hunt has landed an average of 257,000 harp seals annually. On average, 95% (239,000) of these were pups aged between about 2 weeks and 3 months. These pups were killed either by clubbing or shooting. The persistent question is whether they experienced unacceptable levels of cruelty or whether they were killed humanely.

The evaluation of whether or not a seal has been rendered unconscious by a blow to the head or by a bullet is not always easy, even for experienced observers, including biologists and veterinarians. Therefore, there will always be some room for different interpretations among experts examining the same evidence. Data from different studies may also produce quite different results. In addition to such between-observer variation, there will also be individual differences in sealer behaviour and competence, and even this will vary depending on ice and weather conditions, the location and duration of the hunt, and whether or not the sealers are aware that their hunting practices are being observed and recorded.

In order to understand and interpret the results presented in the two reports under discussion, it is helpful to understand the sequence of events that leads to an animal being recorded in the landed catch statistics. First, the animal is clubbed or shot.

This is the stage when it should be rendered immediately unconscious to minimize cruelty and suffering. As the Canadian government notes,⁵ and Daoust *et al.* confirm, some 5% of pups clubbed or shot escape wounded into the sea and are never recovered (struck and lost). For recent seal hunts, this means that more than 12,000 pups annually have been struck and lost. An unknown proportion of these animals will have subsequently died from their injuries.

Much pain and suffering associated with the seal hunt could be alleviated if sealers confirmed immediately that all seals clubbed or shot are unconscious before they are left on the ice, bled or skinned, or hooked and dragged to another location, such as a sealing vessel. To ensure that animals are unconscious, sealers should touch the eyeball to check for a corneal reflex – this is now required by Canada’s Marine Mammal Regulations – as quickly as possible after clubbing or shooting a seal. If the animal still exhibits a corneal reflex, it should be rendered unconscious as quickly as possible, either by clubbing it again or by shooting.

Clearly, this does not happen very often. Burdon *et al.* found that 79% of the sealers they observed did not check for a corneal reflex. Daoust *et al.*’s figure was even higher – 87%. It is not surprising, therefore, that video records of Canada’s seal hunt for the years 1998-2001 inclusive all show numerous instances where animals were clubbed or shot and not rendered immediately unconscious. From the video evidence under review, the estimated proportion of animals in this category ranges from a minimum of 11% (Daoust *et al.*) to about 40% (Burdon *et al.*). If such percentages are at all typical of the Canadian hunt, they suggest that 26,000 to 96,000 harp seal pups annually are not rendered immediately unconscious after being clubbed or shot, but rather are left to suffer for some time before being killed.

Coincidentally or not, these figures are not very different from the data provided in Burdon *et al.* from post-mortem examination of skulls from seals killed in the hunt. If their results are in any way representative of the entire hunt, they would suggest that somewhere between 41,000 and 100,000+ animals are skinned while still conscious.

Together, the two reports also document that a number of animals each year are hooked and dragged across the ice while still conscious and some of these are still alive by the time they reach the decks of sealing vessels.

Collectively, the two reports are essentially consistent with observations documented by IFAW for the 1995 and 1996 Canadian commercial seal hunts. As noted Canadian lawyer, Clayton Ruby has observed:

“IFAW’s videotaped evidence underscores the fact that the rules intended to govern the hunt are difficult (perhaps impossible) to enforce and are routinely ignored by sealers. Canada needs to act quickly if it is to maintain its international reputation as a humane society.”

Daoust *et al.*’s conclusion that “the large majority of seals taken during this hunt (at best, 98% in work reported here) are killed in an acceptably humane manner” is not supported by the data presented in their report, unless of course, these authors have a very narrow view of what constitutes “an acceptably humane

manner.” Regardless, even they concluded that the “...proportion of animals that are not killed effectively justifies continued attention to this hunt on the part of the veterinary profession”.

Daoust *et al.* also concluded that, “Ultimately, the quality of the seal hunt will depend on appropriate and enforceable regulations, adequate supervision and monitoring by DFO officers, and the training and ethics of the sealers”. IFAW’s unpublished evidence from Canada’s commercial seal hunt since 2001 (the last year discussed in this review) indicates that the situation has not improved in recent years. After viewing footage of the 2004 seal hunt at the recent Council of Europe Hearing on Seal Hunting, a Norwegian expert – and a proponent of sealing and whaling – noted that the sealing practices recorded on the film would not be permitted in Norway. The fact that the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans nonetheless continues to cite a small part of the Daoust *et al.* report to deceive people that “virtually all seals taken during the hunt are in fact killed in a humane manner”⁴ indicates a complete lack of political will to ensure that this anachronistic hunt meets the animal welfare standards expected of Canada in the 21st century.

David M. Lavigne⁸

Science Advisor

International Fund for Animal Welfare

Notes & Sources

¹ Burdon, R., J. Gripper, J.A. Longair, I. Robinson, and D. Ruehlmann. 2001. Observation of the Canadian Commercial Seal Hunt. Prince Edward Island, Canada. Report of an International Veterinary Panel, March 2001. 36 pp.

² Daoust, P.-Y., A. Crook, T.K. Bollinger, K.G. Campbell, and J. Wong. 2002. Animal welfare and the harp seal hunt in Atlantic Canada. Special Report. Canadian Veterinary Journal, 43: 687-694. (Note: according to the Instructions to Authors, Special Reports in the Canadian Veterinary Journal are not peer reviewed, see <http://www.canadianveterinarians.net/vetjournals/cvj/instructions.html#1>.)

³ For example, the International Fund for Animal Welfare often claims that “42% of killed seals examined were found to have minimal or no fractures, suggesting a high probability that these seals were conscious when skinned” (From the IFAW website:

<http://www.ifaw.org/ifaw/general/default.aspx?oid=85064>. Accessed 13 December 2004). Similarly, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) states, “An alarming number of the seals are skinned while alive and conscious. Recently, an independent, international team of veterinarians observed the hunt, and examined the corpses of skinned seals. They found evidence that up to 40% of seals were skinned while still able to feel pain” (From the HSUS website, <http://www.protectseals.org>. Accessed 13 December 2004).

⁴ DFO repeatedly claims, for example, that, “A recent report published by the Canadian Veterinary Journal concluded 98% of harp seals are killed in what veterinarians describe as an acceptably humane manner” (Fisheries and Oceans Canada. 2003. UNDERSTANDING SEALS & SEALING IN CANADA. FACTS ABOUT SEALS 2003. Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Available at: http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/seal-phoque/facts-faits/facts-faits20032005_e.htm#HUMANE%20HARVESTING).

Other examples include: “A study by independent members of the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association found that virtually all seals taken during the hunt are in fact killed in a humane manner” (Fisheries

and Oceans Canada. 2004. UNDERSTANDING SEALS & SEALING IN CANADA. Six Facts About Canada’s Seal Hunt. Available at: http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/seal-phoque/facts-faits/factsheet_e.htm) and “A recent report published by the Canadian Veterinary Journal concluded virtually all harp seals are killed in what veterinarians describe as an acceptably humane manner” (Fisheries and Oceans Canada. 2004. UNDERSTANDING SEALS & SEALING IN CANADA. FACTS ABOUT SEALS 2004 - 2005. Available at: http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/seal-phoque/facts-faits/facts-faits2004_e.htm#HUMANE%20HARVESTING). The most recent example appears in a letter to the editor of the *National Post*, 7 January 2005, p. A15, under the signature of David Bevan, Assistant Deputy Minister, Fisheries and Aquaculture Management, Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

⁵ Hammill, M.O. and G.B. Stenson. 2003. Harvest simulations for 2003-2006 harp seal management plan. CSAS Research Document 2003/068. Available at: http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/csas/Csas/English/Research_Years/2000/R_D00_e.htm.

⁶ Note: There is a error in the Daoust *et al.*’s Table 2. The “do not agree” column adds up to 30, not 27; whereas the “agree column” adds up to 10, not 13. I have assumed that the text is correct: that the “agreed” total is actually 13. The text also says that “Three seals were clearly shot and subsequently lost (p. 691) so I assume that these 3 seals should be placed in the “agree” column, rather than in the “do not agree” column.

⁷ International Fund for Animal Welfare. 1996. Canada’s seal hunt. It’s not just cruel...it’s criminal. An IFAW Investigative Report. IFAW Canada, Ottawa. 23 pp.

⁸ Dr David Lavigne has conducted research on harp seals since 1969. He has observed the hunt on a number of occasions and, in 1973, acted as an official observer for the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies. From 1973-1996 he was a zoology professor at the University of Guelph, Canada. He is co-author of *Harps & Hoods: Ice-breeding Seals of the Northwest Atlantic* (University of Waterloo Press: 1988) and a long-standing member of IUCN’s Seal Specialist Group. He recently appeared as an invited expert before the Council of Europe’s Hearing on Seal Hunting (see Lavigne, D.M. 2004. Notes for a presentation to The Hearing on Seal Hunting, Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. 5 October 2004. Strasbourg, France. 6 pp).

© IFAW
January 2005