

BUSINESS | 21.10.2006

German Politicians Ban Import of Seal Products



Harp seals are among those hunted

Germany's parliament has passed a motion banning the import of seal products and sets as a larger goal an EU-wide ban. Lawmakers said the methods used to kill seals were brutal.

The vote for the ban on Thursday night was unanimous and eliminates the German market from the commercial seal trade. Many German parliamentarians also now want to see a ban on seal products and have drafted a proposal for a ban European-wide ban

Hundreds of thousands of seals are killed around the globe annually. In Canada, 350,000 animals have been killed this year. Laws do exist to protect seals, but they only apply to new-born pups. Older seals are can be hunted legally.

Opposition to the hunt has prompted the EU to take steps to halt the trade in seal products. Last month the EU Parliament passed a resolution in support of an EU-wide trade ban.

Animal rights groups, including the German office of the International Fund for Animal Welfare, hailed the decision.

Picture of the Day



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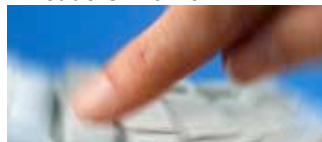
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Your Feedback

"This decision by the German parliament is very significant in its own right, but also in that Germany will be presiding over the EU-presidency in the first half of 2007," said Ralf Sonntag, the group's director. "Germany should use this leadership role to push for a Europe-wide ban on seal products."

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Bärbel Höhn, the Green Party's deputy faction leader in parliament, campaigned for the ban, and said she abhors the methods used to skin seals.



Pups are particularly fluffy

"The seal pups can't even swim yet," she said. "The hunters wait just a few weeks after they are born until the color of their fur changes, then they beat them over the heads and often skin them alive."

She said that studies show that up to 40 percent of the animals have not been hurt enough to be spared of pain.

Seal harvest

Höhn flew to Canada in the spring with an animal rights organization to witness seal hunts, which are a big business for Canada.

According to the Associated Press (AP), the seal hunt there brought \$14.5 million (11.6 million euros) in revenue to Canada last year.

Fishermen sell blubber for oil and the seal pelts, largely for the fashion industry, to European countries like Norway, Russia and China.



The first day of seal hunt season last year in Canada

German firms also import several thousand seal furs every year.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said the cull is an economic necessity for many fishermen, and that hunters do not harvest pups.

"I think unfortunately we're partially the victim of a bit of an international propaganda campaign," Harper also said. "We believe that the country is acting responsibly and we'll make sure all rules are enforced."

Many animal protection groups disagree, however.

"Some seal hunters earn a bit of pocket money with this seal hunt and don't want to lose that," said Sonntag.

"Seal hunters still maintain that the seals eat too much fish and that they're responsible for the depletion of the cod stocks," he added. "But this argument has not been substantiated by research in any way."

According to the AP, the Canadian government maintains Canada's seal population is abundant -- with nearly 6 million in the Arctic north and maritime provinces.



Seal carcasses are often left behind

Regulations require the sealers to quickly kill the seals with a pick or bullet to the brain. The pups also must be over three weeks old and have shed their white downy fur before being killed.

A ban in sight?

German politicians who advocate a European-wide ban want the hunt to stop.

"The decisive point is that I think Germany should do everything possible to stop this cull," said Höhn. "We can't force the Canadians to ban the hunt, but we can make sure that products from these animals are not sold in Germany."

Other countries like the Netherlands and Belgium have already introduced these measures, she said, with Italy having declared a moratorium.



Seal pelts are lucrative business for Canadian fishermen

Some in the fur industry, however, say there's no need for a new law in Germany.

"We don't need the scope of the law to be extended, at least not here in Germany, because we don't make anything from seal fur," said fur designer Olaf Fechner.

Fechner said he's been self-employed since 1979 and hasn't made a single seal fur coat in that time.

"There's no demand for it here in Germany, so it's stupid to be

discussing it. I think sometimes politicians are just interested in raising their profiles. Maybe they should concern themselves with other things -- we have so many problems here," he said.

Fechner did say, however, that the proposed law could put jobs at risk. Some German firms do trade in seal furs, and would be affected by an import ban.

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