

Brief: The Conflation of Canadian Sealing Activities: Implications for Animal Welfare and Inuit Livelihoods

Prepared for: Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans re: current study on Canada's seal population

Prepared by: Sarah Levy, Doctoral Researcher, Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, University of Oxford | sarah.levy@law.ox.ac.uk

Part I: Overview

The fourth key principle of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada states that reconciliation requires constructive action on the part of Canadians to address the legacies which have had destructive impacts on Indigenous peoples' culture, health, and economic prosperity. Essential to the culture, health, and economic prosperity of many Inuit communities in Canada is the continuance of their traditional sealing industry. In addition to the Inuit seal hunt, a seasonal, commercial seal hunt takes place in Atlantic Canada. The commercial sealing industry has been the subject of both domestic and international scrutiny for a half century, having attracted criticism and economic sanction due to concerns pertaining primarily to animal welfare. Although commercial and Inuit sealing differ in their location, purpose, practice, scale, participants, and regulation, the two are commonly regarded as one and the same. This has resulted from the deliberate effort to conflate Inuit and commercial sealing practices by industry and the federal and relevant provincial governments, who have propagated a misinformation campaign on the subject, and by interest groups, who have historically failed to acknowledge the differences between Inuit and commercial sealing practices in their anti-sealing campaigns.

This brief draws attention to the key differences between Inuit and commercial hunting activities, highlighting the historic and ongoing ways in which the federal government in particular has deliberately conflated the two. The aim of this brief is to make the Standing Senate Committee examining the sealing issue aware of the harmful implications of conflation for both the harp seal population and Inuit communities that rely on sealing, with this tactic having the effect of 1) compromising the humane regulation of the commercial sealing industry and 2) damaging Inuit economies and livelihoods. In doing so, this brief provides a summary of the key findings outlined in the article "A Tale of Two Seal Hunts: Contesting the Conflation of Canadian Sealing Activities" (Taylor & Franics, 2020), referenced below.

Part II: Key Questions for Consideration

The Senate should consider two questions in its examination and report of Canada's seal fishery: 1) what are the legal and political processes through which the conflation of Inuit and commercial sealing has occurred; and 2) what are the consequences of said conflation for animal welfare and Inuit livelihoods. In consideration of the second question, the Senate consider how conflation has undermined the stated political aspirations of the federal government to ensure that the commercial seal hunt meets its goals of respecting and promoting animal welfare and Inuit culture, with an aim to rectify past wrongs.

Part III: Issues and Recommendations

3.1: Animal Welfare

In theory, the regulatory framework for commercial sealing seeks to ensure that the commercial seal hunt is conducted in a more humane, sustainable, and culturally appropriate manner, however, due to regulatory gaps and inconsistencies, insufficient compliance and enforcement mechanisms, and misleading information about Inuit hunting practices, respectively, these objectives have not been met. The regulatory framework will not succeed in achieving these goals unless: 1) the framework requires sealers to comply with higher animal welfare standards, and those standards are meaningfully enforced; and 2) references linking the commercial hunt to Inuit sealing are removed.

In order for the commercial seal hunt to be conducted more humanely, robust animal welfare regulations which incorporate both veterinary recommendations and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) must be implemented, complied with, and enforced. Veterinary assessments of commercial hunting practices have shown that the regulations as they stand allow for seals to experience extreme suffering. Veterinary reports have stated that a failure to stipulate that a seal be killed in a single blow, stunned prior to slaughter, and properly exsanguinated results in unnecessary suffering. In order for the commercial seal hunt to be conducted more humanely, seals must be: 1) stunned with a single blow, 2) immediately tested for unconsciousness, (3) immediately exsanguinated, and (4) monitored during this process in the event that further stunning is required. The former two recommendations are not required, but veterinarians have observed that the latter two requirements, which are required under the regulations, are most often not complied with or enforced. Inuit sealers, by contrast, ensure that a seal is killed in one single blow due to the individualised nature of the hunting practice. Veterinarians have agreed that the Inuit method of sealing is humane, because seals do not suffer painful or protracted deaths.

3.2: Inuit Livelihoods

In addition to its responsibilities to the harp seal species, the DFO has a responsibility to Inuit communities to ensure that appropriate messages regarding the socio-cultural and economic significance of the respective seal hunts are being conveyed. The Management Plan for Atlantic Seals (2015) states that one of its main objectives is the consideration of Indigenous culture and livelihoods. The Management Plan outlines three objectives implicating Indigenous issues: 1) that the commercial hunt be conducted in congruence with TEK; 2) that the Atlantic seal hunt facilitates community well-being and nutrition; and 3) that “appropriate messages” related to Indigenous peoples and the seal harvest are conveyed by the DFO. These goals are not being advanced at present. Commercial hunting practices do not resemble Inuit ones, and thus cannot be said to meaningfully incorporate TEK. Furthermore, the commercial seal hunt does not involve the Inuit, so its success does not impact on the communal well-being or nutrition of any Indigenous peoples. It is the third goal of relaying appropriate cultural information on the commercial seal hunt that is most clearly flouted, given that the government has conflated Inuit and commercial seal hunting practices as a strategic tactic used to garner support for the commercial seal hunt in the international sphere.

While the importance of the Inuit seal hunt in terms of maintaining food security, cultural integrity, and economic self-determination cannot be overstated, the commercial seal hunt is a seasonal industry that does not provide significant economic benefit for the eastern provinces or Canada in general, especially following the EU ban on Canadian seal products in 2009, which decimated the market for seal products. Although the EU ban includes an exemption for the import of Inuit seal products in, the perception that commercial and Inuit sealing is the same, or somehow linked, has destroyed the market for Inuit seal products as well. Thus, while both the nature and importance of these two practices could not be more distinct, Inuit sealers have been punished for the actions of commercial sealers, despite legislative attempts by the EU to protect their economies. As a result of the muddled dialogue on commercial and Inuit sealing, both food security and the survival of culture and livelihoods has been compromised in Inuit communities, constituting an appropriation of an Indigenous practice by for economic gain, at the tangible expense of Inuit culture and livelihoods.

The tactic of conflation not only goes against the principles of reconciliation, but infringes on the Inuit’s uniquely held rights. Given that the Inuit have both a constitutionally protected right to hunt seals, and a codified right to pursue economic development under the UNDRIP to pursue economic development, the commercial seal hunt has infringed on their communities’ uniquely held rights. The impact of the backlash against commercial sealing on the Inuit demonstrates just how powerful the misleading and exploitative strategy employed by the Canadian government has been for Inuit communities. In conclusion, in order to undo the damage caused by the deliberate conflation of commercial and Inuit sealing practices, the Standing Senate Committee investigating this issue, and federal government generally, have a responsibility to distinguish between the cultural and economic significance of commercial and Inuit sealing practices in future reports and political discourse.

Works Referenced

A Tale of Two Seal Hunts: Contesting the Conflation of Canadian Sealing Activities by Sarah Levy
(2020) 23:3 Journal of International Wildlife Law & Policy 166

Retrievable: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13880292.2020.1846858>