

“Our cameras tell a different story”

Interview with Sheryl Fink, Wildlife Campaigns Director of the IFAW Canada

1. How did you take an interest in seals and their protection?

My educational background is in wildlife biology, not animal protection, so it was not the usual route. As a young biology student we took a course on Natural Resource Policy, which looked at Canadian and international wildlife policy. One of the case studies was the collapse of Atlantic cod and Canada’s commercial seal hunt. We examined how both Canada’s fisheries policy and the seal hunt policy were being guided not by science, but by the ambitions of politicians to get re-elected. The overall moral of the story was to realize, as undergraduates, that wildlife policy is not always based on science or scientific evidence. Public opinion, values, economics, and politics also play a role, and policy decisions are not always based on the best available science. It was an important lesson for us then, and I think even today many young people would be surprised to learn that wildlife management policies are often not based on science at all but they are political decisions that may be informed by science, but that other factors often outweigh scientific advice.

2. Did you ever take part or witness sealing yourself?

Yes, I have observed the commercial seal hunt in Canada for 11 years, both from on the ice and in the air. We must undergo an interview process and criminal background check each time to obtain an Observation License from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (Government of Canada). In the past, we have travelled by helicopter to the ice where the sealing is taking place. There are many restrictions in place to ensure that we do not interfere with the hunt – the days of “protest” on the ice are now long in the past! But we may observe on the ice at a distance of 10m with our cameras. It can be dangerous. Our crew have been chased by sealers, struck with boat hooks, charged at on snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, and threatened with spiked clubs. Fortunately no one has been seriously injured. Other times the sealers will conduct their work and let us film. In recent years, the ice conditions have been poor due to warming temperatures and reduced ice coverage. In these years we are unable to land a helicopter on the ice, so we use a high-powered gyroscopic camera mounted on the helicopter to film at a distance of 500m. In many cases, this footage is more useful for determining violations of the Marine Mammal regulations because the sealers are unaware of our presence.

3. What exactly makes sealing so cruel and inhumane?

According to veterinary experts in humane slaughter, there are certain criteria that should be met in order to ensure a humane kill of an animal. First the animal must be stunned with a single blow, it must then be checked to ensure that it is unconscious and not feeling any sensation, and then the animal is then bled out to ensure that it is dead. These three steps must take place in rapid succession to ensure the animal does not suffer. In the specific case of the seal hunt, an animal is stunned with either a wooden club, a spiked club called a hakapik, or with a bullet. The sealer is then to check that the brain of the seal is destroyed by pressing down on the skull. The animal is then to be bled out before skinning it. But in reality this rarely happens.

There are two main problems. The first problem is that the commercial seal hunt is extremely competitive, with sealers racing to kill as many seals as quickly as possible, to fill their boat before the quota is reached, or to shoot the seal before it is frightened into the water. Because of this, speed is the priority rather than humane killing methods. Multiple seals are shot at from boats, and several minutes may pass before a seal is checked for unconsciousness. An animal may appear to be dead from a distance, but with our cameras we can see that they are often still breathing, suffering for long periods before the boat arrives to finally kill it. We regularly see seals that are shot, injured, and then hooked in the face with a boat hook while alive and conscious and dragged along the ice and into the boats where they are rendered unconscious and killed. Shockingly, this is allowed under the current regulations in Canada. Obviously this poses a serious animal welfare concern.

The second problem is the unpredictable and often severe weather conditions that are experienced during the seal hunt. This is not the controlled setting of an abattoir. Wind, waves, ocean swells, and snow all come into play. It is very difficult to ensure a clean kill when aiming at a small seal on an ice pan that is bobbing up and down in the ocean from a moving boat. Seals are often struck and injured with the first bullet and will begin writhing on the ice floe in pain, this makes it extremely difficult for a sealer to take a second shot accurately (the sealer must aim for the head so as to not damage the pelt). Seals that are shot but only injured and not killed may slip into the water where they die a slow and painful death.

Although the government claims the seal hunt is humane and well regulated, every year our cameras tell a different story. Seals shot and left to suffer, seals hooked through the face with a steel boat hook while they are still alive and barking, and animals that have been sliced open and still breathing and making conscious motions.

4. What's your opinion on the EU seal ban?

The EU ban was highly successful in reducing the number of seals killed in Canada. Although the EU was not a very large market for Canadian seal products, it is highly influential in the world. After the EU ban, Russia and Taiwan also implemented similar bans. As a result, the number of seals killed in Canada has dropped from 200,000-300,000 / year before the ban, to between 40,000-90,000 in the past three years. The value of a seal skin has also dropped from \$102 CAD in 2006 to only \$25 last year. Lower pelt prices means fewer sealers will participate, and fewer seals will be killed, which means less suffering of seals.

5. The seals hunted in Canada are not an endangered species, why is it so important for them to be protected?

One could also ask the question the other way: if there are no markets for seal products, and there are legitimate concerns about the way they are being killed, why do we need to hunt them? The sealing industry in Canada (and Norway) continues to rely heavily on government money in order for it to continue. While the harp seal population appears to be healthy now, there are concerns about the loss of ice habitat due to climate change. Canadian government scientists estimate that in recent years, entire year classes of seal pups may be missing due to mortality from poor ice and commercial hunting.

6. Do you know what the impacts of the EU seal ban are on seal hunters in Canada and what would you propose the hunters and their families could do instead of sealing, considering the fact that sealing, besides fishing, is their main source of income?

Sealing is not the main source of income for any fisherman in Canada. It is a part time activity, conducted for a few weeks of the year. When the value of a sealskin goes out, fewer sealers participate and they seem to have managed just fine. Sealing is very much a small industry relative to other fisheries in Atlantic Canada, and most fishermen focus on more valuable species such as snow crab. Many sealers make very little money from the hunt, and in some years none at all after they cover their expenses such as fuel, ammunition, repairs to boats (most are not suited to being in the ice). Just as when commercial whaling ended in Canada there was not a large outcry, it appears as though very few individuals would actually be affected by the demise of sealing. One solution that has been proposed is to provide compensation from the Canadian government, which is the normal practice when fisheries are closed. This could be in the form of a sealing license buyout, retraining or investment in other fisheries, or other solutions.