

CONSERVATION CONCERNS WITH CANADA'S COMMERCIAL SEAL HUNT

Those who defend Canada's commercial seal hunt claim that since harp seals are not classified as Endangered, seal hunting is not a conservation issue. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Canada's commercial seal hunt is the largest hunt for a marine mammal in the world. This fact alone makes it an important conservation issue. The setting of unsustainable allowable catches, the effect of global warming on the species' breeding habitat, and the Canadian government's refusal to take a precautionary management approach, make this Canada's harp seal hunt a conservation concern for many scientists.

The current level of hunting is biologically unsustainable.

Since 2000, the Canadian government has been setting Total Allowable Catches (TACs) at levels which government scientists say will cause the population to decline. In 2005, it was estimated that any kill level greater than 250,000 would cause a decrease in the population. The TAC was set at 335,000, and 354,344 seal pups were reported killed. In 2007, the estimated replacement yield was 165,000. Yet again, the TAC was set at a much higher level - 270,000. Not surprisingly, government scientists are now reporting a decline in the harp seal population.

The commercial seal hunt is not well monitored or regulated, and there are no penalties for exceeding the Allowable Catch. In 4 of the past 6 years, TACs have been exceeded.

For more information:

• *Variation in Ice Cover on the East Coast of Canada, February-March, 1969-2006: Implications for harp and hooded seals. (2007)*

http://www.ifaw.org/ifaw/dimages/custom/2_Publications/Seals/Global_Warming_seals.pdf

Global warming is affecting harp seal breeding habitat. Today, the most serious conservation threat to harp seals (and other ice-dependent species) is global warming.

Harp seals require a stable ice platform to give birth and nurse their pups. If suitable ice cannot be found, mothers are forced to give birth in the water where the pups will die. If ice is found, but does not remain solid through the two week nursing period, pups are unable to receive the milk they need to build up the thick blubber required for survival. Thin ice may break up in wind or waves before the pups are fully fed and able to swim, and they will be crushed in the ice or succumb to exhaustion as they struggle to find solid ice.

Below-average ice conditions during the harp seal's birthing and nursing period are becoming more prevalent. According to Environment Canada data, ice conditions have been below-average in 10 of the past 12 years. Government scientists report that this is resulting in increased mortality of harp seal pups, the same pups that are targeted in Canada's commercial seal hunt.

The true impact of the years of unsustainable catches, combined with increased pup mortality due to global warming, has yet to be realized. A recent analysis of the Canadian government's management approach found that the likelihood of depleting the seal population by more than 50-70% within the next 15 years is "alarmingly high".

One thing governments can do to counteract the threats posed by global warming is to reduce other, non-climate threats, such as over-hunting. A precautionary approach demands that Canada take steps to reduce the threats to the harp seal population posed by unsustainable levels of hunting and environmental uncertainty.