

International Trade in Harp and Hooded Seals

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Every year the killing of harp and hooded seals off Newfoundland and in the St Lawrence Gulf raises a public outcry, especially over the clubbing of the whitecoat pups. In 1979 IUCN scientists suggested to the Canadian Government that the quotas were too high and could be imperilling the stocks. Little was known about the trade in seal products that resulted from the hunts, and in 1978 FPS commissioned Jon Barzdo to make a study of this aspect. This article is a summary of his report, a 30,000-word document with detailed figures, obtainable from the FPS office for £3, including p&p.

Harp and hooded seals *Pagophilus groenlandicus* and *Cystophora cristata* are unrelated members of the hair seal family Phocidae, and inhabit the drifting pack ice of the North Atlantic, from Baffin Bay in the west to the White Sea in the east. Large numbers are harvested every year, but little is known about the international trade in their products – skins, oil and meat. Consequently the FPS set up this project to establish

1. the number of harp and hooded seals involved in worldwide trade;
2. the purposes to which the skins and other products of seals are put;
3. the value of products at each stage of trade; and
4. the final form and locations of the markets.

Number of Seals

All harp and hooded seal products in trade come from Canada, Norway or Greenland. Seals are killed in four principal areas. Off Canada's east coast all ages, mostly pups, are killed by Canadians and Norwegians; on the coast of Greenland local hunters kill young and adults, but no whitecoats or bluebacks* because neither species breeds there. Norwegian and Russian sealers take both the species off Jan Mayen (mostly whitecoats and bluebacks) and in the White Sea (mostly young harps excluding whitecoats). Products from seals taken by Russians are not thought to enter international trade.

Figures for the 1970s show that skins from about 109,000 harp and 2500 hooded seals enter trade through Canada each year; through Norway the figures are about 80,000 harp and 31,000 hooded seals annually. Skins from Greenland, where a large proportion of the catch is used by locals, must pass through Denmark in order to enter international trade; in the 1970s the skins averaged 2200 harp and 1400 hooded each year. Skins are the most important products in trade. For 1977 the figures are as follows:

Skins taken by –	Canada	Norway	Greenland	Total
Harp seals	118,706	56,682	2,804	178,192
Hooded seals	6,063	21,438	3,066	30,567
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				208,759

*Whitecoat: a harp seal, usually less than 10 days old, which has still not lost the soft white fur it was born with. Blueback: a new-born hooded seal with blue 'fast' fur.

Only three seal products are of commercial importance: First, skins; second, oil from the blubber; and, least important, the meat.

SKINS

1. Raw Skins

In Canada, only two companies buy sculps from the sealers; Carino Co. of St John's, Newfoundland, and Karlson Shipping Co. of Halifax, Nova Scotia. After removal of the blubber and simple processing Carino generally sends its skins to its parent company, G.C. Rieber & Co. in Norway. Skins from Karlson, however, generally go to a furrier in Germany via the London company M.C. Miller and Moore, although some may be sent to the UK. As there are some 40 grades of pelt, depending on quality, colour, and the age of the animal, it is hard to specify a value, but the average price paid to sealers in 1977 was about \$17 a sculp (i.e. a skin with the blubber); old harps fetched as little as \$6.58 and bluebacks as much as \$40.30. In the same year the average value of sealskins at the point of export from Canada was \$20.58, but this included skins other than of harp and hooded seals. Skins entering trade from Greenland must pass through the Royal Greenland Trade Department which auctions them in Copenhagen. Again, the large number of grades of skin means there is a wide range of payments. The sealers were paid Dkr30-200 a skin in 1978, but these were without blubber. Some were sold at a loss but others at a considerable profit. Thus harp skins with a defined saddle sold at auction for Dkr10 - 390; and at the (then) most recent auction of hooded seal, in 1977, skins achieved prices from about Dkr20 to Dkr330. These skins go mainly to West Germany, Poland, France, Norway, Austria and UK.

In Norway seal skins go to one of four de-blubbing factories. Two are in Tromsø, owned respectively by G.C. Rieber & Co and Jakobsen Brothers, and two, in Ålesund, both owned by Martin Karlson Co. After simple processing some skins are exported raw, mainly to Sweden, Finland, Germany, France and UK. The remainder are either sold to Rieber or sent for dressing and tanning to their Bergen factory, that being one of the few places with the necessary expertise and equipment. Rieber also dresses and tans seal skins for the Russian fur auctions in Leningrad, operated by Sojuzpushnina, and washes skins for the Royal Greenland Trade Department's auctions in Copenhagen. The sealers are paid by the grade of the pelt, but in 1977 the average received for each sculp was Nkr150.34; skins from Newfoundland averaged Nkr127.63 and from Jan Mayen Nkr182.42. Although this cannot be directly compared with any value to the Norwegian companies, the value of seal skins at the point of export from Norway shows an average for all skin types of Nkr110.98 in 1977. However, whitecoats averaged Nkr70.34 and bluebacks Nkr334.44. The principal destinations are France, Finland, UK and West Germany.

2. Processed Skins

Once sold to dealers, sealskins are dressed and tanned, if they were not already, and auctioned or sold direct to furriers. By now they are often dyed, which makes them unrecognisable to the public as seal. The best skins are left looking 'natural' and, like the dyed skins, made into coats. Offcuts and poorer quality furs are used to cover bags or made into moccasins and novelty items - key

cases, purses, seal dolls and cigar cases. The coats sell well in Germany and the Scandinavian countries, and the other items sell throughout Europe and in Canada. Whitecoat is poor fur and so is generally used in coat trimmings or linings. About half the skins are used for leather, notably for shoes and bags, but also in moccasins, belts and wallets, which are sold in many European countries, in Canada and probably elsewhere.

OIL

The blubber is rendered down to oil. In Russia this is used by the coastal peoples and possibly inlanders, but there seems to be no export. The coastal peoples of Greenland also consume the oil from the seals they kill, although RGTD is now trying to create a market for about 10 tons a year outside Greenland, and paid the sealers about Dkr3/kg in 1978 – presumably for the raw oil.

In Canada, Carino Co. was paying the sealers 16¢/lb. for oil in 1977 – about four times the 1976 price. But Karlsen appears to have been paying slightly less. Their total production for 1977 was about 2092 tonnes of seal oil, which is sold on the open market for the highest price, usually to Canada or Europe; in 1977 60 per cent of Canada's production went to Norway. The price varies enormously and has been rising. Canada Packers of Toronto say that crude oil sold for 17-23¢/lb. in 1977. For trade reasons oil and food companies will supply little information about usage, but they admit that seal oil is used in margarine and shortening, and the Premier of Newfoundland says it is used in the manufacture of chocolate.

In Norway production of seal oil has been declining in recent years, and dropped from 2374 tonnes in 1974 to 1440 tonnes in 1977. This may explain why Norway has almost ceased exporting seal oil and is now importing increasing quantities – the reverse of the situation before 1974. Although I do not know the price paid to the sealers there, Rieber's de-blubbering plant was selling seal oil direct to refineries, at an average of Nkr2.90 kilo at point of export in 1977, the price varying with the season. The uses of the oil are the same as in Canada. Norwegians also use seal oil as a nutritional supplement, taking it by the spoonful, like cod-liver oil; some cod-liver oil mixtures probably contain seal oil. The decrease in production of high quality fish oils, such as herring, appears to have led to an increase in the value of seal oil, from Nkr1570 tonnes in 1973 to double that in 1977, at the point of export. If this rate continues seal oil will be more important commercially than skin before the end of the century – as it was before 1950 and the development of new skin treatments.

MEAT

There is almost no international trade in harp and hooded seal meat. The only obvious indication that such a trade exists is the inclusion of seal meat in a European customs-tariff heading, together with whale meat and frogs' legs. However this is no evidence of trade, and the enormous quantities traded under this heading are of the right order of value to be frogs' legs. Suggestions in India that the revival of malaria could be due to massive exploitation of frogs support this deduction. However, as Government agencies in Canada, Greenland, Norway and the USSR are all actively encouraging seal-meat marketing and consumption, for economic reasons or for the sake of using a

potentially renewable resource, it is important to know the state of play.

Meat from harp and hooded seals is taken in two forms: flippers from animals of all ages for the meat on the shoulder, and meat from the carcasses of animals more than about three months old, as they have insufficient meat to be worth taking before that age. At three months a carcass yields about 18-20lb of meat, and at one year about 35lb. There are no official statistics in any of the countries where the two species are killed that record the amount of meat taken. However, a 1976 Canadian Government survey found that 78,000 flippers were marketed in Canada in that year, at a retail price of CA\$2 each, although the sealers were paid \$10.80-\$24 a dozen. The vast majority of the flippers taken are used by the sealers themselves in Newfoundland and Labrador and sold privately, so that they were not included in this survey. Indeed, the total number of flippers landed in Canada was officially estimated to be 288,807 in 1976, valued at CA\$210,063 – i.e. 73¢ each. Strangely, this accounts for at least 144,403.5 seals, which is 21,017.5 more than the official number of harp and hooded seals killed. In both Norway and Canada the flippers are used in flipper soup and flipper pie, and in Newfoundland the latter is said to be the centre of social feasts.

In Canada the market for seal meat is entirely within Newfoundland and Labrador, and consists mostly of fresh and frozen seal meat. 1978 statistics of the Canadian Dept. of Fisheries show that 20,000 seals are used annually for domestic consumption – about 14 per cent of the 1978 kill of harps and hoodeds – and that 10,000 are used for canning. The survey carried out two years earlier had concluded that nearly 59,600 carcasses were landed in 1976, of which some 28,000 were sold to fresh meat retailers and possibly as many as 9000 sold privately or consumed domestically. In 1977 fresh seal meat retailed at CA\$1.40/lb.

Canned seal meat is cheaper, retailing at 89¢ for a 14oz tin in Newfoundland in 1978. Young seal is canned with the bone and older ones without it. Only two Canadian companies can seal meat, one of which claims to can 500,000lb a year (although the evidence indicates that this is an overestimate by about 200 per cent); the other canned about 300,000lb in 1977. Both, however, failed to sell their stock in that year and canned none the following year, in spite of Government initiatives to improve the markets.

Norway also has a cannery, but it is still experimental, having canned only five tons in 1977 and the same in 1978. The two products, both in white sauce, are seal steak and processed meat-balls, selling to the trade at \$1.90 and \$1.20 respectively for an 850-g can. Since seal meat is low in fat and high in protein, its main disadvantage in marketing is thought, by the cannery, to be the dark colour – and, I would add, the unusual flavour, especially of the processed meat balls. Norwegian sealers certainly take flippers and meat from harp and hooded seals for their own use and for private sale, but they keep no records of this, as any declared income would be taxed at the very high Norwegian rate.

In both Greenland and the USSR seal meat is an important part of the diet of coastal peoples. In Greenland well over 2000 tonnes is estimated to be used annually, though not necessarily from harp and hooded seals, and a few tonnes each year are exported to Denmark for the use of Greenlanders there. In the Soviet Union meat goes to feed mink and silver fox on fur farms, and seal tongue is a delicacy. The implications of using meat of seals killed by lethal injection – as many are – are not clear.

DISCUSSION

Largely as a result of the depletion of harp and hooded seal stocks over the past decades, Canada, Norway and USSR all operate scientifically-based quota systems for the kills of these species. And the quotas make some allowance for Greenland catches, where quotas would be difficult or impossible to enforce. So it is significant that from 1970 to 1977, while the number of harp and hooded seals traded by Canadians, Norwegians and Russians has decreased, the Greenland trade has increased by 240 per cent.

In numbers, this is not important in comparison with the trade of the other three countries, but it is obviously important for Greenlanders and for their dependence on these species as a resource. And in fact the Greenland people have been complaining about the drop in value of skins; so also have the Canadian Eskimos. Both groups, and also some skin dealers, blame the anti-sealing campaigns for the reduced demand and reduced value. But the real value of skins has been falling for over five years, longer than the time the major anti-sealing campaigns have been operating; and 1978 saw the beginning of a recovery. The fact that dyed whitecoat skins and other types unrecognisable as seal have continued to sell well supports the theory of the effects of campaigners. As about 50 per cent of sealskins go to make leather one would expect no decline in at least half of the demand for skins, so presumably the effect on the other half is considerable. But some dealers believe the decreased demand is caused by the fashion cycle.

However, as the number of seals whose products enter international trade is controlled not by consumer demand but by fisheries management authorities' quotas, it is quite possible that supply will exceed demand. In this case, the expected result is a drop in price and a diversification of use to ensure that the investment is not lost. This has certainly happened with sealskins, in the move to novelty uses, and to a lesser extent with processed seal meat, with both Canada and Norway trying to expand their markets. With the improvements in skin dressing over the past thirty years, sealskins have come to be used in high-class garments, and skins became the most important product of seals. But the demand is diminishing. Add to this the increased demand for good marine oils and the reason for the rapid increase in seal-oil value becomes clear.

Most seal meat is wasted, left to be washed back into the sea. The major problem, if more were taken, would be finding markets. But the present level of wastage is unacceptable and attention should be paid to potential uses.

Apart from the products, seals have important non-consumptive values which so far management authorities have ignored. Harp and hooded seals feature in films, television programmes and books whose popularity reflects the value of the subject. It is, of course, impossible to assess the true value of seals, but one indicator might be to check the success of a book like Bruemmer's *The Life of the Harp Seal* or the monetary support for anti-sealing campaigns such as those of Greenpeace and International Fund for Animal Welfare. This could be graphed against the fall in value of sealskins. Other factors are the cost of advertising and distribution of literature; the cost of postage, both of anti-sealing campaigns and thousands of support letters to ministers, MPs and animal welfare and conservation groups; and the cost of protesting on the ice-fields off Newfoundland. Any comprehensive analysis of the effects of anti-sealing campaigns must take all these factors into account.