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Briefing: The Commercial Seal Hunt

Vote Cruelty Free is opposed to the commercial hunting of seals because of the cruelty involved, the unsustainable nature of the hunts, and the additional threat that global warming poses to seal populations.

Commercial seal hunts take place in Canada, Greenland, Namibia, Norway and Russia; with Canada's commercial seal hunt being by far the largest marine mammal hunt in the world. These hunts take place primarily for the animal's fur resulting in over 1.5 million seals being killed in Canada in the last five years alone. Every veterinary report on the Canadian commercial seal hunt demonstrates unacceptable levels of cruelty.

Vote Cruelty Free remains convinced that Canada's commercial seal hunt is inherently inhumane, as evidenced by veterinary, media and eyewitness reports along with a study conducted by the European Food Standards Agency (EFSA) on behalf of the Commission. Any decision that tries to enforce higher standards is unrealistic. In 2008, for example, the Canadian government issued new regulations for hunters claiming these would make the hunt "as humane as possible". However, one of these regulations called for the bleeding out of seals (to ensure death) to be conducted only at some point 'where possible', which could even be after the seal has been injured, dragged across the ice and finally hauled onto the deck of a sealing vessel. IFAW footage showed many violations of the new rules and documented seals suffering slow and agonising deaths.

EU seal products ban

In 1983, the European Community banned the trade in skins from newborn harp seals ('whitecoats' up to 12 days old) and young hooded seals ('bluebacks' up to 14 months old)¹. This ban substantially reduced the market for sealskins and thus greatly reduced the scale of the Canadian seal hunt. However, following subsidies from the Canadian government to reinvigorate the hunt and create new commercial markets, the annual hunt has increased with a vengeance. The sealers now simply wait a few extra days until the harp seals begin to shed their 'whitecoats' before killing them.

As a result of studies by the European Commission

(one regarding the humaneness of seal hunting and an impact assessment looking at socio-economic aspects of the hunt), an upsurge in European public opinion² and Member State pressure against the hunt, the EU decided to revisit this issue and in May 2009 the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly in favour of a ban on the trade of seal products from commercial hunts within the EU.

The EU ban contains within it an exemption for products from Inuit hunts and by-products from seal management programmes as long as these are conducted on a non-profit basis.. Once approved by the Council the ban will become law in 2010, a major victory in the long campaign to end cruel commercial seal hunts worldwide.

Seal product bans are nothing new and have been in existence in some countries for over 30 years. The USA has had a ban in place since the introduction of the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972. In May 2009 the U.S. Senate unanimously passed a Resolution calling for an immediate end to this annual commercial slaughter. Mexico introduced its own Marine Mammal Protection Act in 2006 and Croatia also banned the trade in seal products in 2006.

Russia has also recently banned the hunt of all harp seals less than one year old. This decision heralds the ultimate end of the hunt in the northern White Sea region.

Vote Cruelty Free would like to congratulate the decisions of both the Russian government and the European Union for taking these momentous steps in 2009. These victories send a strong message to the Canadian, Norwegian and Namibian governments that commercial seal hunting can no longer be tolerated in modern society. Vote Cruelty Free's focus now shifts to Canada where Canadian Senator Mac Harb introduced a Bill to end commercial sealing in Spring 2009.

The Canadian commercial seal hunt today

- Canada's commercial seal hunt is the largest marine mammal hunt in the world. In the last five years

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over 1.5 million seals have been killed in Canada. This year's quota was set at 275,000. This does not include the thousands of seals which are killed in the water but not recovered.

- Current kill levels are unsustainable. The Canadian government is ignoring its own scientific advice by setting quotas for harp seals above what the population can sustain. A recent scientific report concluded that the Canadian government's management approach risks depleting the harp seal population by as much as 70% within the next 15 years³. Recent years, including 2007, have seen poor ice conditions, which normally lead to higher natural pup mortality rates.
- Veterinary reports have consistently identified unacceptable levels of cruelty. Due to concerns about cruelty, the European Commission asked the animal health and welfare panel of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to produce a scientific opinion on seal killing and skinning methods. The study, published in December 2007, recognised many of the concerns raised by previous veterinary reports, stating there is strong evidence that, in practice, effective killing does not always occur; that animals suffer pain and distress during Canada's commercial seal hunt; and that sealers often do not comply with regulations.
- Canada's commercial seal hunt targets seal pups. In 2008, approximately 98.5% of the seals killed were less than three months old.
- The pups are killed primarily for their fur. Practically all of the seal carcasses are abandoned and left to rot on the ice because there are few markets for the meat.
- Overfishing, not seals, has led to the decline in fish stocks. Even the Canadian government no longer claims the hunt is related to fish stocks, and acknowledges it is purely a commercial hunt.
- The commercial hunt is separate from the Inuit hunt. Vote Cruelty Free is not opposed to subsistence hunting by the Inuit and other First Nation peoples of Canada, who take less than 2,000 (adult) harp seals a year. Canada's commercial seal hunt and Inuit seal hunting are two very different operations; they take place at different times of the year, in different places, involve different people and different seals. The Canadian government is cynically trying to blur the distinction between Canada's commercial seal hunt and Inuit sealing to deflect opposition to the commercial hunt. Virtually all existing bans on seal products contain exemptions for products derived from Inuit hunts.

The economics of the hunt

- Europe remains a key transitory market for Canadian sealskins. Each year hundreds of thousands of Canadian sealskins are shipped to Europe for processing and resale.
- The seal hunt contributes very little to Canada's economy. Even in Newfoundland, where 90% of sealers live, sealing income accounts for less than 0.5% of Newfoundland's GDP.
- No-one makes a living solely from the seal hunt. It contributes very little to individual incomes, with about 5,000 fishermen participating each year, for a few days during the off-season for fishing.
- The Canadian government still indirectly subsidises the hunt, for example, through the provision of ice-breaking vessels to allow sealers access to the pups, and through funding an expensive PR effort in the face of massive and ever-increasing international opposition.

Commitments sought from UK Government

- To support and enforce the EU ban on the commercial trade and importation of seal products into the EU
- Renew diplomatic efforts with Canada, Norway, Denmark (Greenland), Russia and Namibia to seek an end to cruel commercial seal hunts and the trade in seal products in these hunts
- Provide support to Canadian Senator MacHarb and other Canadian politicians in their efforts to ban commercial seal hunting in Canada
- Promote a ban on the sale of commercial seal products worldwide

¹ EEC Directive 83/129/EEC.

² A series of polls conducted across a number of member states have shown that over 70% of citizens oppose commercial seal hunting and support an EU ban on the trade in seal products

³ Leaper, R., Matthews, J., 'An investigation of the effects of uncertainty on Canadian harp seal management', London: IFAW, 2006