

Think About It

BY Tom Schneider

Part of the annual spring seal hunt arrived on the north shore of P.E.I. earlier this week, providing the general public with the rare opportunity of witnessing the hunt firsthand, causing some reflection on the whole process.

This situation has sparked an especially concerted effort on the part of the seal hunt protest groups. Peter Dykstra of Greenpeace has said, "With the ice up against the shore of Prince Edward Island, the inhuman aspects take on an even more gruesome air. The seals haven't come to P.E.I. in over ten years, and the sealers who have applied for permits will be dangerously inexperienced. It will be a horrible spectacle, with shore-bound harp seals at the mercy of the hunters."

It is unfortunate that permits were granted to Island fishermen because most were lacking the skills necessary for a clean kill and skinning. Even the most experienced hunters have difficulties, at times, because of the protective role of blubber which the seal may draw its head into. This, along with the occasional nature of the seal pups to play dead when threatened, results in the effect that at times the pups are skinned while still conscious. A press release, issued Tuesday, through the combined efforts of three protest groups states, "Harp seal pups were skinned alive during the P.E.I. seal hunt yesterday. William Murphy, Fisheries Canada Area Manager for P.E.I., said that there were several incidents

in which seal pups "were skinned before they lost consciousness." Similar claims have been forwarded by hunt opponents for years, but never before admitted to by Fisheries.

A halt to the P.E.I. hunt has been declared by the Canadian Ministry of Fisheries. The end of the slaughter was attributed to "sloppy and wasteful hunting by inexperienced sealers". However, Doug Mulhall of Greenpeace said that the abrupt end to the hunt was a result of the fact that "The eyes of the anti-seal hunt groups and the international media are focused on P.E.I."

Stephen Best of the International Fund for Animal Welfare added, "The hunt was taking place as little as 20 feet offshore. If they (Fisheries) can't regulate the hunt there, they can't regulate it anywhere". This press release points out some of the political nature of the seal hunt, which becomes more apparent in the question of monitoring the seal population levels.

Federal Fisheries authorities claim that relatively accurate population counts are made to prevent overkill. But, depending on whose report you look at, the seals are either in danger of extermination, or not. The Canadian government reports maintain that the seal herds are large enough to withstand the losses incurred by the hunt. On the other hand, some U.S. reports show that the seals could be near extinction within ten years. Who do we believe?

The Canadian government undoubtedly has some interest in seeing the hunt continue, specifically

with regards to the economic benefits gained by Newfoundland fishermen. Otherwise regulations would not have been put into effect banning protesters from the seal hunt grounds and photography of the hunt from within a half-mile radius. But the point has been made, and even suggested by Greenpeace, that the money spent by the government on seal hunt management or that spent on protest by Greenpeace would be sufficient to pay the men not to hunt.

Unfortunately, public reaction to the hunt is based mostly on an emotional reaction to the visual aspects of the hunt and rarely goes beyond this aspect.

The sight of clubs and blood covered ice does not sit well, for most people, with the appearance of a young white seal pup lying helplessly alongside its mother. This "gruesome spectacle" aspect of the hunt has been used to its full emotional extent by the media and protest groups in order to promote their cause. Granted that some form of impact must be used to gain public attention and support, it is unfortunate that the greater issue behind the seal hunt is rarely thought about or brought to the public's attention.

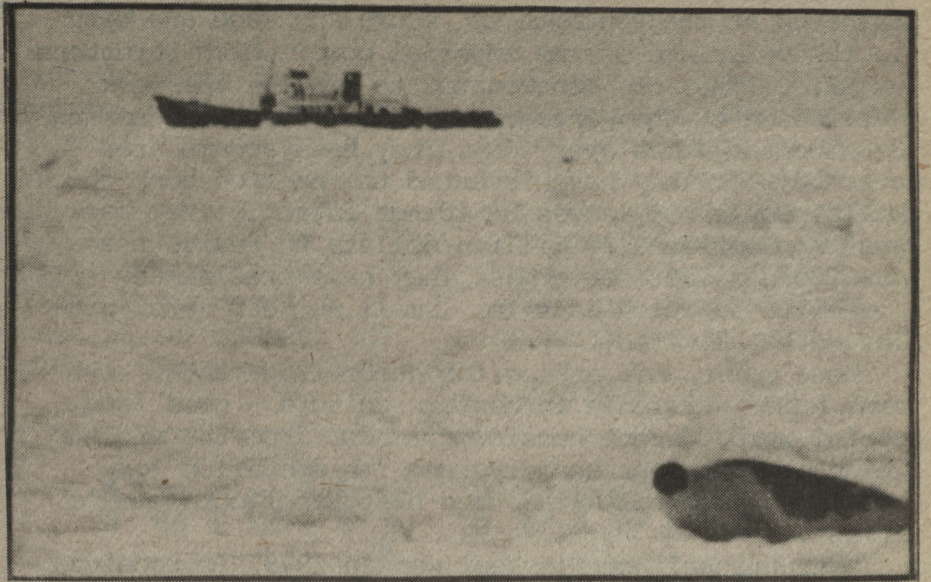
It is important, in dealing with this issue, to forget about the spectacle of the hunt and concentrate

of the underlying implications. What are we doing?

Whether or not the seal is in danger of immediate extermination, the most questionable aspect of this hunt, or for that matter any trapping, is why kill solely for the purpose of acquiring fur. The animals killed in the hunt are not used for any other purpose. The entire remaining carcass is left to rot, except for the skin, which is used purely as a cosmetic, luxury item to beautify our species. All things considered, the skin looked better on the original owner.

On the aspect of endangering species, it is difficult enough to reconcile the fact that many are lost through the encroachment and byproducts of our civilization, but to aggravate this situation with the quest for a luxury item is the real issue which deserves outrage.

This general problem of our attitude towards other species, due largely to the human superiority complex, has resulted in the situation where, whatever our claims to intelligence are, we remain "smart but not wise". Until the majority of people become ever conscious of the complex ecological interdependencies on our planet, events like the seal hunt will continue to wear down the resources which, however abstract from ourselves, are ultimately necessary for our own survival.



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