

## **The seal hunt: Time for a measured approach**

*The Canadian Government urges the UK to consider carefully the real facts on the Canadian seal hunt, writes Canadian High Commissioner James Wright.*

The Canada – UK relationship is among the strongest and longest standing between any two nations. It is a relationship based on profound historical roots, shared values, familial ties, robust trade and investment relationships, and on partnership: at the UN, in NATO, in the G8 and the Commonwealth, and currently in Afghanistan, where our troops continue to fight shoulder to shoulder in the most challenging of conditions.

The bond between our two countries is thus as strong as ever and continues to grow. However, as in all close relationships, differences exist, as is the case regarding the Canadian seal hunt.

Three weeks ago, a delegation led by Canadian Ambassador for Fisheries Conservation Loyola Sullivan came to London to discuss the Canadian perspective on the seal hunt. Accompanied by Nunavut Premier Paul Okalik, Newfoundland Minister of Natural Resources, Cathy Dunderdale, and a number of senior officials, technical experts, and several sealers, the delegation met with UK parliamentarians, government officials, media, and other interest groups in an effort to present the ‘Canadian side’ of this issue.

The delegation greatly valued the dialogue it engaged in with its UK counterparts. It was pleased to be able to provide an update on new humaneness and enforcement measures, and to underscore the impact which a potential EU ban would have on remote coastal, northern, and Inuit communities. During these productive meetings, however, the delegation was reminded of – and disappointed by – the extent to which emotion, based on incorrect information, has sometimes infiltrated the public discourse on this issue.

Many of ‘the facts’ espoused by anti-hunting groups are incorrect or provided in a misleading way. For example, it has been illegal to hunt the whitecoat seals, so often pictured in the press and in anti-sealing campaign literature, for over 20 years. Uninformed and non-expert endorsements have spread a distorted impression of the seal hunt, at the potential expense of Canadian livelihoods in remote regions of my country. As long as these misrepresentations prevail, Canada will continue to seek a balanced portrayal of the seal hunt based on both scientific, peer-reviewed expertise, and facts.

The Canadian seal hunt is a humane, legal, well-managed, and economically viable activity based on sound conservation principles. Seals are killed quickly and according to strict regulations. Moreover, enhanced resources for enforcement will assist in holding to account those few who may violate new humane licence conditions. A number of independent reports have supported this over the years, including one published in the

*Canadian Veterinary Journal* in 2002, which concluded that virtually all seals are taken in an acceptably humane manner. The recent European Food Safety Authority report on the animal welfare aspects of seal hunts around the world upheld the humaneness of the techniques used in Canada's seal hunt. Furthermore, the humaneness of the Canadian hunt compares favourably with wildlife hunts in EU member states and with methods used in commercial abattoirs, including those in the UK.

Canada's seal population is healthy and abundant. Current estimates put the harp seal herd in excess of 5.5 million, nearly triple what it was in the 1970s. Work has already started on a new population survey, to ensure that decisions continue to be made based on the most up-to-date science.

The seal hunt is an economic mainstay for numerous remote communities in Atlantic Canada, Quebec and the North. Decisions on the seal hunt are taken with these people in mind. Seals are a valuable natural resource that provide income to between 5,000 and 6,000 individuals and their families in isolated towns and villages, at a time of year when few other economic opportunities exist.

Furthermore, the seal hunt is of fundamental cultural and economic importance to Inuit communities. An EU ban on Canadian seal products (even if Inuit hunters were excluded, as was the case in the 1980s) would still have a devastating impact on the livelihood of Inuit sealers and their small communities; a point made very clearly by Premier Okalik of Nunavut. Almost all Inuit communities hunt seals for subsistence purposes, and have been doing so for centuries. Seals are a vital source of nutrition and income for these isolated communities.

The Government of Canada recognizes that this is an emotive and complex issue, and it is important to note that Ambassador Sullivan's delegation was also here in London to listen. British views are valued, and your messages are taken back to Canada and considered when making decisions on managing the hunt. In the meantime, I would urge our UK friends to continue to seek out the facts on the Canadian seal hunt before rushing to judgment.

*For more information, I encourage you to refer to the DFO website, [www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca](http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca).*