

WGM-18  
Greenland - Hunting VI  
The Threat

Åkandevvej 7  
Lille Værløse  
Denmark  
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York, New York 10017

Dear Dick,

The campaign against buying sealskins continues to rage. Its effects showed up in the lower prices for Greenlandic sealskins of the 12 April auction in Copenhagen and even more so in the prices paid for "whitecoats" in Tromsø, Norway yesterday. In a way, the Tromsø prices are more indicative of the campaign's success because the whole furor is against the methods of killing "whitecoats" or young seal pups off eastern Canada and not at all the adult seals taken in Greenland.

The two main types of seal hunting in the northern North Atlantic area are the hunt for adult seals by native groups (Canadian Eskimos and Greenlanders) and for "whitecoats" by North Americans and Europeans. The "Don't Buy SealSkin" campaign is against the latter hunt. But, because of its irresponsibility, the campaign has hit the Greenlandic sealskin prices. The threat continues and I believe therefore that a good look at the whole affair is in order.

The first type of seal hunt, by native groups, is a remnant of the traditional Eskimo economy and is found in my area today in the eastern Canadian Arctic (Baffin Island and the Labrador coast) and in Greenland. The hunt is for adult seals, both migratory and local stocks in Canada, or mainly local seals in Greenland. The main local seal is the ring seal (netside or ringsæl in Danish). Two main types of migratory seals are the harp (sortside and blåside in Danish) and the hood seal (klapmyds), of which the harp seal is more prevalent.

The second type of seal hunt in the northern North Atlantic area, by Europeans and North Americans, occurs for a short period each spring when the concentration of seals for breeding and whelping offers opportunity for the traditional "whitecoat" hunt--the killing and flensing of 3-5 week-old seal pups. This takes place in the three main breeding areas: the White Sea, the area north of Jan Mayen Island, and off eastern Canada. The Canadian breeding area has two distinct locations: the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence (the "Gulf") where seals have their young on the winter ice, and off the eastern coast of Labrador and Newfoundland (the "Front") where the young are born in the spring on the drifting winter pack ice.

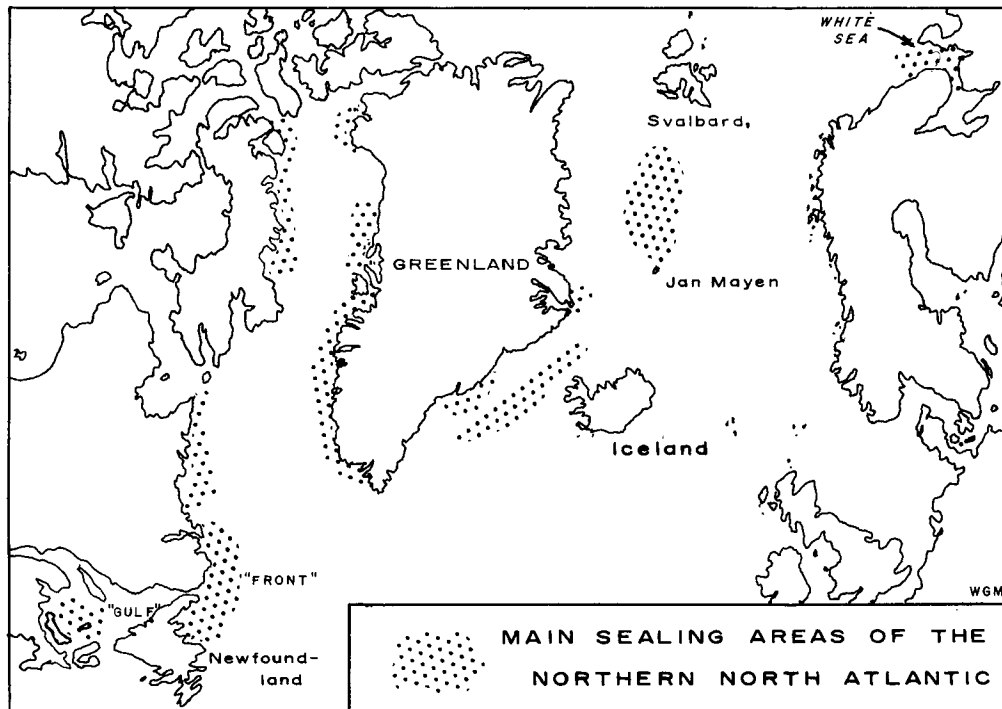
The breeding seals in these three areas are the harp and the hood seals. The hood seal, however, does not breed in the White Sea, and is much less abundant off eastern Canada than the harp seal. The hood seal's main breeding area is north of Jan Mayen in the East Greenland pack ice (known as Storis in Danish and Vestis in Norwegian).

The "whitecoat" hunt in the two main areas off eastern Canada (the "Gulf" and the "Front"), therefore, is mostly of the pups of the harp seal. This hunt was first pursued from the Newfoundland coast in the early 1800's. Later, a special fleet of sealing ships grew up. It has been mainly a Canadian operation, although Norway has also been active in the hunt since World War II, and the Soviet Union since the early 1960's. Norway hunted in both the "Gulf" and the "Front" areas until recently; its "Gulf" operations ended in 1964. Seal pups are hunted in the two other breeding areas (north of Jan Mayen and in the White Sea) by both Norwegian and Russian sealers, although the White Sea area is now under the strict control of a joint Norwegian-Soviet convention.

Two main problems confront the utilization of seals as a resource in the northern North Atlantic: the decline of stocks and apparent inhumane killing of "whitecoats". The decline in stocks of seals is because of intensive hunting and changing natural conditions. The number of seals taken off eastern Canada has fallen by about one half since the early 1800's despite (or because of?) refined transportation techniques. During the same period (particularly in the 1920's and 30's), a general climate warming in the northern hemisphere limited the extent of ice on which the seals whelp.

The seal herds north of Jan Mayen and in the White Sea have also suffered a similar fate. The recent bi-lateral agreements between Norway and the Soviet Union indicate a concern for this situation; and in fact the agreement suspended all catching of seals in the White Sea for five years (from 1966) and limited the hunting season in the Jan Mayen catching area. Regulations off eastern Canada have also been strengthened several times in recent years. A Canadian proposal in 1964 to the International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries (ICNAF) for seals to be included among the Commission's responsibilities was accepted and finally ratified by all member nations in spring 1966. Seals were formally discussed for the first time in ICNAF at their annual meeting in 1966. A smaller seal panel met in Copenhagen last autumn and the sealing question is on the agenda for the ICNAF annual meeting to be held next month in Boston. In the meantime, informal agreements between Canada and Norway have limited the catching season in the international waters of the "Front"; the "Gulf" area has also come under increasing regulation by the Canadian government.

The second main problem in sealing, the apparent inhumane killing methods, arose three years ago in Canada when allegedly barbarous hunting methods caused a great public outcry. Public reaction also focused on the scope of the killing operation (an estimated 85% of the young seals produced on the "Front" in 1964 were taken) and was aided, or caused, by extensive press and TV reports. As expected in this day of mass communication, the public reaction spread beyond the borders of Canada and had reached mammoth proportions in Europe (mainly in W. Germany, Holland, and Switzerland) by the spring of 1967. As in many "causes", the passionate heat of debate and public outrage at times colored the true facts. And this was helped along by a faked film sequence, part of a Canadian movie which got wide TV reception in Europe.



I have not seen the seal hunt off eastern Canada, nor have I viewed the film in question, so that I can only write a very condensed account of the story as I understand it after reading the official Canadian papers, and talking with various officials here in Denmark and Norway. What I have seen, however, is the effect the campaign has had on the prices of sealskins from Greenland. The whole affair is tragic and continues to pose a threat to the native economies of both Greenland and northern Canada. The affair is tragic because, whatever the justification of the campaign against the "whitecoat" hunt, its side effects are threatening the very lives of hunters who have nothing whatever to do with "whitecoats". In fact, these native hunters would like to see less pressure against the young seals so that more would grow to maturity to migrate past their shores in spring and summer.

The inhumane killing question centers in the "Gulf", especially around the Magdalen Islands. Unlike the "Front", sealing in the "Gulf" area is of recent date, with intensive operations only since the early 1950's. Small aircraft began to be used in 1962. Because the "Gulf" operation was relatively new (especially the use of aircraft), many seal hunters there were inexperienced. I knew an ex-tractor driver from the iron mines of Labrador who went back to Newfoundland to rent a Super-Cub plane and "make his pile". If he represented the norm, I can see why the operation was called inexperienced.

At any rate, the hunting operations in the "Gulf" came before the public eye in the press and film reports mentioned above. The practice of taking seal pups or "whitecoats" for their prime fur involves striking the pup over the head with a club. This blow supposedly kills the pup,

after which it is skinned. The whole operation, including skinning, takes about a minute. The outcry against this method arose in 1964 mainly after a Canadian news film (taken several days before the legal season opened) showed sealers on the ice of the "Gulf" skinning a live baby seal. Later it was shown that the sequence in question had been staged, but only recently was this fact publicized in Europe.

Despite this faked film, there seems to be room for improvement in the method of killing; the public protest appears to have had some results. The tightened regulations announced this spring by the Canadian Minister of Fisheries were enforced by twice as many fisheries inspectors than formerly. The season this year lasted from 7 March to 26 April on the "Gulf" and 12 March to 30 April on the "Front".

In 1966, Canadian seal hunters took 205,000 seals off the east coast; these had a landed value of about \$2 million, an important off-season source of income for many Maritime fishermen. The question is therefore a vital one for Canadians and for the European fur buyers who take almost the entire catch. Equaling the Canadian catch is that of Norway from both the "Front" and the Jan Mayen area.

Several seal hunters I talked with in Norway expressed their concern over the course of recent events. They stressed that, aside from the obvious humanitarian considerations, skinning seal pups alive would be a difficult and dangerous operation. It would also be foolhardy because the skin's worth depends, in part, on the quality of skinning. With sharp knives this can only be done well enough on unmoving animals. There is evidence to show that some of the pups have not been clubbed skillfully enough and, although not conscious, they have not been technically dead when skinned.

Two scientific investigations of the killing methods in the "Gulf" have recently been carried out because of the public protest. Their results have contradicted each other in some basic respects; they were sponsored by wildlife groups and SPCA organizations. So far as I know, the Canadian government has not sent a team of scientists to do their own field investigations of the seal hunt; I believe this would have been a good idea, especially if they had made a study on a larger sampling than was used in the two investigations. Canadian scientists have, however, been quite active in other research on the seal herds, but this has been concerned with the first problem I outlined--the decline of stocks--and not the methods of killing.

Ironically enough, the public (and scientific) concern over the decline in stocks, which gave rise to a tightening of Canadian regulations in 1964, might possibly have been a factor in the killing method debate. Such regulations as the shortened hunting season, the ban on killing seals before the previous day's pelts have been removed from the ice, and a new quota on total seals to be taken, have put more pressure on the sealers to increase their take in a shorter time. This pressure may have caused killing inefficiency in some cases, but it does not appear to be widespread and, as said before, is restricted to the inexperienced sealers.

The new sealing regulations of 29 October 1964 stipulated:

1. sealing licenses for vessels over 30 feet in length
2. complete protection of hood seals in the "Gulf"
3. a quota of 50,000 seals annually in the "Gulf"
4. limited use of helicopter and aircraft outside the "Gulf" area to spotting purposes only
5. a shortened season on "Front" and "Gulf"
6. a tightening of killing methods with detailed specifications for use of club and gaff
7. all sealskins to be removed from the ice the day the seals are killed, and no further killing before this is done
8. protection of adult seals in the breeding patches where whelping occurs.

These regulations, of course in more detailed form, went into effect before the 1965 season.

Before the 1966 season, the Canadian Minister of Fisheries (who was a constant target during debates in Parliament by the Opposition Leader John Diefenbaker) invited six official observers to inspect killing methods in the "Gulf". These observers were from various SPCA groups, both Canadian and international; in several cases they were also biologists. The observers were to see if the amended sealing regulations were adequate, as well as to comment on the question of alleged live-skinning.

Other than one isolated instance, involving a Montreal apple-farmer and a bunch of hired youths with little experience, the humane society officials expressed their general approval with the killing methods used in the "whitecoat" hunt. The observers brought along various weapons which they thought might have applicability, but the traditional club used in the seal hunt was still considered the best means.

More regulations to place further control on the hunt were announced from Ottawa in January 1967. The 1967 hunt was obviously the most highly regulated and patrolled seal hunt in the world. The public outcry, however, continued to mount. At times I have been uncertain as to the exact object of the hue and cry. It alternates between three positions: (1) killing of seal pups should be outlawed as being a threat to the stocks; (2) the killing of helpless, young seal pups ("small, sweet seal young" as the leader of the Danish protest action put it) should be outlawed as being a shame to kill defenseless critters; and (3) the hunting methods are inhumane, the killing is inefficient, and some young seals are skinned alive.

As for (1), the maximum sustained yield has been exceeded on the "Front", but probably not in the "Gulf". The catch of seal pups largely replaces natural deaths and does not add to them until, of course, a maximum limit is reached. Stopping the seal hunt, as has been proposed by the Canadian SPCA, is unrealistic and unfeasible and is against the principle of cropping a resource on a maximum sustained yield basis without endangering the resource. The principal officers of the humane societies proposing a stop of the hunt have already shown their general lack of criticism of (3), the hunting methods. Their arguments must therefore fall under number (2). The "whitecoat" hunt is certainly not a pleasant sight and I suppose that most people could not bring themselves to participate in it. I think that a TV film highlighting a day in a typical slaughterhouse would cause the same public reaction. We continue, however, to eat steaks and chops. The seal hunt must assure that the young seals are dealt with in a humane way, without unnecessary cruelty during the kill. By the recent action of Canadian officials, the seal hunt appears to be run with strict control under sensible regulations, but the campaign against sealskin will no doubt continue.

Why does the campaign against the "whitecoat" hunt have an effect on the sealskins from Greenland? As the campaign continues, it strays farther from its objective because the people behind this "cause" are overlooking a few basic facts. The "whitecoat" pelts are prepared for the market by dyeing. They are used for fur coats or collar and cuff trim on cloth coats. As such they are not recognizable as a "whitecoat" pelt. On the other hand, adult sealskins from the Canadian Eskimo and Greenland hunts are immediately recognizable as sealskin and have therefore borne the brunt of the campaign's passion. It is about the same as an anti-bullfighting crusade causing a boycott of steak and hamburger houses. Some adult seals are taken during the "whitecoat" hunt, as well as some first-year harp seals or "bluebacks" (blåsider). The campaign has no doubt hit these skins as well. But on the whole, the campaign, which is out to stop the "whitecoat" hunt, has missed its target. No doubt the protest spurred much-needed reforms in killing methods and closer supervision of the "whitecoat" hunt. As the smoke clears, however, we are left with a rather poor market for Greenlandic sealskins to say nothing of the unfortunate women in Zurich or Frankfurt who run the risk of public abuse and rough treatment by appearing in a sealskin coat.

During the weeks prior to the April auction of sealskins from Greenland, the campaign quickened in Europe. The Royal Greenland Trade Company was at a loss as to how best to combat the obvious misdirection of the "cause". Some action was plainly called for; the choice ranged from diplomatic pressure through the Foreign Ministry to doing nothing. Obviously you don't waste powerful ammunition in a situation threatening so few people. Television announcements or films in Denmark and the rest of Europe are not as straightforward (or cheap) a means as they might seem. One opinion (which I agreed with myself) was that the more you say about the matter, the more it is brought before the public eye. The Greenland Trade people could not dwell too much on the difference between the Canadian "whitecoat" hunt and sealing in Greenland--you don't defend your own position by criticizing another's.

But the distinction between the two types of sealskin from the two hunts had to be made. KGH chose a short, to-the-point, and dispassionate open letter in the Danish and foreign press. This letter by Director H. C. Christiansen pointed out that the campaign threatened economic ruin for many hunters in the Arctic who were in no way involved in the "whitecoat" hunt.

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Auction day approached in Copenhagen and I spoke with a few fur buyers who were inspecting the Greenlandic sealskins at Glostrup. Two representatives of Copenhagen's leading furrier are shown in their pre-auction inspections in the photograph below.

Only a few fur buyers and inspectors were present in the warehouse rooms on 10 April when the photograph below was taken. I thought this looked like an ill-omen, but more men arrived the next day. By 12 April, auction day, the usual number of buyers scurried about in pre-auction activity. Up for sale were over 27,000 sealskins from Greenland--25,000 of these were ring seals.



Two young fur experts from the well-known Copenhagen firm of Birger Christensen inspect a lot of ring seal pelts before the auction. A KGH helper (l) and KGH chief fur grader Christen Jensen (r) look on.

Auction time on 12 April was 10:00 a.m. At 0915 I pulled into the Fur Sale's parking lot and had a few hurried words with KGH's director Hans C. Christiansen. He was obviously worried about the auction. At 0930 there were still buyers inspecting skins--either a frantic effort to see the remaining lots or a desire for another look. Auctioneer H. E. Petersen was away in a corner memorizing the seating plan. He will retire soon from the auction; for 15 years he has sold for KGH.

By 0957 the auction hall upstairs began to fill up. Sixteen young Greenlandic men in Denmark for business training filed in and stood along the left aisle of the hall. At 1003, KGH fur-sale chief Poul Mønsted opened the auction, introduced the Greenlanders, and turned over the gavel to the auctioneer. At 1005 the auction began, starting with ring sealskins, Grade 1A, washed. Ten minutes later, the 25 lots of Grade 1 skins had been auctioned, but only one half were sold. The bids on the unsold lots were not high enough for KGH; the acceptable price was not known until the bidding ended by the auctioneer's "sold" or "out". I had not heard the word "out" in previous sealskin auctions. It was quickly apparent that prices had indeed fallen. This had been true of the autumn 1966 auction, but the rapid fall on 12 April meant that average prices were around 60 kroner a skin versus 125 kroner in the 1964 spring sale.

By 1210, or after 2 hours and 5 minutes, the auction ended--25% of the skins unsold. The total sale was 1.3 million kroner. Top prices for skins were 305 kroner (ring seal), 210 kroner (harp seal), and 370 kroner (hood seal). The 370 kroner was bid for each skin in the lot of 35 hood sealskins and was fully twice the price for any other hood seal lots. Leading up to that high price was a round of furious bidding and an exciting performance by auctioneer Petersen. So quickly did he recognize bids that the pressure and price mounted violently. The quick word "sold" after the last bid brought spontaneous applause--for the first time of the morning.

But that performance and the price it brought was only a bit of relief in an otherwise dismal sale. Although the market did not fall through, the final result was not merely a continuation of the past year's trend downward, but an acceleration of that trend. The "Don't Buy Sealskin" campaign obviously had had its misdirected effect, what remains to be seen is whether the market can recover. Right now retail sales of sealskin are down to 50% of their former level in West Germany; 5% (!) of formerly in Switzerland.

If human nature prevails in the end, and the facts are well broadcast, Greenlandic sealskins may not be more than temporarily threatened. But while they are, one quarter of Greenland's population stands to lose its livelihood, with no alternatives in sight.

Sincerely,

*Bill Mattox*

W. G. Mattox