Our sympathies go out to the families of the lost crew members of the L’Acadien II.

Our heartfelt condolences go out to the families of Captain Bruno Bourque, Gilles Leblanc, Marc-Andre Desros and Carl Aucoin (missing and presumed dead) and to the entire Iles-de-la-Madeleine community for their terrible loss.

BREAKING NEWS

Canadian seal hunters, government take their case to Europe

With the start of the 2008 East Coast Seal Hunt, a delegation from Canada headed to Europe to open a dialogue with European nations on the seal hunting issue. The 12-day, six-country tour was organized by the Canadian departments of Foreign Affairs and Fisheries and Oceans and comes within days after officials in Brussels announced they are considering taking EU-wide measures against Canada to protest the annual hunt.

The delegation included Loyola Sullivan, Ambassador of Fisheries Conservation, the Honourable Paul Okalik, Premier of Nunavut, Newfoundland and Labrador Natural Resources Minister Kathy Dunderdale, Guy Beaupré, Director General, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Tony Grace, Sealing Communications Coordinator, NL Fisheries and Aquaculture, Mark Small, Newfoundland Seal Hunter, and Denis Longuepée, Quebec Seal Hunter, and Rob Cahill, Fur Institute of Canada Executive Director.

The group met with parliamentarians in London, Brussels, Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Athens and Kastoria, to engage them on animal welfare, conservation and socioeconomic issues around the hunting of seals and other wild animals. The tour also included discussions with government officials and media to present Canada’s arguments and messages to Europeans. The tour was planned in anticipation of a European Union decision on whether to ban the import of Canadian seal products and is part of a larger effort to keep the market open. Tensions were high throughout Europe, based on intense animal rights lobbying. However, the delegation was very well received. Despite repeated trips and diplomatic interventions by Canada to European nations who have objected to Canada hunting seals, it is clear that the EU elected officials and department staff are not well informed of the facts of Canada’s seal hunting practices. While there are exceptions, many officials were unaware that hunt-

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BREAKING NEWS

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ing whitecoats has been banned for 21 years, that 95% of seal hunting in Canada is done with rifles or that the seal meat and oils are used in addition to the pelts providing significant economic income to remote coastal people through Atlantic and Northern Canada. Denis Longuepée said that “many people, from Ambassadors and Ministers to department officials and media, were sympathetic for the loss of four of his friends, but they still do not understand the impact they will cause to so many people. They are also focused on Canada’s seal hunting practices without even looking at the hunting practices in their own countries. What they were told on every occasion was that the people who are showing them 20-year-old photos of whitecoats want to end all uses of animals. They are starting with seals because it is easy for them.”

Seal pelt grading system announced

Under agreement with five Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec seal processing companies and the Canadian Sealers Association, a seal pelt grading system is being implemented for the 2008 harvest.

This is the first time in many years that a standard grade for beater seal pelts will be in place. Grades are based on colour and pelt condition. Under a three-level colour grade, yellowed pelts will be downgraded. A quality grade will discount skins with excessive or poorly located holes, skins that are poorly pelted, or skins with excessive hair side defects as outlined in the grade standards.

The Fur Institute of Canada, on behalf of GC Rieber Carino Ltd., NuTan Furs Incorporated, Phoca G. Company Inc., the Northeast Coast Sealers Cooperative, Les Produits du Loup Marin Ta Ma Su Inc. and the Canadian Sealers Association, has submitted the approved Beater Harp Seal Pelt

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Limited hunt held off Cape Breton to protect environmentally sensitive area

A limited grey seal hunt was held on Hay Island off the coast of Cape Breton in February. The cull of sixto eight-week-old grey seals was approved earlier this year by the provincial government, and was supervised by the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the provincial Natural Resources Department. The tiny island is part of the Scotarie Island protected wilderness area. The provincial Fisheries and Aquaculture Department requested the cull as a way to protect the ecologically sensitive island’s fish stocks.

Permission to harvest up to 2,500 animals from the area was a one-time decision that will be assessed later this year, according to Ministry officials. The hunt took roughly half the allowable catch.

A federal Fisheries Department assessment last year placed the population at 300,000 in the western Atlantic and southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. There are between 4.5 million and six million grey seals worldwide.
Grading Classification to the province’s Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture requesting department monitoring and enforcement to ensure fairness and consistency. The grading will be based on clarity of colour and the quality of pelt preparation.

The grading classification system will be assessed following this year’s harvest to allow for changes and improvements. The review will involve feedback from government monitors, sealers and processing companies.

New rule introduced for 2008 sealing season

With input from the sealing community, veterinarians and members of the Seals and Sealing Network, this past winter, the Fisheries and Oceans Canada has added a new requirement for the 2008 sealing season. Sealers are now required to follow a three-step process in dispatching seals. The three steps are: stunning the seal either with a rifle or hakapik to render the animal dead or immediately unconscious, then perform, according to IVWG (Independent Veterinarians Working Group*) and their instructional poster, the blink reflex test to prove the animal is unconscious, and then bleed the animal on the ice to end brain activity, before moving it. This three-step process has been recommended by the IVWG as the most humane way to conduct the hunt.

While it is recognized that bleeding animals on the ice may be a concern for sealer safety and will create publicity photos for anti-sealing protesters, the additional bleeding requirement addresses the EFSA December report (See International news). As Phil Jenkins, spokesman for the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans, explains: “We’re trying to make sure there is no possible way that a seal could be skinned while it was irreversibly unconscious but not dead. It’s really going the extra mile to make sure that it’s as humane as it can be.”

It is also part of a larger effort to open discussions with the European Union through the World Trade Organization. Canada lodged its trade complaint against the Netherlands and Belgium over their ban on the import of seal products in September of 2007.

* What Is the Independent Veterinarians Working Group?

The Independent Veterinarians Working Group (IVWG) on the Canadian Harp Seal Hunt was formed in 2005 to review the Canadian seal hunt and contribute to the promotion of animal welfare. The IVWG on the Canadian Harp Seal Hunt is composed of nine veterinarians from North America and Europe; four are from Canada. The members of the Group have a wide range of experience and knowledge relating to the Canadian harp seal hunt, the health and welfare of seals and other marine mammals, and animal welfare in general.

The initial meeting of the IVWG and a preliminary information session with sealers, industry representatives, government managers, and scientists were held in May of 2005, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. At that meeting, sealers asked the members of the working group to assist them in improving humane practice. The IVWG produced a report titled Improving Humane Practice in the Canadian Harp Seal Hunt, August 2005 that provides comments, observations and recommendations on a number of aspects of the seal hunt. The Group’s decisions and recommendations were made by consensus and are intended to provide practical improvements to hunting practices.

Canadian members of the IVWG include Pierre-Yves Daoust, Charles Caraguel and Alice Crook of the Atlantic Veterinary College in Prince Edward Island.
Following the success of “Up the Anti 2007”, the SSN hosted an International Day of Celebration of seal hunting people on Saturday, March 15. Pro-hunting events were held in St. John’s and Iqaluit, while a planned counter-rally in London UK proved to be unnecessary. The message at this year’s events was that, with European countries moving towards bans on seal products, Canadians in rural and northern communities are facing cultural and economic collapse. March 15 was originally named as a day of protest against the hunt, but pro-sealing groups first took the day back in 2007 in Ottawa with a celebration of the hunt and plan to do so gain in coming years.

City of Iqaluit, Celebration of the Seal

The population of the City of Iqaluit in Nunavut came out in large numbers to show their support for the Celebration of the Seal. The event, organized by the Nunavut Government and the Fur Institute of Canada’s Sealing Committee, involved numerous local organizations and individuals who were on hand to show the importance of seals and sealing to Inuit and northerners. Organizer Aaju Peter said, “March 15 was a beautiful spring day in Iqaluit. I was very pleased to see so many people coming inside the local arena for hours to show their support. Nobel prize nominee, Sheila Watt-Cloutier and Premier Paul Okalik were among hundreds of people who came out to show their pride in our culture and respect for the seal. People were so proud to be wearing their sealskin coats, pants, kamiks, and other items made of sealskin. The highlight for me was when the daycare children, dressed in traditional sealskin clothes, sang a seal hunting song, Natsirmik qinirpunga.” The four-hour celebration included speeches on the importance of seals to the Inuit life and culture. As well, demonstrations on how to clean and prepare sealskins were followed by a fashion show of traditional and contemporary clothes as well as seal products made by people for the very first time. Tajamuit Productions documented the event.
UP THE ANTI 2008

St. John’s Swiler’s Ball

The first annual Swiler’s Ball took place on the afternoon of March 15 and featured a long roster of speakers with messages of support, samples of seal flipper pie, omega-3 capsules made of seal oil, seal skin fashions and music by the popular Newfoundland group, The Navigators, who sported seal skin hats and guitar straps.

Newfoundland and Labrador’s fisheries minister, Tom Rideout, told the crowd, many clad in seal fur and sporting SSN “Hug a Sealer” buttons, that the hunt is part of the province’s cultural fabric and an essential source of income for many economically depressed rural communities. “No more will March 15th be a day dedicated only to the seal hunt protesters. From here on in this day will be part of Newfoundland and Labrador and part of the industry. What’s clear is the message. We want to tell the world that we have a sustainable hunt, a humane hunt, a hunt that’s based on economics, that there’s no cruelty,” he said. Seals and Sealing Network organizer Anne Troake said even on short notice people were willing to help out and every one of them had their own story about how the seal hunt has affected their lives. “The SSN is extremely grateful to all of the individuals and organizations that showed their support for our industry and joined the festivities,” she said. Adding, “we expect the Swiler’s Ball 2008 to grow from a one-time celebration to an annual event for years to come.” The event was documented for web cast on the Seals and Sealing Network web site.

International Day of Protest 2008 news coverage

Turnout in Canada was low for this year’s “International Day of Protest” which saw a handful of demonstrators in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, Vancouver and Nanaimo and no media coverage of most of the events. SSN member Jim Winter, who attended the annual London UK protest outside the Canadian Consulate, reported a turnout of “25 people and one big dog” and a total lack of interest by the media.

Up the Anti 2008 news coverage

Canadian Press newswire pick up resulted in stories in the Evening Telegram, the Globe and Mail, the Toronto Star, Toronto Sun, Calgary Sun, the Winnipeg Free Press, Nunatsiaq News and The Montreal Gazette. NTV, CBC radio and Global National TV news also ran stories.
EU proposal on Canadian seal products expected by summer

Reuters News Agency reports that the European Union’s environment chief will present a report on the “inhumane killing” of seals in Canada in the next few months, his spokeswoman said amid persistent calls for a ban on fur imports.

“Commissioner (Stavros) Dimas is looking into the matter of the inhumane killings of seals and we are preparing texts to be presented in the next few months to address this issue,” spokeswoman Barbara Helfferich said. Speaking at a daily European Commission media briefing in February, she did not say whether the EU executive would propose a ban on seal fur imports by the 27-nation bloc. “I can’t give you any details on this proposal... We are hoping to have it ready before the summer,” Ms. Helfferich said.

Belgium and the Netherlands last year banned imports of seal products on their own, prompting Canada to launch a trade dispute with the EU as a whole in September. The EU already bars imports of furs from white-coated pups.

Canada has argued at the World Trade Organization that there is no basis in science or international trade law to justify bans on the import of seal products, which provide an important source of income for many people in eastern Canada. But the European parliament last year called for a full EU ban on imports, prompting the Commission’s investigations into the cull. Some of its members have renewed their calls for the EU to act decisively.

“As the culling season gets under way, the time has come for the Commission to take action” said Neil Parish, a Conservative member of the legislature and head of its Animal Welfare group. “The slaughter of seals in Canada, including seals that are just a few weeks old, is barbaric and the EU should not condone it,” he said in a statement.

EFSA scientific opinion finds killing and skinning of seals can be done humanely

On December 19, 2007, the Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW) Panel of the European Food and Safety Authority (EFSA) released their opinion on the animal welfare aspects of different methods of killing and skinning seals in their report titled: Animal Welfare Aspects of the Killing and Skinning of Seals. According to an EFSA press release, their “independent scientific experts looked objectively at the best available evidence to assess whether seals can be killed rapidly and effectively without causing avoidable pain, distress, fear and other forms of suffering, and if so which methods are most likely to achieve that.”

EFSA’s opinion was requested by the European Commission as part of its consideration of possible measures concerning the killing of seals and the trade in seal fur and other seal products.

The Panel noted that there are only a limited number of peer-reviewed scientific studies available for the scientific evaluation of various killing methods. Additional studies are available, notably from industry-linked groups and from NGOs. The Panel concluded that such studies may contain potential serious biases but, nevertheless, there were obvious areas of concern for seal welfare.

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The Panel concluded that, “seals are sentient mammals who can feel pain, distress, fear and other forms of suffering. The Panel also concluded that it is possible to kill seals rapidly and effectively without causing them avoidable pain or distress. However, the Panel also reported evidence that, in practice, effective and humane killing does not always happen.”

The Panel recommended that the netting and trapping of seals underwater should not be used, as it is inherently inhumane because of the possibility of prolonged suffering. Appropriate firearms can ensure effective killing on adults and young seals, as can hakapiks and other clubs when appropriately designed and used correctly but only on young seals.

Independent monitoring of seal hunts was recommended by the Panel: independent of both industry/commercial interests and NGOs. Hunts should be open to inspection, the Panel also said.

The importance of the training of hunters was stressed by the Panel. This is to ensure a high standard of competence in firearm and club use, as well as effective techniques to monitor unconsciousness and death.

EFSA reports that it received data from a wide range of sources including industry, animal welfare organizations, governments and other bodies within the EU and third countries. A draft report and opinion were prepared by a working group of the AHAW Panel and discussed with stakeholders, including a member of the Seals and Sealing Network, at a meeting in October 2007. Around 25 organizations from 11 countries attended the meeting. Stakeholders were given time to submit any further data for consideration in preparing the final report.

As the EFSA explains, animal health and welfare is part of EFSA’s overall remit and so the Authority has contributed its independent scientific expertise to objectively assess the available evidence in relation to the welfare aspects of the methods currently being used for killing and skinning seals. However, EFSA does not have a mandate to decide whether such practices should or should not be permitted, nor to consider ethical, economic, social, cultural, managerial or other related issues.
EDITORIAL - Ritualized outrage


The seal hunt, that annual ritual that sees the government of Canada and its sealers pair off with the animal rights activists of Sea Shepherd and the European Union in a bizarre dance across the ice floes of the North Atlantic, begins today.

This year’s hunt allows for a cull of 275,000 seals from a herd estimated to be as large as six million, and new regulations in place governing its operation mandate that the hunters use a new technique -- severing the arteries under a seal’s flippers to ensure that it is dead before it is skinned.

“It’s really going an extra distance to make sure that it’s as humane as it can be,” a Fisheries Department spokesman maintains.

Indeed, each year, as inevitable as spring, new rules appear to make the cull more humane in an effort to satisfy its critics.

The problem is that there is no satisfying them. Images of adorable white seal pups still dominate the public imagination, although the hunt of white-coat seal pups was halted years ago. Coincidentally, saving seals and saving whales are the two largest money-raisers for Sea Shepherd and its rival Greenpeace.

On Wednesday, Sea Shepherd leader Paul Watson said that the animal rights group was en route to the hunt to yet again document the “perverse abomination” that it constitutes. Although its ship, the Farley Mowat, is not even there yet, Mr. Watson is already accusing Canada of harassment for threatening legal action if the ship enters Canadian waters: Ottawa officials, he says, “harass us every time ... it’s just normal routine for us.” Across the Atlantic, the European Union is acting out its annual role in the ritual as well. The EU is once again considering a complete ban on all seal products, a decision it might or might not come to some time around June, long after this year’s hunt is over but in time possibly to cause serious trouble for next year’s.

Canada takes the position -- correctly -- that the hunt is sustainable, well managed and humane and it provides needed income for communities devastated by the collapse of the cod fishery. Canadians should not give in to either the bullying by Sea Shepherd nor the hypocrisy of the European Union -- the home of the force-fed goose -- on this issue.

The irony of this ritual is that, even if opponents of the hunt succeed in eliminating the market for seal products, it would have to take place anyway as a straight cull of the herd that would directly benefit no one. Six million seals eat a lot of fish -- a lot of cod -- and without the hunt there is no control on their population or the toll they take on the fishery.
Harp Seals Focus for Cardiac Surgeons

According to a Canadian Press news story, Greek cardiac surgeons are interested in the plentiful supply of harp seals for heart-valve transplantation purposes.

In the Magdalen Islands, TAMASU, a company supplying harbour-seal products, has announced a partnership agreement with Greek cardiac surgeons as part of a research and development project.

The article reports that if the project achieves the desired results, this company from the Cap-aux-Meules area would have the exclusive right to supply the medical market with harp-seal heart valves.

The Director of cardiac surgery at the Medical Centre in Athens, Dr. Andreas Agathos, was cited as saying that research that he conducted some ten years ago on common seals from Nova Scotia showed that valves from the hearts of harbour seals are less likely to be rejected than mechanical valves. He explained that they are more resistant than valves from pigs or cows, which are commonly used in the medical field.

However, he said it would be another six months before we find out whether the experiment was a success and whether the way will then be open for an application to be made to permit transplantation of these valves into humans.

Bernard Guimont, the President of TAMASU, confidently predicts that such a break-through would make a major impact on the public image of the seal hunt. Last week, the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) authorized the harvesting of 200 harp seals. The cost of the operation was to be shared between TAMASU and the hunter, Denis Éloquin.

The story reports that research will be conducted on the transplantation of pig valves in French, Swiss and Swedish laboratories.

Worldwide demand for mechanical valves and those of animal origin for medical transplantation purposes amounts to 300,000 per year, according to Dr. Agathos.

Biological valves cost between $4,000 and $5,000 each according to the story.
An EU ban on seal products would have a devastating effect on Arctic communities

By Aaju Peter, Iqaluit

We in the north realize that we need to do more to educate southerners and other countries about our sealing practices and we realize we need to do a lot more public education in the Arctic as well as in southern Canada. The kind of educating we need to do in the Arctic is to educate Inuit about the anti-sealing campaigns and legislation that is passed in other countries that affect our hunting and livelihood. We also need to educate southern Canadians and other countries such as the European Union about the importance of the ability to sell the sealskin.

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Our ability to sell the sealskin depends on the market generated by the Newfoundland seal hunt. Legislation passed in Europe that attempts to exempt Inuit traditional seal hunt does not work. In the 80s, when the seal skin market crashed, the Inuit were not able to sell their traditionally caught seal skins even if the ban was not aimed at the Inuit seal hunt. We were not able to sell our skins. The same will happen even if the European Union attempts to exempt Inuit sealing.

The market crash in the 80s was devastating to the Inuit. You have to realize that Inuit live in a harsh environment. All 27 communities depend on the income that they are able to make on the sale of sealskin. I urge the European states to take a serious look at what they are proposing. Legislation to ban imports of sealskins to Europe while attempting to exempt our traditional seal hunt will have devastating economic and social effects on our communities.

WHO WE ARE

The Seals and Sealing Network was formed by the Fur Institute of Canada in June 2006 to provide factual information on seals and sealing in Canada. The Network operates within and outside Canada to address sealing issues. This includes certifying the welfare, health and sustainability of seal herds while promoting the maximum utilization of the meat, oil and pelts of abundant populations. The Network includes sealers, Inuit, veterinarians, product processors and researchers, wildlife biologists, and federal and provincial/territorial governments. For more information, go to www.sealsandsealing.net.

The Fur Institute of Canada, a national non-profit organization, was founded in 1983 with a mandate from the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Wildlife Ministers to promote the sustainable and wise use of Canada’s fur resources. As a nation-wide, cross-sector umbrella organization, we are committed to providing information to the media, the general public and governments relating to the economic, social, cultural and environmental issues surrounding the harvesting and farming of fur in Canada. For more information, go to www.fur.ca.
Funders for the seals and sealing network campaign:

Government of Newfoundland and Labrador
  Government of Nunavut
  Government of Quebec
International Fur Trade Federation (UK)
  Rieber-Carino Company (NL)
    NU Tan (NL)
    Ta Ma Su (QC)
    NewMil Products (QC)
Northeast Coast Sealers Cooperative
  Phoca G. Company (NL)

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For more information on the Fur Institute of Canada, go to www.fur.ca