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what happened to them

OVERKILL

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EVERY YEAR BETWEEN OCTOBER AND DECEMBER, the adult Harp seals move slowly down from the Canadian Arctic along the Labrador coast. The young, who are mostly in the Greenland area, move south much later in January or March. A small population of them even spends the winter there. After a winter of feeding the adults crawl out on the new ice-fields and whelp in two areas. One of these is the "Front", off the northern end of Newfoundland, and the other, between the Magdalen Islands and the Gaspé Peninsula, is known as the "Gulf" area. The young "whitecoats" develop soon and when they are four weeks old shed their coats and become spotted "beaters". The adults mate at this time and afterwards also moult. All the seals then start moving northward. The two groups separate, the young staying primarily along the western coast of Greenland, while the adults move into Hudsons Bay, around Baffin Island, and up into the Queen Elizabeth islands. In the fall this cycle is again repeated.

The reason for the separation of adults and young appears to be food. The younger seals tend to feed more on small crustaceans and also capelin, a small type of fish, while the older ones eat primarily capelin and polar cod which are more abundant in the colder waters of the Canadian arctic.

This is the typical life cycle of one of the three populations of Harp seals in the world. The other two breed in the White Sea (in the USSR) and on pack ice between Spitzbergen and east Greenland.

Every year after the seals reach the Front and the Gulf in late February and early March there is extensive hunting carried on, especially of the young whitecoats (and also to some extent of the older seals). This hunting is done primarily by Canadian ships in the Gulf area, by Canadian and

Norwegian ships in the Front area and to some extent by "landsmen" in both areas. It is this hunt which has been the recipient of so much publicity and the centre of so much acrimony over the past few years. Much of the publicity has been misdirected and as a result most people are confused about the issues involved. There are, fundamentally, two arguments to be considered.

THE FIRST IS THE POSSIBILITY of cruelty being involved in the killing of seals. After talking to many people who have observed the seal hunt I am convinced that there is no real cruelty involved. It is true that the scene on the ice is very bloody and can be shocking to anyone who has never observed the killing of animals before, but it is no more shocking than any slaughter-house. The young seals look very cute and it seems inhumane to kill such pretty little things. (I often think that if seals looked like alligators no one would care what happened to them.) The regulation club for Canadians and the ice-pick for Norwegians does a very efficient job of killing the seals almost instantaneously and with very little pain. The idea that the hunters skin seals alive, incidentally, is a myth. For the hunter all this would do would be to make his work excessively difficult, if not impossible, since a live seal tends to jump around quite a bit. Even if the seal was only knocked out it could never come around again without its skin as it would be dead long before from extensive blood loss and shock. Seals sometimes move while being skinned - but this is purely because of reflexes and not because it is alive (as anyone who has killed chickens knows).

THE SECOND REASON is by far the more important of the two. It is the possibility that our seal population may be destroyed by overhunting. If we examine the birth rates and the death rates of Harp seals and compare the two we can obtain the number of seals which can be taken each year without the decline of the species as a whole. This sustainable yield has been worked out: it is about 33% of the young born each year.

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Next lies the herculean problem of finding out how many seals are born each year in the Gulf and Front populations. The best present estimates are about 200,000 on the Front and 100,000 in the Gulf, or a total of about 300,000 seals born annually. In the Gulf about 70,000 young seals are taken annually by both ships and landsmen, and on the Front the catch is often over 180,000. Studies have shown that the year classes that have been so heavily hunted are very scarce, so that the bulk of the adult seals are older ones. There are very few young surviving.

Checking with our sustainable yield you can see that a total catch of 180,000 in the Gulf and Front areas would probably be too high for survival. The total catch should be around 125,000 and certainly no more than 140,000. Clearly too many seals are being taken. To the best of my understanding the quota this year will be 245,000, of which 235,000 might be taken as young. The ships' quota is 200,000 of which almost all will probably be taken as young. The landsman's 20-year average has been 45,000, of which 35,000 were young; small craft apparently will not be bound by the ships' quota this year. This works out to approximately 78% of the young — much higher than the 33% sustainable yield.

This means that when the older seals who presently make up the bulk of the population die off there will be a steady and continuous drop in seal numbers because there are few young ones coming up to take their place. Certainly it is presently possible to take 250,000 or even more of the young seals, but if you do, in a few years there will be many fewer left.

Numbers have already dropped considerably since the fifties. If Harp seals were not hunted at all their numbers might be about 4 million compared to the perhaps 1 3/4 million that we now have. This number will steadily decline unless we act to prevent this excessive killing.

A second species, the Hooded seal, also whelps in these two areas. An average of about 6,000 are taken yearly of which 66% are young. This number fluctuates greatly and in 1957 only 144 were taken. 70,000 are taken in their other breeding area on "West Ice" north of Iceland. There

are fewer numbers of these seals breeding near Canada than there are of Harp seals. Much less research has been done on them and since they are much scarcer a close watch must be kept to see that this species is not destroyed. An important point about this seal is that the adults will defend their young unlike the Harp seal. This means that sometimes both adults must be killed in order to get the baby "blueback".

WHAT CAN WE DO? The first thing that must be done as soon as possible is to have the quota of pelts taken lowered to 125,000, the sustainable yield. More extensive studies should be carried on into the behaviour and population dynamics of the Harp seal to see whether this level is correct and if it is not, then raise or lower the quota if necessary after we know, and not after we have exterminated the species. Perhaps it would be wise to cease hunting altogether for several years to let the seal numbers build up so that a larger amount could be taken later. Much work needs to be done on these animals which might show all sorts of things. So far research has been difficult because of the constantly shifting habitat in which these seals live. For instance, recent developments show that there is much more intermingling of the Gulf and Front populations than was previously supposed, so that the herds must be managed as a whole and not as two separate units. If any group of seals should be kept to a minimum it should seem it should be the Gulf and not the Front one as is being presently done. The Gulf seals have a high incidence of codworms, an internal parasite which infests fish muscle and is a cost to the fishing industry.

In the meantime what we must do is to write to Mr. Jack Davis, the Federal Minister of the Environment asking that the quota of seals be set at 125,000 pelts until further research is done. Otherwise our seal herds will suffer a drastic decline and we will end up with another species to enter on our roll of animals eliminated by the greed and irresponsibility of man.