

The Commercial Seal Hunt in Canada: Frequently Asked Questions

What kinds of seals are hunted commercially in Canada? Where are they hunted?

- The main commercial species hunted in Canada is the harp seal, which is hunted primarily off the East Coast by fishermen based in Newfoundland and Labrador. Harp seals are also hunted in a limited number off the Magdalen Islands
- There is also a commercial quota for hooded and grey seals, but very few are hunted.
- Ringed seals are hunted by the Inuit in the North, primarily for food and to produce garments and crafts with the pelts. Bearded and harbor seals may also be hunted for subsistence purposes.

Is there a difference between the hunts?

- The three main hunts in Canada are all very different. The Newfoundland hunt is primarily for the pelt of juvenile animals (3 weeks – 3 months of age), with secondary use of the blubber. Although there is a small domestic market for flippers, most all of the meat is left on the ice. There is also a “personal use hunt” in Newfoundland which allows hunters to take up to 6 seals for personal use. IFAW does not oppose this seal hunt.
- There is also a seal hunt in the Magdalen Islands, in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. This hunt is for both meat and pelts. Since [a fire forced the closure](#) of the local tannery in 2007, the Magdalen Islands hunt has been primarily for food. In the past 3 years sealers admitted to [dumping 6000 pelts overboard due to their inability to process them](#).
- The Inuit hunt seals primarily as a source of food, and produce clothing and other items out of the pelts.

I've heard that seal meat is being wasted. Is this true?

- The Inuit hunt and the Magdalen Islands hunt both use as much of the meat as possible.
- The East coast commercial seal hunt, however, wastes almost all of the meat. For instance, in 2013, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) reported no meat landed by the commercial seal hunt. In 2011, approximately 18,000 kg of meat was landed, including flippers (approximately 1kg each). Based on a very conservative estimate of 5kg of meat per 36kg seal carcass, and the total pelt number of 37,839, this means that over 90% of the meat is left on the ice.
- If DFO truly supported full utilization of seals, the regulations would require the landing of both pelts and meat.

What is IFAW's position on hunting seals for food, by the Inuit or anyone else?

- [IFAW does not campaign against non-commercial hunting of seals for food](#), by Inuit or anyone else.
- IFAW campaigns against commercial hunting and trade of wildlife, which in the long term almost invariably proves unsustainable, whether it is for ivory, rhino horn, or seal pelts.

How old are the seals being hunted?

- Current regulations ban the hunting of harp seal “white coats” and hooded seal “bluebacks” — the youngest seals of these two species.
- Harp seals begin shedding their white coats when they finish nursing, at [8 to 12 days old](#), [after which they are known as “ragged jackets” \(partially moulted seals\) and “beaters” \(fully](#)

[moulted seals – so-called because of the way they beat the water with their flippers as they learn to swim](#)). These seals are the primary target of the commercial seal hunt. According to DFO, 98% of the seals killed are between 3 weeks and 3 months of age.

- Hooded seals lose their slate grey fur (their “blueback”) [around the age of 14 months](#), after which time they can be hunted. Very few hooded seals are currently hunted (fewer than 10 per year in recent years).

How much is spent on the hunt? What is the economic gain?

- According to the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, [the landed value of the commercial seal hunt was \\$2,666,000 in 2013](#). But the total amount of government support for the hunt in 2013 was \$4,315,200.
- Since 1996, the governments of Canada and of Newfoundland and Labrador have been supporting the commercial seal hunt with over \$50 million in subsidies, grants, travel expenses, and loans, to go towards product development and opening new markets for seal products. Some examples:
 - In 2009, the cost of monitoring the hunt by the Canadian Coast Guard was \$989,679.
 - In 2010, \$617,000 was granted to the Canadian Seal Marketing Group to attend trade shows and develop new seal garments. But the organization folded just three years later.
 - In 2013, the Atlantic Seal Development Association received \$572,000 to vacuum pack seal meat to send to China — [something the Chinese have historically rejected](#).

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans now requires sealers to be trained in a 3-step process for killing seals. Does this mean the hunt is humane?

- Veterinary studies from a wide variety of sources continue to conclude that there is ongoing, unacceptable cruelty in the seal hunt ([see Canada’s Commercial Seal Slaughter 2009, page 7](#)). And with fewer and fewer resources being devoted to monitoring the hunt by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the possibility of inhumane hunting activity is high. As Professor of Veterinary Medicine, [Dr. Andrew Butterworth contends](#), “The review of available data indicates that generally accepted principles of humane slaughter cannot be carried out effectively or consistently in the commercial seal hunt.”

How is climate change affecting seals in Canada?

- According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), climate change is already having a negative impact on [harp](#), [ringed](#), and [hooded seals](#). These three species are ice-dependent seals, which means that changing ice conditions are expected to result in increased mortality and other threats.
- In 2011, there may have been 100% pup mortality. [According to scientists at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans](#), 80% of seal pups are thought to have died due to lack of ice in 2011. Using the estimates of 600,000 pups born that year, and 40,000 killed by hunters, that would leave 80,000. But the same herd is hunted in Greenland, which reported a catch of 83,000, and there is also “bycatch” of seals in other fisheries.

What do Canadians think about the commercial seal hunt?¹

- IFAW has conducted a number of opinion polls over the years, and the majority of Canadians consistently do not support the commercial seal hunt.
- In 2012, we found that 56% of Canadians oppose the commercial seal hunt, asking the simple question “Do you support or oppose the hunting of seals off of Canada’s East coast?”
- However, when asked about support if “seal pups under one year of age should be protected,” 70% of Canadians agreed. This points to a misperception in the Canadian public, since at present seals as young as 12 days old are legally hunted.
- 71% of Canadians oppose the government’s financial support of the seal hunt, and believe that the industry should survive or fail on its own.

What do Newfoundlanders think about the seal hunt?²

- There is a great deal of support for the seal hunt in Newfoundland, owing to its place in the island’s history; however, polling indicates that 1 in 5 Newfoundlanders opposes the seal hunt.
- While 73% of Newfoundlanders believe the seal hunt is an important part of their culture and heritage, 67% believe that it will end inevitably.
- 75% of Newfoundlanders support a program to help sealers transition into other jobs.
- 71% of Newfoundlanders believe it makes sense to question the continuation of the seal hunt if it is not economically viable or needs government help to survive.

How many sealers participate in the hunt?

- The number of sealers participating in the commercial seal hunt varies year over year, and in recent years has not been over 1,000. In 2013, for instance, the number was 844. In 2010, it was 390.

Year	Number of active sealers ³	Number of active vessels ⁴
2005	3203	1,746
2006	5594	2,112
2007	4607	1,850
2008	2964	1,235
2009	1354	626
2010	390	106
2011	465	168
2012	763	316
2013	844	327

¹ Data based on: Environics. 2012. *Attitudes Towards the Seal Hunt – National Survey, 2012*. [Canada]. IFAW Canada [Distributor].

² Data based on: Environics. 2012. *Survey of Newfoundland and Labrador: Attitudes towards the commercial seal hunt*. [Newfoundland and Labrador]. IFAW Canada [Distributor].

³ Personal communication with DFO. Active sealers is an estimate according to DFO.

⁴ Personal communication with DFO.

- Many people cite a much higher number — the number of seal licenses, which does not represent the number of active sealers. In 2013, there were around 13,000 licenses issued, but only 844 sealers active.

How important is the commercial seal hunt to the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador?

- While the commercial seal hunt can provide a boost to the incomes of a few hundred fishermen in the early spring, it does not contribute greatly to the provincial economy.
- In 2012, for instance, the landed value of the commercial seal hunt was \$1.6 million, representing less than 0.2% of the landed value of the entire fishery, and approximately 0.005% of the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador.
- For comparison, [the tourism industry](#) has a total value of approximately \$1 billion, and makes up around 1.1% of the economy.