

ARCTIC SEALING: TREAT OR BLUE PROSPECT

Breakout Session at the Arctic Circle Conference in Reykjavik, Iceland 14 October 2017.



NAMMCO, in liaison with the WWF Arctic Programme and Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, convened a Breakout Session at the Arctic Circle Conference in Reykjavik, Iceland 14 October 2017. The programme - four talks and a panel discussion addressed the questions:

Can (some) populations of Arctic seals qualify as blue resources contributing to food security? Do they represent a sustainable resource with a low ecological cost that meets the dietary needs and food preferences of Arctic communities? Is sealing responsibly managed? Do bans on seal products protect Arctic seals?

As an introduction to the discussion, four short presentations centered around the following questions:

- What do seals and sealing represent for Arctic communities?
- Is the sustainable management of Arctic seals possible, and what is the ecological footprint of sealing? Can traditional knowledge work with science-based management to ensure the sustainability of stocks?
- What are presently the major threats to the sustainability of Arctic seal stocks?

Speakers

Gabriel Nirlungayuk, Director of Inuit Programs and Services Division, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.
Title: Importance of sealing for Arctic communities

Genevieve Desportes, General Secretary, North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission
Title: Is Arctic sealing responsible in an ecosystem perspective?

David Lee, Wildlife Biologist, Department of Wildlife and Environment, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.
Title: Expectations of the Nunavut Agreement in Sustaining Wildlife Populations.

Gert Polet, Head of Forests & Wildlife Unit, WWF
Title: Perception and reality: threats to ice seals in a changing Arctic.



Panelists

Adamie Alaku, Vice President-Resource Development, Makivik Corporation, Quebec, Canada

Aaja Chemnitz Larsen, Member of the Danish Parliament, Greenland

Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, Producer of Angry Inuk, Canada

Dwayne Ryan Menezes, Director, Polar Research and Policy Initiative (PRPI), UK

Eggert Jóhannsson, Furrier, Iceland

Geir Oddsson, Senior adviser, Nordic Council of Ministers

Moderator:

Martin Breum, Danish Journalist and author

With around 120 participants the session was particularly well attended. Participants came from Inuit communities in Alaska, Inuvialuit, Nunavut, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut and Greenland in addition to participants from Canada, several European countries, Iceland, Norway and USA.

The screening the evening before of the documentary “The Angry Inuk” from Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, constituted as a good introduction to the debate. The documentary presents the dire consequences of the seal ban for communities in Nunavut and the general misinformation vehiculated and consequent lack of knowledge on the realities behind Arctic Sealing.

Focussing on the human and societal aspect of sealing, the two representatives of Nunavut illustrated the invaluable importance Arctic sealing has for Arctic communities, both as food resource, cash income giving access to everyday commodities, and societal and cultural links. Inuit sealing provides food security and promotes the use of sustainable food sources at minimal global ecological cost. Nunavut representatives also underlined the importance of the effective inclusion and active participation of local communities and indigenous peoples in the management of wildlife. In this regard the Nunavut Agreement (NA), protected by the Canadian Constitution, acknowledges and reflects the primary role of Inuit in wildlife harvesting and is an important step in this recognition. In its Article 5.1.5 – Principles of conservation, the NA also strongly promotes the maintenance of vital, healthy, wildlife populations capable of sustaining harvesting needs.

NAMMCO presented Arctic Sealing in a global ecological and blue growth perspective. The talk illustrated the absolute low ecological footprint (with reduced or absent collateral environmental costs) associated with Arctic Sealing (when sustainable) and underlined how low its was compared to that of any imported resources. Arctic Sealing appears clearly as a resource extraction well in balance with the environment and ecologically responsible. If seals were not the target, it would be difficult for anyone not to consider this resource extraction as an ecological ideal well in tune with the blue growth principals of sustainability, low carbon, resource efficiency and optimisation and social inclusion. Finally, the talk challenged bans of seal by-products of corresponding to a blue approach, as seals are hunted for human food and the bans generate waste (skins) and decrease food security and wellbeing, while impoverishing the overall Arctic ecosystem by generating a loss of knowledge, skills and cultural traits.

WWF Arctic Programme emphasized that economic development will also take place in the North, but that some developments were associated with great risks for the Arctic environment and its people. Great caution should be taken with the fragile Arctic environment so that it could continue to sustain the life of its people. Indigenous and local peoples have the right to utilise and manage the natural resources that traditionally are a part of their cultures, but also the duty to do it sustainably. Ice seals were not threatened by the present level of sealing and the present management framework, but other threats were on the rise that needed to be accounted for, taking into account the cumulative effects of all human activities.

The representative of the Nordic Council of Ministers reiterated that for the NCM the key element in Blue Growth was sustainability, and that any sustainable extraction of marine resources should be taken as an



element of Blue growth / Blue economy. NCM, therefore, acknowledges a sustainable Arctic Sealing as one component of the Arctic Blue Economy.

Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, the producer of the documentary *Angry Inuk* underlined very strongly that, Arctic communities belong, as all other communities worldwide, to the world cash economy and needed cash for surviving and developing their economy and society. Talking about and requiring pure subsistence economy gave no meaning in the 21st century and the development of the Arctic. Depriving Arctic community of one of their income opportunities - that they themselves have control over - was pushing them towards other cash sources, like income from oil exploration and exploitation, mining, shipping and tourism, economic activities they will have little control over if any and that may generate serious, rather uncontrollable and irreversible threats to the Arctic Environment.

The vital importance of Arctic sealing for Inuit communities and the importance of the importance of the effective inclusion and active participation of local communities in the management of wildlife were also underlined by the Nunavik representative. An Alaskan Inuit person also commented that the situation in Alaska is similar to other places in the Arctic with respect to the importance of sealing and seal by-products to the Inupiat. [There was no Alaskan representative in the panel, but ICC, as representative of all Inuit Communities, participated in the organizing committee. However, the ICC chair, who should have represented the organization, withdrew her participation at the last minute.]

On point of the discussion from the public was the industrial sealing, which was not acceptable, while Inuit sealing was. The answer was provided by Alethea, supported by other Inuit Representatives. She underlined that there was no industrial sealing any longer, that the big bulk of the sealing was done by Arctic/Inuit communities and not by Newfoundlanders. She again refuted the fact that Arctic sealing was not commercial and underlined that all sealings, including Inuit sealing, had a commercial aspect, besides the sharing of food. The cash it brought was needed to cover the cost of hunting and local extraction of country food and access to other commodities in a place where prices of the most common daily items were extremely high. Inuit have been engaged in the market economy since the fur trade commenced with Europeans and Inuit should not be restricted by the technology or methods that they utilize to harvest. At the contrary, hunting methods should keep improving, as they benefit animal welfare.

There were some general statements made on perception of sealing and the seal hunt (driven mostly by the images of the Newfoundland hunt). It appears to be very challenging to change the perception because of the images that are typically provided of the seal hunt by NGOs contain lots of blood. Also, NGOs continue referring to the hunt of baby seals, although the hunt of young of the year has been prohibited the last 20 years. These images evoke emotions from people who are not accustomed to it and do not know about the hunt and its regulation. Statements were made that there was an ethical problem when Europeans impose their emotional values on Inuit, disguised as environmental concerns, but ignoring facts regarding the sustainability and management of the hunt.

NAMMCO concluded the session by underlining that for NAMMCO the only keywords were sustainability and ecological responsibility and that NAMMCO did not make any differences between Inuit or other coastal communities, not recognising the notion of indigenous sealing or whaling. All had the same right and duties, especially the duty of improving hunting methods for example and that for the sake of the hunted animals. The hunting activity (time, place, target) as such represented the traditional aspect, not the hunting method.