

EVA BUTTERWORTH



The moral problem with commercial seal hunting

The Canadian seal hunt leads to animal suffering, and a European Union ban on the import of its products should stand, says Andy Butterworth.

As I write this piece in mid-April, small boats are weaving their way through the shifting Arctic sea ice off the east coast of Canada to hunt seals. In previous years, more than 1,000 boats have taken part. By the end of the 2014 hunt, a quota of some 400,000 young seals could have been taken, leaving the ice stained red with blood. The pace is rapid. Most of the annual take occurs in the first five days.

The annual Canadian commercial seal hunt is the world's largest hunt of marine mammals. A few weeks old, the seal pups are prized primarily for their skins and also for the omega-3-rich oil used in food supplements — products that are shipped around the world.

This month, the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Geneva, Switzerland, is expected to announce whether products from commercial seal hunting can be marketed in Europe. At present, they cannot. Such products have been banned by the European Union (EU) since 2009 to protect 'public morals'. Canada and Norway have asked the WTO to overturn the ban — the first of its kind — and the trade body will soon deliver its verdict.

My research has been at the centre of the case, and papers I published on welfare aspects of the seal hunt in the journal *Marine Policy* (see, for example, A. Butterworth and M. Richardson *Mar. Policy* **38**, 457–469; 2013) were cited more than 40 times in a WTO panel report last year that backed the European ban. I have been part of the EU delegation to the WTO, and had a ring-side seat to view an international tussle between the promotion of trade, animal welfare and public morals. The WTO should reject the appeal, and the ban on seal products must stay in place. Here is why.

As an official observer, I have seen the hunt at close quarters, from the ice and from helicopters. The details are grisly. That is why the WTO originally agreed that the EU could act to limit trade on the grounds of public morals — the first time that such a restriction had been put in place.

When they are born, seal pups have white fur. They are suckled, weaned and then abandoned by their mothers at about 12 days of age. Stranded on the unstable ice, they remain alone and unfed for up to six weeks, and during this time their fur changes from white to grey — and the hunters arrive.

The pups are either shot from boats, or clubbed with a wooden bat or an iron-tipped pole called a hakapik. Some shot and injured seals slide into the water and are lost. Many shot and injured animals could potentially suffer for several minutes while the hunters manoeuvre their boats close enough to club them unconscious. If the ice is too unstable for the hunters to cross, shot and injured but conscious and reactive seals can be dragged into

the boats with long hooked gaffs before being clubbed.

My publications on the hunt reflect my scientific and veterinary perspective. Animal welfare can be scrutinized and measured. I brought both my compassionate (veterinary) and dispassionate (scientific) perceptions to bear. It is impossible to monitor all the hunting activity, which takes place across a huge shifting frozen expanse the size of France. But what I have seen and measured on the ice challenged me, and provoked concern within me. The Canadian Marine Mammal regulations allow hunters to retrieve injured animals from the ice using the hooked gaffs before they have been checked for unconsciousness. But people do not allow land animals to be treated in this way. If what I have witnessed being done to a young seal was done to a horse or a dog, there is little doubt that it would be labelled as cruel.

The EU ban was introduced on moral grounds, and science and scientific evidence can inform judgements on moral questions. When it comes to the seal hunt, the science indicated that some shot seals took a considerable period of time to die, and some injured animals were 'unchecked' for periods of several minutes before being finally killed by clubbing. The post mortems that we carried out on the ice indicated that some seals had multiple shooting, clubbing and hooking injuries — and that some had swallowed their own fresh blood — probably indicating that they were alive for a period following the first contact with the hunter. The assessments also described the distressed behaviour of conscious injured animals in response to being recovered from the ice with the gaffs.

Interestingly, the appeal from Canada and Norway does not challenge the "poor welfare outcomes" of the seals, which the WTO last year judged sufficient to justify the European ban. Instead, the appeal concentrates on trade issues and claimed unfair restrictions.

In reaching its decision, which will be final and binding, the WTO must reconcile contrasting statements from international agreements that are almost 70 years old. One forbids "arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination" between countries. Another says that nations can act in a way that is "necessary to protect public morals".

As a human and as a veterinary scientist I consider the hunt to present real and significant welfare concerns. The available scientific evidence supports that opinion. But science, of course, is only one of the factors at play. Perhaps the final word should go to a statement attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated." ■

Andy Butterworth is a senior lecturer and researcher in clinical veterinary science at the University of Bristol, UK.
e-mail: andy.butterworth@bristol.ac.uk

IT IS
IMPOSSIBLE
TO MONITOR
ALL THE
HUNTING
ACTIVITY.

➔ **NATURE.COM**
Discuss this article
online at:
go.nature.com/n9cfqi