

Canada seen as having a victory at the WTO over ban on seal products

When Canada's effort to overturn actions by individual European nations to ban seal products comes before the World Trade Organization (WTO), the betting is that its presentation of the facts will triumph over the emotion that led to the bans.

The WTO has sole responsibility for decisions affecting trade among its members, and Canadian authorities are confident that they have truth and reality on their side, as opposed to the emotional appeals by animal rights activists to the various governments touched off the legislative actions.

Canada made the decision to bring the matter to the WTO after The Netherlands moved to follow the action by Belgium last April in banning sale of any seal products within its borders. Neither country is an importer of such items, but their actions are seen as influencing countries that are. Germany and the U.K. are talking about similar bans.

At the beginning of this year the population of harp seals along Canada's east coast was put at 5.5 million, a very large number, and the animals were deemed to be very healthy. So on the advice of fish and wildlife professionals, federal fisheries minister Loyola Hearn set the quota for the 2007 hunt at 270,000, down from 335,000 last year, as part of what is described as "...a precautionary approach."

Her department also announced that it is accelerating a survey of the seal population, moving it up from 2009 to 2008. "Seals are an important resource for Canada, and we take very seriously the sustainable management of the herd," said Kevin Stringer, spokesman for the Fisheries Department.

COD POPULATION ENDANGERED

A partial ban on seal hunting was imposed in 1983, causing the number of seals to increase dramatically, straining the ability of their habitat to support them. In turn, that caused a serious diminution of the cod population, which once sustained a vibrant fishing industry. It also had a heavy financial impact on the indigenous people who, like their ancestors for millennia, derive a substantial part of their meager income from trapping and hunting.

The 2006 seal hunt produced revenue of \$55 million, of which \$1 million went to the Inuits, the aboriginal population of Nunavut, Canada's turn-of-the-

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century spinoff from the North West Territory. They are seen as the most likely to suffer if any additional export bans are put in place.

The 1983 ban focused on organized trappers and hunters and excluded native peoples, but the market place ignored such an exception. Pelts that had sold for \$50 apiece dropped almost overnight to 50-cents.

Last spring a Canadian delegation visited Europe to try to inform government ministers about the true picture, but found they had been filled with misinformation by animal rights activists.

AN INUIT ESSAY

In an essay published in Canada's national newspaper, The Globe and Mail, Mary Simon, an Inuit leader with the delegation, wrote:

“This propaganda from the animal rights crowd extended to virtually every aspect of the topic: false fears about the size of the seal populations, out-of-date information about harvesting methods, and a lack of obvious comparisons with levels and methods of hunting in Europe. For Inuit, however, the most offensive part of this propaganda is the demeaning insult that we are being passively used by East Coast Canadian sealers or the government of Canada to make hunting palatable to European sensibilities.

“The consumption of seal meat and the sale of seal pelts continues to make important contributions to our economy, diet, physical well being and cultural survival.”

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