



SENATE
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CANADA

MAY 2024

SEALING THE FUTURE

A Call to Action

Report of the Standing Senate Committee
on Fisheries and Oceans

The Honourable Fabian Manning, Chair
The Honourable Bev Busson, Deputy Chair

SEALING THE FUTURE

A Call to Action

SCIENCE
COMMUNITIES
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DISINFORMATION
MARKETS

BALANCE
COLLABORATION

EFFECT
KNOWLEDGE

MANAGEMENT
RESEARCH
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INDIGENOUS
ECOSYSTEM

SEAL
FISH

CULTURE

GAPS

SEALING THE FUTURE: A CALL TO ACTION



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THE COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP



The Honourable Fabian
Manning
Chair



The Honourable Bev
Busson
Deputy Chair

The Honourable Senators



Salma Ataullahjan



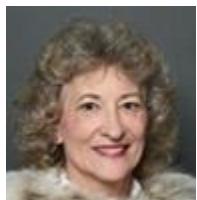
Jane Cordy



Rodger Cuzner (from
January 2024)



Colin Deacon (from
September 2023)



Pat Duncan (from June
2023)



Brian Francis (until
January 2024)



Stan Kutcher



Marilou McPhedran



Rebecca Patterson (until
November 2023)



Iris G. Petten (from
September 2023)



Jim Quinn (until
September 2023)



Mohamed-Iqbal Ravalia

Ex-officio members of the committee:

The Honourable Senator Marc Gold, P.C. or The Honourable Senator Patti LaBoucane-Benson

The Honourable Senator Donald Neil Plett or The Honourable Senator Yonah Martin

Other Senators who have participated in the study:

The Honourable Réjean Aucoin

The Honourable Marty Deacon

The Honourable Pierrette Ringuette

Research and Education, Library of Parliament:

Daniele Lafrance, Analyst

Senate Committees Directorate:

Sara Gajic, Committee Clerk

Florence Blanchet, Administrative Assistant

Sofiya Sapeha, Administrative Assistant

Senate Communications, Broadcasting and Publications Directorate:

Ben Silverman, Communications Officer

ORDER OF REFERENCE

Extract from the *Journals of the Senate* of Tuesday, October 4, 2022:

With leave of the Senate,

The Honourable Senator Manning moved, seconded by the Honourable Senator Batters:

That the Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans be authorized to examine and report on Canada's seal populations and their effect on Canada's fisheries, including but not limited to:

- (a) how Canada's seal populations have been managed by the federal government thus far;
- (b) the identification of the most appropriate and effective ways of managing seal populations going forward;
- (c) how Canada determines research priorities and funding allocations for research related to seals, and any research and/or funding gaps; and

That the committee submit its final report to the Senate no later than December 31, 2023, and that the committee retain all powers necessary to publicize its findings for 180 days after the tabling of the final report.

The question being put on the motion, it was adopted.

Interim Clerk of the Senate

Gérald Lafrenière

SEALING THE FUTURE: A CALL TO ACTION

Extract from the *Journals of the Senate* of Tuesday, November 7, 2023:

The Honourable Senator Busson moved, seconded by the Honourable Senator Loffreda:

That, notwithstanding the order of the Senate adopted on Tuesday, October 4, 2022, the date for the final report of the Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans in relation to its study on Canada's seal populations and their effect on Canada's fisheries be extended from December 31, 2023, to March 31, 2024.

The question being put on the motion, it was adopted.

Interim Clerk of the Senate

Gérald Lafrenière

Extract from the *Journals of the Senate* of Tuesday, March 19, 2024:

The Honourable Senator Busson moved, seconded by the Honourable Senator Clement:

That, notwithstanding the order of the Senate adopted on Tuesday, November 7, 2023, the date for the final report of the Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans in relation to its study on Canada's seal populations be extended from March 31, 2024, to June 30, 2024; and

That the committee be permitted, notwithstanding usual practices, to deposit with the Clerk of the Senate its report relating to this study, if the Senate is not then sitting, and that the report be deemed to have been tabled in the Senate.

The question being put on the motion, it was adopted.

Interim Clerk of the Senate

Gérald Lafrenière

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2022, the Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans (the committee) undertook a study on Canada's seal populations and their effects on Canada's fisheries. Over the course of more than a year, the committee sought testimony and information about the following topics and issues:

- Canada's seal populations, their effects on fisheries and the ecosystems they inhabit, their diets, and their distribution;
- Canada's seal harvest and seal products industry; and
- The cultural and economic importance of seals to remote, coastal and Indigenous communities in Canada.

The committee's report, entitled *Sealing the Future: A Call to Action*, presents this information and answers the questions posed in the study's order of reference, which are summarized below.

How does Canada determine research priorities and funding allocations for research related to seals?

The committee determined that troubling science and research gaps exist. The committee proposes actionable solutions to help fill these knowledge gaps to enable Fisheries and Oceans Canada to better understand the roles seals play within the ecosystems they inhabit, and to learn more about their diets and their distribution. These include developing a more robust and state-of-the-art marine and fisheries research capacity and encouraging more scientific collaboration that better utilizes private sector and academic partners and incorporates Indigenous and local knowledge.

How have Canada's seal populations been managed by the federal government thus far and what are the most appropriate and effective ways of managing seal populations going forward?

The committee found that the federal government is not managing seal populations in an active or evidence-based manner. Additional troubling findings included the precipitous decline of Canada's once-vibrant sealing industry and the breadth of misinformation and disinformation that surrounds Canada's seal harvest. Although the current seal harvest is humane and well regulated, the commercial total allowable catches set by Fisheries and Oceans Canada have not been reached for some time and the committee learned that seal harvesting is no longer economically viable for most fishers. This decreased harvest has impacted the transfer of skills and traditional knowledge, and limited the availability of seals for the value-added products industry.

The committee underscores that Canada's commercial seal harvest has not been actively managed by Fisheries and Oceans Canada for some time because the harvests have been almost negligible. This report recommends targeted actions to reinvigorate the harvest, which is socially, economically, and culturally important. The seal harvest presents significant economic opportunities for many remote, coastal, and Indigenous communities, and plays a crucial role in ensuring ecosystem balance.

Do seals have an effect on Canada's fisheries?

Despite the fact that the committee heard several statistics that emphasized the impact seals can have on fish populations – including that seals eat 22 times as much fish as is commercially harvested, and that an adult seal can eat 1,000 kilograms of fish and seafood per year and in some cases more – it has determined that Fisheries and Oceans Canada is unable or unwilling to make any conclusions about the effects of seals on fisheries. However, the committee did learn that most seal populations in Canada are stable and able to sustain well-managed commercial harvests on all of our coasts.

Recommendations

In all, the committee makes **9 recommendations** in this report to:

- Improve seal population management;
- Expand marine and fisheries research capacity and encourage substantially more collaborative research;
- Counter misinformation and disinformation about Canada's seal populations, seal harvest, and seal products industry by promoting credible sources of information, among other measures; and
- Develop market access for seal-based products.

The committee is hopeful that the report will be a call to action and that its findings will persuade the Government of Canada – and each of the appropriate departments and agencies – to take immediate and concerted steps to implement the committee's recommendations with expediency. The committee looks forward to getting an update from Fisheries and Oceans Canada on the progress made in the coming months and beyond.



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1 (Seal Population Management Strategy)

The committee strongly recommends that the Government of Canada urgently develop and implement an effective and sustainable seal population management strategy, as soon as is practicable or no later six months from the date of tabling of this report.

This strategy must be prepared in collaboration with relevant stakeholders and take into consideration:

- a. the fact that various seal species are found on the Atlantic, Arctic, and Pacific Coasts;
- b. the fact that seals are part of complex ecosystems;
- c. the impacts of climate change on seals and the ecosystems they inhabit; and
- d. the social, economic, and cultural importance of the seal industry.

Recommendation 2 (Marine and Fisheries Research Capacity)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada rapidly develop and implement a more robust and state-of-the-art marine and fisheries research capacity, by using both currently available and up-to-date modern research methods and emerging technologies, and by acquiring and establishing additional ocean-specific research infrastructure, such as dedicated research vessels. This must include the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge to enhance research capacity. Furthermore, these research capacity-building activities must be developed in collaboration with Indigenous governments and organizations, communities, seal industry members, the academic community, international experts, private sector organizations, and other stakeholders.



Recommendation 3 (Increasing Seal Science and Research Collaboration)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada encourage, foster, and support greater science and research collaboration concerning seal populations, their diets, and their distribution. This must be conducted together with provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments, academics, international experts, seal harvesters, commercial fishers, local communities, private sector organizations, and other relevant stakeholders, and where possible, must utilize existing modern research capacity. As part of this work, the Government of Canada must also ensure that resulting data and research outcomes are shared appropriately, which could be done by way of a user-friendly database designed to meet the information needs of researchers and stakeholders.

Recommendation 4 (Modifications to the Income Tax Act)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada urgently review and amend the *Income Tax Act* and all other related acts, as needed, to ensure that registered Canadian charities and non-profit organizations that produce or promote misinformation and/or disinformation about the seal harvest or seal products industry have their tax-exempt status revoked.

In addition, the committee recommends that the Government of Canada amend the *Income Tax Act* to require registered Canadian charities and non-profit organizations to fill out information returns about donors, similar to those that are prescribed for registered journalism organizations in section 149.1(14.1) of the Act, which includes a public information return for the year in the prescribed form that lists each donor whose total gifts to the organization in the year exceed \$5,000.

Recommendation 5 (National Educational Campaign)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada develop, in collaboration with Indigenous governments and organizations, local communities, and seal industry members, a national educational campaign regarding Canada's seal populations, seal harvest, and seal products industry. The educational campaign should be informed by educational materials currently available and be completed and ready to launch within one year of the tabling of this report. This educational campaign material and its implementation plan shall be shared with the Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans upon its completion.



Recommendation 6 (Anti-misinformation/Anti-disinformation Campaign)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada, in collaboration with key stakeholders, create and disseminate an effective anti-misinformation/anti-disinformation campaign related to the Canadian seal harvest and seal products industry. Work on this campaign must begin immediately and it is essential that it be a whole-of-government initiative, led by Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Recommendation 7 (Increasing the Seal Harvest)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada immediately take steps to ensure that commercial sealing is economically viable for harvesters, which will help grow the seal products industry so that it can achieve the commercial total allowable catches set by Fisheries and Oceans Canada. Marine and fisheries research and a sustainable seal population management strategy will help ensure that the commercial harvest remains sustainable and is adjusted when necessary. In addition, to expand Canada's seal products industry and to open new domestic and international markets, the Government of Canada must be willing to take actions, such as implement regulatory changes and invest in innovative product development, national marketing campaigns, and an effective anti-misinformation/anti-disinformation campaign.

Recommendation 8 (Seal Studies Centre of Excellence)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada immediately begin to establish a seal studies centre of excellence that includes Indigenous organizations, academic institutions, and other relevant stakeholders as partners, and is supported by Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Recommendation 9 (International Market Development)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada, in collaboration with key stakeholders, urgently develop and implement a domestic and international campaign to promote traditional and innovative Canadian seal products and to work towards the removal of trade barriers and the development of new markets. Work on this campaign must begin immediately and it is essential that it be a whole-of-government initiative, led by Global Affairs Canada.

INTRODUCTION

On 6 October 2022, the Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans (the committee) began a study on Canada's seal populations and their effect on Canada's fisheries pursuant to the following order of reference received from the Senate:

That the Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans be authorized to examine and report on Canada's seal populations and their effect on Canada's fisheries, including but not limited to:

- (a) how Canada's seal populations have been managed by the federal government thus far;*
- (b) the identification of the most appropriate and effective ways of managing seal populations going forward;*
- (c) how Canada determines research priorities and funding allocations for research related to seals, and any research and/or funding gaps; and*

That the committee submit its final report to the Senate no later than December 31, 2023, and that the committee retain all powers necessary to publicize its findings for 180 days after the tabling of the final report.¹

The final report date was extended to 30 June 2024 by subsequent orders of reference received from the Senate on 7 November 2023 and 19 March 2024.²

Further to this mandate, the committee heard from witnesses with a wide range of backgrounds, expertise, and lived experiences, including representatives from federal government departments and agencies; provincial and territorial governments; seal harvesters and fishers; Indigenous people and organizations; scientists and researchers; communications specialists; artisans, and many more.

¹ Senate of Canada, [*Journals of the Senate*](#), 1st Session, 44th Parliament, 4 October 2022.

² Senate of Canada, [*Journals of the Senate*](#), 1st Session, 44th Parliament, 7 November 2023; and Senate of Canada, [*Journals of the Senate*](#), 1st Session, 44th Parliament, 19 November 2024.

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Witnesses appeared before the committee in Ottawa, Ontario between 6 October 2022 and 7 December 2023. The committee also travelled to Newfoundland and Labrador from 11 to 13 September 2023 to gather additional evidence regarding this study and the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard appeared on 8 February 2024. Several briefs and written responses were also received from government departments and agencies, academics, animal welfare organizations, commercial fishers, and others. Committee members extend their sincere appreciation to all the witnesses who appeared, submitted a written document, or met with the committee while it travelled in Newfoundland and Labrador.



Fishing vessels docked at the Port de Grave harbour in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The committee's study, pursuant to its order of reference, was meant to examine the effect Canada's seal populations are having on Canada's fisheries. For reasons explained in the report below, the committee is not able to come to a firm conclusion about this impact at this time. In addition, as committee members learned about Canada's seals, seal harvest, and seal products industry, it became clear that due to the complex nature of the questions posed, the order of reference questions could not be considered on their own. The study scope evolved and broadened naturally, and the information presented in the report below reflects this evolution.

SEALING THE FUTURE: A CALL TO ACTION

The knowledge shared with the committee enabled its members to gain a better appreciation of the social, economic, and environmental context related to Canada's seal populations. The committee learned that many Canadians know very little about the country's seal populations, seal harvest, and seal products industry. This report begins with a brief history of Canada's seal harvest, presents ecosystem-based information about Canada's seal populations and their relationship to fish stocks, and identifies knowledge gaps that must urgently be addressed to better understand the role of seals in complex and changing ocean ecosystems. The report also aims to help Canadians learn more about seals and their social, cultural, and economic importance, and it discusses the role misinformation and disinformation has played regarding the implementation of seal product bans.

A BRIEF HISTORY

In Canada, Indigenous people have harvested seals for subsistence purposes for thousands of years.³ At the end of the 16th century and until the early 1970s, European (and later Canadian) fishing fleets launched annual seal harvest expeditions on Canada's East Coast.⁴ Expeditions were often perilous and, over the years, many sealers (seal harvesters) were injured or lost their lives. Commentators and witnesses appearing before the committee have noted that these commercial harvests were unsustainable and depleted seal populations as they were not managed by the Government of Canada until the early 1970s.



A delegation of the Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans kicked off its fact-finding mission to Newfoundland and Labrador with a visit to the John C. Crosbie Sealers Interpretation Centre in Elliston, a historic fishing town and settlement. From left, senators Jim Quinn, Rebecca Patterson, Jane Cordy, Bev Busson, Brian Francis, Pat Duncan, Fabian Manning, Salma Ataullahjan, Iris Petten and Marilou McPhedran.

³ Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), [2011-2015 Integrated Fisheries Management Plan for Atlantic Seals](#).

⁴ Ibid.

1. PACIFIC COAST

On Canada's West Coast, harbour seal populations, for example, were said to have "been depleted by predator control programs and especially commercial harvests" which were "conducted between the late 1800s and 1960s."⁵ The commercial seal harvest took place until the 1970s.⁶ Today, in Canada's Pacific Region, the commercial harvest of all marine mammals, including seals, is prohibited. This prohibition on commercial harvesting is implemented by Fisheries and Oceans Canada pursuant to the *Fisheries Act*⁷ and its regulations. The harvest of marine mammals for food, social and ceremonial purposes is permitted for Indigenous communities and Indigenous individuals as outlined in the *Marine Mammal Regulations*⁸ and pursuant to Aboriginal rights and treaty rights.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada, in a report published in 2009, estimated the British Columbia harbour seal population to be 105,000 seals, a population the committee heard has been stable for over 25 years.⁹

2. ATLANTIC AND ARCTIC COASTS

In Canada's Atlantic and Arctic regions, the commercial seal harvest is managed by Fisheries and Oceans Canada as a fishery pursuant to the *Fisheries Act*.¹⁰ "Quota management was introduced in [...] 1971 amid concerns that the herds were being depleted" and commercial seal landings dropped significantly in the following decade.¹¹ In 1986, the Royal Commission on Seals and the Sealing Industry in Canada issued its report.¹² The following year, the Government of Canada prohibited the commercial harvest of whitecoats (harp seal pups) and bluebacks (hooded seal pups), and reduced the size of the vessels that could be used to harvest seals.¹³ In 2009, the *Marine*

⁵ Peter F. Olesiuk, "[An assessment of the status of harbour seals \(*Phoca vitulina*\) in British Columbia](#)," DFO, 1999.

⁶ Senate, Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans (POFO), [Evidence](#) (Rebecca Reid, Regional Director General, Pacific Region, Fisheries and Oceans Canada), 6 October 2022.

⁷ [Fisheries Act](#), R.S.C., 1985, c. F-14.

⁸ [Marine Mammal Regulations](#), SOR/93-56.

⁹ DFO, [An assessment of population trends and abundance of harbour seals \(*Phoca vitulina*\) in British Columbia](#), Research Document 2009/105; and POFO, [Evidence](#) (Andrew Trites, Professor and Director of the Marine Mammal Research Unit, Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia, appearing as an individual), 11 May 2023.

¹⁰ [Fisheries Act](#), R.S.C., 1985, c. F-14.

¹¹ DFO, [2011-2015 Integrated Fisheries Management Plan for Atlantic Seals](#).

¹² The Royal Commission on Seals and the Sealing Industry in Canada (also commonly referred to as the "Malouf Commission," named after its Chairman, Albert H. Malouf) produced a two-volume report available for download at: Government of Canada, [Seals and sealing in Canada - report of the Royal Commission. Volume 1 / Royal Commission on Seals and the Sealing Industry in Canada : chairman, Albert H. Malouf](#).

¹³ DFO, [2011-2015 Integrated Fisheries Management Plan for Atlantic Seals](#).

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Mammal Regulations were amended to prescribe the tools to be used in the humane harvesting of seals.¹⁴

Fisheries and Oceans Canada has stated that the Northwest Atlantic harp seal population, estimated at 7.6 million seals in 2019, is deemed recovered from its pre-hunt levels and that populations of other seal species are also said to have stabilized.¹⁵ The Northwest Atlantic grey seal population, which continues to increase, was estimated at 366,400 seals in 2021.¹⁶

Today, on Canada's Atlantic and Arctic Coasts, commercial seal harvests primarily consist of harp and grey seals. Subsistence harvests, undertaken by Indigenous people include various seal species, with ringed seals being the primary species harvested.

As noted in a 2017 Library of Parliament publication, "Canadian seal landed values peaked in 2006, with meat and pelt values exceeding \$30 million."¹⁷ Following 2006, however, there was a significant decline in seal pelt landings, and a reduction of seal pelt prices and demand.¹⁸

It is widely known that Canada's seal harvest has come under international criticism for pre-conceived assumptions related to current harvesting methods, which affected the marketability of Canada's seal products. More than 30 countries have issued import bans on commercial seal products, primarily due to historical concerns that are no longer valid because of improved management practices and regulations. These countries include all European Union countries, the United States, Mexico, and India. The most economically significant ban was the one instituted by the European Union in 2009, which banned the importation and sale of seal products, with the exception of those resulting from traditional hunts by Indigenous communities.¹⁹

Fisheries and Oceans Canada has written that in "Canada's remote coastal and northern communities, sealing is an important part of the way of life and a much needed source of income for thousands of families."²⁰ The committee learned that the number of seals harvested in Canada's commercial fishery at present does not significantly impact the health of current seal

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Bernard Vigneault, Director General, Ecosystem Sciences Directorate, Fisheries and Oceans Canada), 6 October 2022; and DFO, "[2019 Status of Northwest Atlantic Harp Seals, *Pagophilus Groenlandicus*](#)," *Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat Science Advisory Report 2020/020*, March 2020.

¹⁶ DFO, "[Stock Assessment of Northwest Atlantic Grey Seals \(*Halichoerus Grypus*\) in Canada in 2021](#)," *Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat Science Advisory Report 2022/018*, June 2022.

¹⁷ Daniele Lafrance, "[Canada's Seal Harvest](#)," *Library of Parliament*, Publication No. 2017-18-E, 9 August 2017.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ European Commission, [Trade in seal products](#).

²⁰ DFO, [The importance of the seal harvest](#).

populations.²¹ As Adam Burns (Fisheries and Oceans Canada) confirmed to the committee, in recent years, approximately 30,000 harp seals have been commercially harvested annually, which is “significantly below what could be removed while still maintaining the population at the level it is now.”²²

Similarly, Todd Williams (Fisheries and Oceans Canada) confirmed that the department has not set total allowable catches (TACs) for seals since 2016 because the harvests have not achieved the previously set TACs.²³ According to Mr. Williams, between 2018 and 2022, only 1% of the TAC was landed for the grey seal harvest and only 7% of the TAC was landed for the harp seal harvest. TACs are set by using the precautionary approach²⁴ to ensure that healthy stocks are maintained.²⁵ As a result, should grey and harp seal commercial harvests increase, the TACs would be revised by the department to ensure that the increase did not threaten the long-term sustainability of those seal populations, as prescribed by the precautionary approach.²⁶

²¹ POFO, [Evidence](#), 6 October 2022.

²² POFO, [Evidence](#) (Adam Burns, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Fisheries and Harbour Management, Fisheries and Oceans Canada), 6 October 2022.

²³ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Todd Williams, Acting Director General, Fisheries and Resource Management, Fisheries and Harbor Management Sector, Fisheries and Oceans Canada), 29 November 2022.

²⁴ Fisheries and Oceans Canada defines the use of the “precautionary approach” in fisheries management as “being cautious when scientific knowledge is uncertain, and not using the absence of adequate scientific information as a reason to postpone action or failure to take action to avoid serious harm to fish stocks or their ecosystem.” See: DFO, [A Fishery Decision-Making Framework Incorporating the Precautionary Approach](#).

²⁵ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Todd Williams), 29 November 2022.

²⁶ Ibid.

CANADA'S SEAL POPULATIONS AND THEIR EFFECT ON CANADA'S FISHERIES²⁷

1. SCIENCE AND DATA COLLECTION

Canada is home to eight species of seals, each with their own diets and distribution areas (Table 1). One can therefore not generalize the effect of “seals” on Canada’s fisheries. Indeed, there are important differences amongst the various seal populations on each of Canada’s three coasts. The amount and type of seal-related data gathered, and research conducted on each coast and each species also greatly varies.

Table 1 – General Information About Seal Species Found in Canada

Species (Scientific Name)	Canadian Distribution	Population
Bearded Seal (<i>Erignathus barbatus</i>)	Found throughout the Arctic and in Newfoundland and Labrador. Distribution does not extend farther north than 80°N.	Unknown
Grey Seal (<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>)	<p>A highly mobile species, grey seals forage in waters from Georges Bank to the northern Gulf of St. Lawrence.</p> <p>Found on the shores of the North Atlantic Ocean, in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nova Scotia; ▪ New Brunswick; ▪ Prince Edward Island; ▪ Newfoundland and Labrador; and ▪ the Gulf of St. Lawrence off the shores of Quebec. <p>Found in the Northwest Atlantic near:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sable Island; ▪ coastal Nova Scotia; and ▪ the Gulf of St. Lawrence. 	<p>A 2021 assessment estimated the population at 366,400 seals.</p>
Harbour Seal (<i>Phoca vitulina</i>)	<p>Found off the coastal waters of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ British Columbia; ▪ Manitoba; ▪ New Brunswick; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A 2009 assessment estimated approximately 105,000 seals on the British Columbia coast. ▪ 20,000 to 30,000 harbour seals were estimated in Atlantic Canada.

²⁷ The committee heard considerable testimony regarding the science and research conducted on seal populations across Canada. Although this information was valuable for committee members in the drafting of this report and its recommendations, a detailed outline of that science is not provided herein. To learn more about seal science and research, the committee invites readers to consult Fisheries and Oceans Canada’s research (e.g., Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat reports), which is available online, and to read the testimony provided to the committee by various experts, such as testimony provided to the committee on 17 November 2022, 29 November 2022, 1 December 2022, and 23 November 2023.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Newfoundland and Labrador; ▪ Nova Scotia; ▪ Nunavut; ▪ Ontario; ▪ Prince Edward Island; and ▪ Quebec. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The size of Canada's Arctic population is unknown.
Harp Seal (<i>Pagophilus groenlandicus</i>)	<p>There are three distinct populations, each whelping (i.e., giving birth to their young) in distinct areas. Only the Northwest Atlantic population is located in Canada (off Eastern Canada and Western Greenland). Each of the three populations has an important range.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In 2017, the Northwest Atlantic population was estimated at 6.8 million seals, and it was estimated that the population increased to approximately 7.6 million seals in 2019. ▪ In 2019, the global population was estimated at 9.3 million seals.
Hooded Seal (<i>Cystophora cristata</i>)	<p>Three Northwest Atlantic populations are known to whelp in Canada. They are found in the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence; ▪ Davis Strait between Greenland and northern Canada; and ▪ the Front. <p>After whelping, the populations utilize a large range.</p>	<p>A 2006 assessment estimated the Canadian population at 593,500 seals.</p>
Northern Elephant Seal (<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>)	<p>Found in British Columbia in the spring and summer months:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ off Vancouver Island's West Coast; ▪ in the Strait of Juan de Fuca; and ▪ off the Queen Charlotte Islands. 	Unknown
Northern Fur Seal (<i>Callorhinus ursinus</i>)	<p>Found on Canada's West Coast, this species is migratory and is believed to winter and breed in California and Alaska (United States). A portion of the population is believed to inhabit Canadian waters in May.</p>	<p>A 2008 assessment estimated the number of seals passing through Canadian waters in May was approximately 123,000 seals.</p>
Ringed Seal (<i>Pusa hispida</i>)	<p>Found in Arctic waters near ice floes and pack ice in the Arctic and sub-Arctic. In Canada, they can be found as far south as northern Newfoundland.</p>	<p>The most recent global population estimate was 5 million seals. The Canadian population size is unknown.</p>

Sources: Table prepared using data obtained from Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), [Bearded seal](#); DFO, [Please keep your distance ... moulting Elephant Seals](#); Ocean Networks Canada, [Seals and Sea Lions](#), 1 December 2013; DFO, [Grey seal](#); Government of Canada, [Stock Assessment of Northwest Atlantic grey seals \(*Halichoerus grypus*\) in Canada in 2021](#), [Science Advisory Report 2022/018](#); DFO, [Harbour seal](#); DFO, [An assessment of population trends and abundance of harbour seals \(*Phoca vitulina*\) in British Columbia](#), [Research Document 2009/105](#); DFO, [Harp seal](#); DFO, [Trends in abundance of harp seals, *Pagophilus groenlandicus*, in the Northwest Atlantic, 1952–2019](#), [Research Document 2021/006](#), March 2021; North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO), [Harp Seal](#), July 2021; DFO, [Current Status of Northwest Atlantic Harp Seals, \(*Pagophilus groenlandicus*\)](#), [Science Advisory Report 2011/070](#), February 2012; DFO, [2019 Status of Northwest Atlantic Harp Seals, *Pagophilus Groenlandicus*](#), [Science Advisory Report 2020/020](#), March 2020; DFO, [Hooded seal](#); Government of Canada, [Northern Fur Seal \(*Callorhinus ursinus*\)](#); Government of Canada, [Northern fur seal \(*Callorhinus ursinus*\): COSEWIC assessment and status report 2010](#); DFO, [Recovery Potential Assessment for Northern Fur Seals \(*Callorhinus ursinus*\)](#), [Science Advisory Report 2007/052](#), October 2008; DFO, [Ringed seal](#); Government of Canada, [Nunavut ringed seal monitoring](#); and NAMMCO, [Ringed Seal](#), July 2021.

The total number of seals (all species) in Canada was not shared with the committee by any witnesses. The seal population estimates presented in Table 1 are based on the most recent Fisheries and Oceans Canada data. It is clear that Canadian seal populations are only estimated periodically, with some species not being estimated at all. The committee therefore cannot establish how many seals can be found in Canada in any given year with any scientific certainty, making it extremely difficult to determine their effect on Canada's fisheries.

Seals are part of complex ocean and terrestrial ecosystems and how seals interact with their environments can vary by region and seal species. In addition, some seal species, such as the grey seal, inhabit various different ecosystems throughout the year since they are highly mobile. The committee also learned that climate change is impacting the ecosystems that seals and various fish stocks inhabit. These changes can both directly and indirectly influence various aspects of seal behaviour as well as that of various fish stocks and seal-fish interactions. Although the complexities and nuances of these impacts are being studied, they currently are not well understood. Much more research into these ongoing and complex ecosystem transformations, including changing ecosystem food webs, is urgently needed.

The committee heard much conflicting testimony with regards to the effect seal populations are having on Canada's fisheries, with some witnesses noting that seals are not considerable contributors to fish stock depletion and other witnesses explaining that they are. The committee heard from Fisheries and Oceans Canada that an adult seal will consume approximately 1,000 kilograms of fish and seafood per year, although this statistic varies with various factors, such as the seal's species, maturity, and diet.²⁸ The background information that the department provided the Atlantic Seal Science Task Team noted that grey seals consume 1,500 to 2,000 kg of food annually, with prey species varying by geographic area.²⁹

What the committee heard from many witnesses is that additional research on seals and their food webs – including diet, distribution, and ecosystem roles – is required and the committee wholeheartedly agrees. In a brief submitted to the committee, W. Don Bowen (retired Fisheries and Oceans Canada Research Scientist, as an individual) noted: “[I]t is doubtful that additional studies on seals or fish will yield model results that constitute a eureka moment whereby all will become clear as to the impact of seals on fish stocks of interest.”³⁰ While the committee recognizes that progress in collecting and understanding science and research will take time, there is nevertheless an urgent need to develop a better understanding of the role seals play within the various ecosystems they inhabit.

Without an ecosystem-based understanding of Canada's oceans, it is difficult to manage any population, whether it be fish stocks or predators, such as seals. In addition, it is well understood that good policy is based on good science. Additional up-to-date science and robust research are therefore imperative to ensure that Canada's ocean management policies are sound and based on

²⁸ POFO, *Evidence*, 6 October 2022.

²⁹ DFO, *Report of the Atlantic Seal Science Task Team: Appendix 5*.

³⁰ W. Don Bowen (as an individual), *Brief*, 17 February 2023.

facts. Fisheries and Oceans Canada must therefore expand its seal science program as soon as possible.

2. STATE OF CANADIAN SEAL POPULATIONS

2.1 Arctic

The committee heard that seal populations in Canada's Arctic region are most likely stable and healthy, and that the subsistence seal harvest has not negatively impacted the ecosystem's balance.³¹ However, the committee also heard that very little science and research has been conducted on Arctic seal populations, which is cause for great concern. Paul Irngaut (Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.) explained that a lack of science should not be used to assume seal populations are unhealthy or at risk and if the federal government is concerned about these populations, more research and collaboration with communities would be key.³² Similarly, Tom Henheffer (Arctic Research Foundation) asked how, without "accurate stock assessments of what the fish stocks are," can we draw conclusions about how seals are affecting those fish stocks?³³

The committee learned that, in Nunavut, seal populations are likely stable, and it was recommended that "the future management of seals in Nunavut needs to be led by Inuit and [Nunavut] communities, that it respects the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, while bringing in the resources, capabilities and capacity of [Fisheries and Oceans Canada]; that is the spirit of co-management."³⁴ Co-management could also help track any impacts climate change may have on seals inhabiting Arctic ecosystems in the short and long-term.

³¹ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Zoya Martin, Director of Fisheries and Sealing, Department of Economic Development and Transportation, Government of Nunavut), 23 November 2023.

³² POFO, [Evidence](#) (Paul Irngaut, Vice-President, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.), 9 November 2023.

³³ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Tom Henheffer, Co-CEO, Arctic Research Foundation), 23 November 2023.

³⁴ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Zoya Martin), 23 November 2023.

2.2 East and West Coasts



Thousands of seals dot a vast expanse of ice floes off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Photo credit: Canadian Seal Products

Overall, the committee heard that seals on Canada's East and West Coasts are part of complex ecosystems and that their place within those ecosystems is not scientifically well understood by modern science. Witnesses explained that, in the past, seal populations were heavily commercially harvested in both Atlantic and Pacific Canada and that recent population increases are the result of population recovery.³⁵ Witnesses also explained that the effect the increasing seal populations and climate change are having on ecosystem balance and food webs is difficult to predict and varies from region to region. In addition, the committee often heard that seals are opportunistic feeders and change their diets according to prey availability, possibly making them more adaptable than other species within these various ecosystems.³⁶

The committee learned that the Northwest Atlantic harp seal population (estimated at 7.6 million seals in 2019) is currently deemed to be recovered from its pre-hunt levels and that populations of

³⁵ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Fred Whoriskey, Executive Director, Ocean Tracking Network, Dalhousie University, appearing as an individual), 17 November 2022; POFO, [Evidence](#) (David Rosen, Assistant Professor, Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia, appearing as an individual), 1 December 2022; and POFO, [Evidence](#) (Andrew Trites), 11 May 2023.

³⁶ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Bernard Vigneault), 6 October 2022; POFO, [Evidence](#) (Paul Bentzen, Professor, Dalhousie University, appearing as an individual), 17 November 2022; and POFO, [Evidence](#), (Kris Vascotto, Executive Director, Atlantic Groundfish Council and member of the Atlantic Seal Science Task Team), 20 October 2022.

other seal species are also said to have stabilized.³⁷ The committee learned that the Northwest Atlantic grey seal population continues to increase, although this increase has slowed in recent years.³⁸ In 2021, Fisheries and Oceans Canada estimated the size of this grey seal population to be 366,400 seals.

Various witnesses voiced a need for Fisheries and Oceans Canada to actively manage seal stocks sustainably within the ecosystem and stressed that without management, seal stocks will continue to increase and negatively impact commercial and non-commercial fish stocks. Also of concern was that seal predation and competition are excluded from stock assessments and species rebuilding plans, which is an important oversight.³⁹ Even if they are not the only possible cause of stock declines, seals may be in direct competition with certain fish stocks for specific high-calorie food sources, and so could indirectly contribute to the suppression of stock recovery. These factors must be taken into consideration by Fisheries and Oceans Canada when stock assessment models are developed and species rebuilding plans are drafted.

Morley Knight (Fisheries Consultant and former Assistant Deputy Minister of Fisheries Policy, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, appearing as an individual) stated that “[s]eals need to be managed effectively as part of an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management. The first step in this is having a clear understanding of how much fish of each species seals are eating and what is the impact on that fish stock. At the same time, there needs to be a proactive strategy by Canada to effectively manage seal populations at sustainable levels, at much less than their maximum sustainable yield. Seal population management strategies will need to include different approaches depending on the species and their suitability for utilization.”⁴⁰ Similarly, the Honourable Céline Hervieux-Payette, (former Senator, appearing as an individual) highlighted that “we must ensure that managing fish stocks, marine animals and seals becomes a priority for the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard.”⁴¹

Witnesses also often observed that seals are opportunistic feeders and the food they consume will be impacted by how climate changes, such as warming ocean waters, will affect the movement and

³⁷ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Bernard Vigneault), 6 October 2022; and DFO, “[2019 Status of Northwest Atlantic Harp Seals, *Pagophilus groenlandicus*](#),” *Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat Science Advisory Report 2020/020*, March 2020.

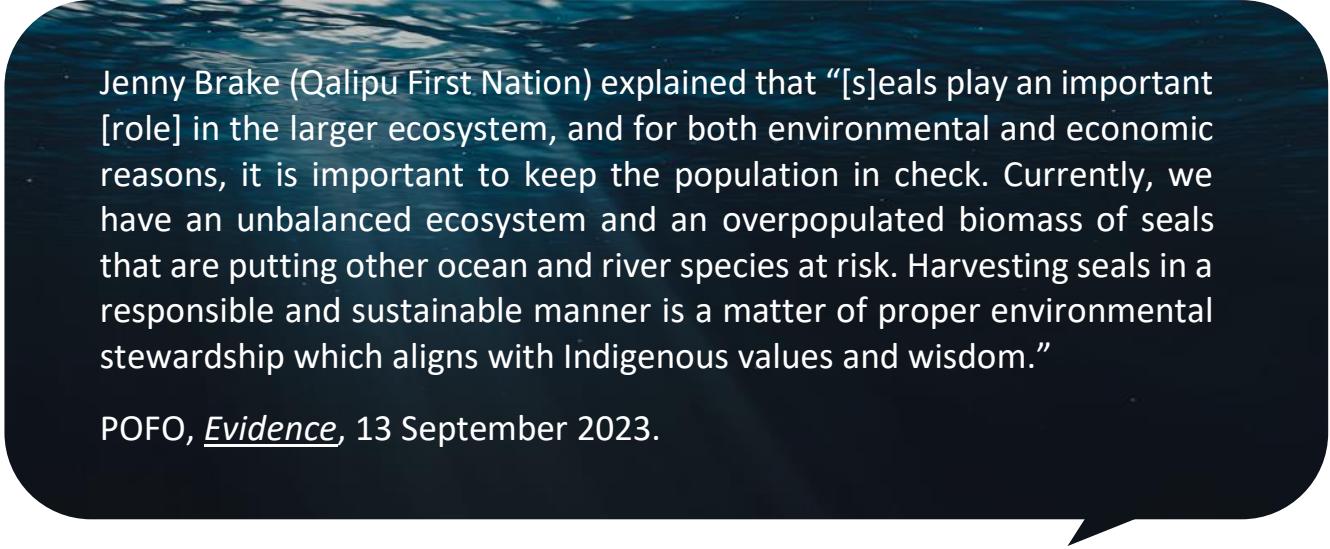
³⁸ DFO, “[Stock Assessment of Northwest Atlantic Grey Seals \(*Halichoerus Grypus*\) in Canada in 2021](#),” *Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat Science Advisory Report 2022/018*, June 2022.

³⁹ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Ginny Boudreau, Executive Director, Guysborough County Inshore Fishermen’s Association and member of the Atlantic Seal Science Task Team), 20 October 2022.

⁴⁰ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Morley Knight, Fisheries Consultant and Former Assistant Deputy Minister of Fisheries Policy, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, appearing as an individual), 13 September 2023.

⁴¹ POFO, [Evidence](#) (The Honourable Céline Hervieux-Payette, former Senator, appearing as an individual), 2 November 2023.

distribution of sea life. However, the committee learned that there is insufficient research to properly understand current food web relationships. Due to rapid climate-induced changes in ocean ecology, research conducted, even a decade ago, may no longer be accurate and may not depict the current spatial distribution or diets of seal populations.



Jenny Brake (Qalipu First Nation) explained that “[s]eals play an important [role] in the larger ecosystem, and for both environmental and economic reasons, it is important to keep the population in check. Currently, we have an unbalanced ecosystem and an overpopulated biomass of seals that are putting other ocean and river species at risk. Harvesting seals in a responsible and sustainable manner is a matter of proper environmental stewardship which aligns with Indigenous values and wisdom.”

POFO, *Evidence*, 13 September 2023.

Dion Dakins (Carino Processing Ltd.) explained that “[e]xisting [Fisheries and Oceans Canada] harp seal science tells us that, since the population has risen above 5.4 million, females are on average 20 kilos lighter in February, a critical point in the gestation cycle, and 1.7 centimetres, about 0.67 inches, shorter in body length; females are on average two years older before they have their first pup; and late-term abortions have risen by 200 per cent. Furthermore, ice-dependent seals like harp seals are more susceptible to the effects of climate change when their populations are higher.”⁴²

Recommendation 1 (Seal Population Management Strategy)

The committee strongly recommends that the Government of Canada urgently develop and implement an effective and sustainable seal population management strategy, as soon as is practicable or no later six months from the date of tabling of this report.

⁴² POFO, *Evidence* (Dion Dakins, Chief Executive Officer, Carino Processing Ltd.), 13 September 2023.

This strategy must be prepared in collaboration with relevant stakeholders and take into consideration:

- a. the fact that various seal species are found on the Atlantic, Arctic, and Pacific Coasts;**
- b. the fact that seals are part of complex ecosystems;**
- c. the impacts of climate change on seals and the ecosystems they inhabit; and**
- d. the social, economic, and cultural importance of the seal industry.**

3. INDIGENOUS SCIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE

David Kunuk (Government of Nunavut) shared the following with the committee:

“There have been IQ [i.e., Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit*] studies completed and workshops to document the rich and holistic knowledge that Inuit elders and harvesters hold, but this information has not been recognized or used in any meaningful way by resource managers.”

POFO, Evidence, 23 November 2023.

In discussing science and research, Steven Lonsdale (Qikiqtani Inuit Association) said that, in his opinion, scientific studies are often a snapshot in time, whereas Inuit knowledge spans years and decades.⁴³ He also noted that oral accounts are often more in-depth and can highlight trends. Similarly, Zoya Martin (Government of Nunavut) said that “Inuit harvesters and elders hold a tremendous amount of knowledge, and there needs to be room within policy and practice for the inclusion of this knowledge in resource management plans. Resource management plans often rely

⁴³ POFO, Evidence (Steven Lonsdale, Conservation Program Advisor, Marine and Wildlife Department, Qikiqtani Inuit Association), 9 November 2023.

solely on science, and we are advocating that in policy and practice there needs to be space for other knowledge systems to be included beside and, when needed, in lieu of science.”⁴⁴

Ginny Boudreau (Guysborough County Inshore Fishermen’s Association and member of the Atlantic Seal Science Task Team) was “at a loss to explain why the federal government and [Fisheries and Oceans Canada] specifically haven’t reached out to those [Indigenous] communities [that have developed the seal harvesting plans and tools] to get a better understanding of the seal populations, their diets, their movements, their range and the uses of this particular species.”⁴⁵ The committee learned that many science and knowledge gaps exist and that the integration of Indigenous knowledge can help fill those gaps and focus future research. As such, it is imperative that Indigenous knowledge be systematically incorporated into developing research studies and into fisheries-related policy development processes by Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Carl Sidney (member of the Yukon Salmon Sub-Committee, appearing as an individual) stated his hope that traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge be given the same weight, noting that traditional knowledge stems from first-hand experience.⁴⁶ He went on to explain that progress is happening and that “people are finally starting to realize how important it is to have traditional knowledge.”⁴⁷

4. EFFECTS OF SEALS ON FISHERIES

Sara Iverson (Professor in the Department of Biology at Dalhousie University, appearing as an individual) warned that “is it very dangerous to think about [an] ecosystem as a two species ecosystem with one predator, the seal, and one prey”, and that it in fact “looks like a spiderweb” with many linkages.⁴⁸ Sara Iverson also explained that seals are a visible predator among many others that are less visible, such as larger fish, whales, sharks and more. It was underscored that reducing the number of seals in a specific ecosystem may not necessarily shift the ecosystem balance in a predictable way (i.e., reducing the number of seals may not help target fish stocks recover).⁴⁹ Similarly, Harpseals.org explained that we “don’t know if eliminating the predators [i.e., the seals] is actually the solution for the fish to recover.”⁵⁰

⁴⁴ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Zoya Martin), 23 November 2023.

⁴⁵ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Ginny Boudreau), 20 October 2022.

⁴⁶ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Carl Sidney, appearing as an individual), 30 November 2023.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Sara Iverson, Professor, Department of Biology, Dalhousie University and Scientific Director, Ocean Tracking Network, appearing as an individual), 1 December 2022.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Harpseals.org, [Brief](#), 28 November 2023.

Conversely, Robert Hardy (Fisheries Consultant and member of the Atlantic Seal Science Task Team, appearing as an individual) stated that the “fishing industry and the public, for many years, have pointed to record seal populations and [their] predation [on cod] as the possible cause” for the cod stock collapse and subsequent lack of recovery, while Fisheries and Oceans Canada “science is reluctant to accept the impact of seals on any fish stocks, for example, Atlantic cod, capelin, Atlantic mackerel or west and east coast salmon. Instead, [Fisheries and Oceans Canada] remains dismissive and ignores the evidence provided by fishers, industry associations and seal science from other North Atlantic fishing nations.”⁵¹

Morley Knight (appearing as an individual) quantified the impact seals are having on fish stocks by explaining that, in his opinion, “22 times as much fish is eaten by seals as is harvested by the commercial fishery.”

POFO, Evidence, 13 September 2023.

⁵¹ POFO, Evidence (Robert Hardy, Fisheries Consultant and member of the Atlantic Seal Science Task Team, appearing as an individual), 20 October 2022.

At a time where the global food supply is at risk, this should be of great concern to the Government of Canada and to all Canadians. Immediate action and a whole-of-Canada approach must be taken to ensure that the country's fish stocks remain healthy and that rich sources of quality protein for domestic and export markets are maintained.

In the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, Fisheries and Oceans Canada has confirmed that grey seals are known to be negatively impacting groundfish stock recovery.⁵² However, elsewhere in Atlantic Canada, the impact of seals on specific fish stocks was described by the department as either unknown or measured as equal or less than that of other predators or environmental factors. This level of uncertainty is unacceptable given the amount of anecdotal evidence and Indigenous knowledge pointing to the contrary.

Following a survey of their membership, the Halifax East Fisheries Association recommended that, given the growth of the harp and grey seal populations, Fisheries and Oceans Canada should "act quickly to address the seal problem. While seals have enjoyed a strong recovery from the mid 20th century, their prey species have not. Many fisheries remain at critically low levels and a growing seal population significantly decreases their probability of recovery."⁵³ The committee also heard that, in Atlantic Canada, although seals may not be preying on vulnerable fish stocks, they may be in direct competition for food sources, therefore impacting their recovery more indirectly.⁵⁴

Based on Morley Knight's (appearing as an individual) "experience and observations after talking to thousands of fish harvesters, [Fisheries and Oceans Canada] employees and others from all over Eastern Canada" he believes that "seals are consuming a huge amount of commercial species of fish as well as important prey species like herring and capelin. Unless some action is taken to mitigate the impact of seals, there is no way to effectively manage important fish species using the precautionary approach. The seals will continue to eat them before they get to the level where they can be commercially fished. Seals are everywhere in the ecosystem and eating whatever species of fish they can find."⁵⁵

⁵² POFO, [Evidence](#) (Bernard Vigneault), 6 October 2022.

⁵³ Halifax East Fisheries Association, [Brief](#), 12 December 2022.

⁵⁴ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Fred Whoriskey), 17 November 2022.

⁵⁵ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Morley Knight), 13 September 2023.



A seal eats a fish while swimming on its back. Photo credit: Canadian Seal Products

The committee believes that significantly increasing seal science and research and including Indigenous knowledge will be crucial to clarifying the role seals play within different food webs and, consequently, the effects their increasing populations are having on other species within various ecosystems. In situations where Fisheries and Oceans Canada is unable to conduct the needed research, private, academic, and other partnerships should be considered to fill those gaps. The committee concludes that much more and better seal science is urgently needed on Canada's West, Arctic and East Coasts. Similarly, the committee is of the opinion that additional seal research is needed in unique ecosystems such as Churchill, Manitoba, where seal habitats border freshwater and ocean ecosystems.

Recommendation 2 (Marine and Fisheries Research Capacity)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada rapidly develop and implement a more robust and state-of-the-art marine and fisheries research capacity, by using both currently available and up-to-date modern research methods and emerging technologies, and by acquiring and establishing additional ocean-specific research infrastructure, such as dedicated research vessels. This must include the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge to enhance research capacity. Furthermore, these research capacity-building activities must be developed in collaboration with Indigenous governments and organizations, communities, seal industry members, the academic community, international experts, private sector organizations, and other stakeholders.

5. MOVING SCIENCE FORWARD

Witnesses often suggested that collaboration between fishers and Fisheries and Oceans Canada in seal research be increased. For example, Greg Pretty (FFAW-Unifor) explained that fishers could help gather data to be used by Fisheries and Oceans Canada scientists, including by documenting seal sightings using logs, photos and/or videos.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Greg Pretty, President, FFAW-Unifor), 13 September 2023.



Data is recorded using a pencil and clipboard by a Fisheries and Oceans Canada employee wearing a yellow rain jacket and orange gloves. Photo credit: The Canadian Press

Andrew Trites (Professor and Director of the Marine Mammal Research Unit of the Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries at the University of British Columbia, appearing as an individual) believed “stronger collaboration between fishing communities and researchers” should be a priority.⁵⁷ Researchers could then base research on fisher observations and identify gaps. Andrew Trites also saw a role for government scientists to bring together fishers and academics so relationships between these groups can be built. Similarly, Fred Whoriskey (Executive Director of the Ocean Tracking Network at Dalhousie University, appearing as an individual) explained that research priorities should be regional in nature as stakeholders in each area are asking different questions and have their own research needs.⁵⁸ The committee agrees that increasing collaboration between fishers and scientists will help move our understanding of these complex issues forward.

On 12 September 2023, Fisheries and Oceans Canada announced that it would be funding four projects that were meant to improve the department’s understanding of seal populations “and their potential impacts on fish stocks.”⁵⁹ Funding was allocated to the Heiltsuk Tribal Council, Dalhousie University, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and the FFAW-Unifor. Each project

⁵⁷ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Andrew Trites), 11 May 2023.

⁵⁸ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Fred Whoriskey), 17 November 2022.

⁵⁹ DFO, “[Funded projects for seal and sea lion science](#),” *Backgrounder*.

had a unique goal and varying funding and duration parameters. The FFAW-Unifor's project, for example, was allocated \$150,000 over four years (2023 to 2026) to "identify local changes in seal abundance, distribution and seasonality over a 20-40 year time period through the collection of current and historical seal observations by fish harvesters."⁶⁰ Although the committee applauds the funding of such regional, stakeholder-led projects and encourages more of this type of work, the selection criteria and process whereby these projects were selected by Fisheries and Oceans Canada for funding were not provided to the committee. The committee hopes that Fisheries and Oceans Canada is using a robust and fixed funding request mechanism to select projects.

Throughout the study, committee members also heard about how new and emerging technologies could be used to help improve seal population science and support research activities in a more robust and cost-effective manner. For example, Sara Iverson (appearing as an individual) discussed the idea of using seals as oceanographers by acoustically tracking tagged fish and seals to help gather data on both their spatial distribution through time and their interactions.⁶¹ Similarly, Fred Whoriskey (appearing as an individual) spoke to the use of electronic telemetry to track the movements and survival of various marine species, including seals.⁶² The use of bioacoustics as a cost-effective tool to assess fish stocks was also suggested by Tom Henheffer (Arctic Research Foundation).⁶³

Paul Bentzen (Professor at Dalhousie University, appearing as an individual) suggested that environmental DNA could be used as a biodiversity surveillance tool and Daniel E Ruzzante (Killam Professor at Dalhousie University, appearing as an individual) explained that genomics could be used as a cost-effective way to estimate seal population abundances.⁶⁴

An ecosystem-based approach⁶⁵ to fisheries and ocean management was suggested by various witnesses. As such, scientific research and stock assessments for all marine species are important to ensure adequate data is available to implement this type of approach. Tom Henheffer (Arctic Research Foundation) explained that, at present, "stock assessments are largely conducted by trawling with large vessels using massive nets, a process that is slow, expensive and

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Sara Iverson), 1 December 2022.

⁶² POFO, [Evidence](#) (Fred Whoriskey), 17 November 2022.

⁶³ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Tom Henheffer), 23 November 2023.

⁶⁴ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Paul Bentzen; and Daniel E Ruzzante, Killam Professor, Dalhousie University, appearing as an individual), 17 November 2022.

⁶⁵ According to Fisheries and Oceans Canada, "[a]n ecosystem approach requires that fisheries management decisions consider the impact of the fishery not only on the target species, but also on non-target species, seafloor habitats, and the ecosystems of which these species are a part." See: DFO, [Principles of Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management](#).

environmentally damaging. But proven technologies [such as bioacoustics mapping] exist that have been widely used in other parts of the world [(e.g., by Scandinavian countries and in parts of Asia)] that can achieve the same or better results at a massively reduced cost and with a massively reduced environmental impact.”⁶⁶ Fisheries and Oceans Canada must leverage the experience and expertise of the private sector and of international partners to help advance ocean and marine science and research, especially in the Arctic, where the committee heard that most stocks are not assessed by the department at present.⁶⁷

The need to conduct more and better scientific research and gather more ecologically important data on Canada’s ocean and marine environments and fish stocks is huge. The committee believes this must be a top priority for Fisheries and Oceans Canada, within the context of studying seals and to better integrate an ecosystem-based approach to resource management.

Recommendation 3 (Increasing Seal Science and Research Collaboration)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada encourage, foster, and support greater science and research collaboration concerning seal populations, their diets, and their distribution. This must be conducted together with provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments, academics, international experts, seal harvesters, commercial fishers, local communities, private sector organizations, and other relevant stakeholders, and where possible, must utilize existing modern research capacity. As part of this work, the Government of Canada must also ensure that resulting data and research outcomes are shared appropriately, which could be done by way of a user-friendly database designed to meet the information needs of researchers and stakeholders.

⁶⁶ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Tom Henheffer), 23 November 2023.

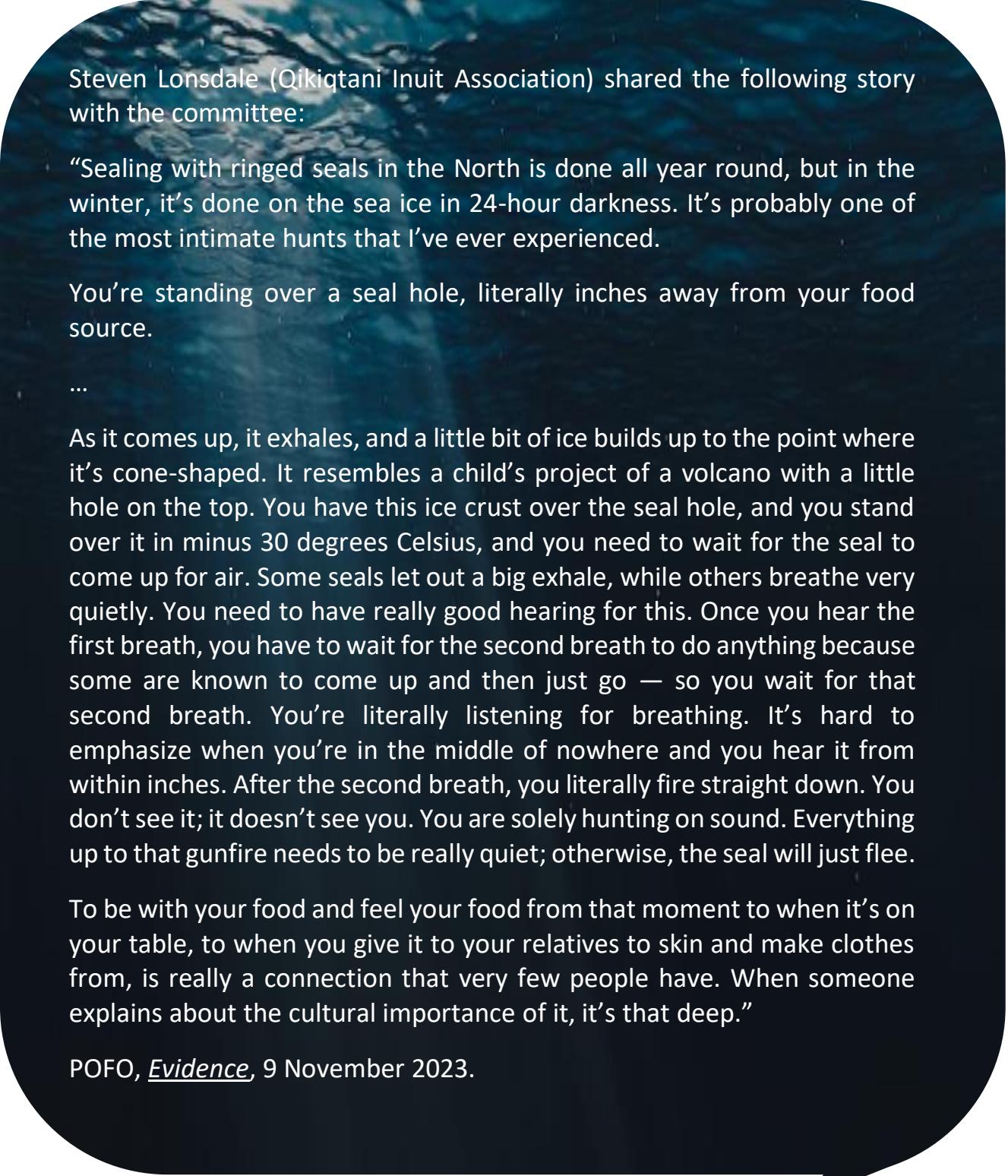
⁶⁷ Ibid.

WHAT THE COMMITTEE LEARNED ABOUT CANADA'S SEAL HARVEST AND SEAL PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

1. CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE

Over the course of this study, the committee heard first-hand accounts of the importance of the seal harvest and seal products industry from many Canadians. These personal stories could never be recounted in this report in a manner that would do them justice. However, the committee believes it is important to highlight that the connection people across Canada have to seals and the seal harvest is deep, meaningful, historic, and something that should be preserved. This important connection may not be well understood across Canada, including within Government of Canada departments and agencies. That being said, the following sections will attempt to demonstrate what the seal harvest and the seal products industry mean to Canadians in different regions.

1.1. Arctic



Steven Lonsdale (Qikiqtani Inuit Association) shared the following story with the committee:

“Sealing with ringed seals in the North is done all year round, but in the winter, it’s done on the sea ice in 24-hour darkness. It’s probably one of the most intimate hunts that I’ve ever experienced.

You’re standing over a seal hole, literally inches away from your food source.

...

As it comes up, it exhales, and a little bit of ice builds up to the point where it’s cone-shaped. It resembles a child’s project of a volcano with a little hole on the top. You have this ice crust over the seal hole, and you stand over it in minus 30 degrees Celsius, and you need to wait for the seal to come up for air. Some seals let out a big exhale, while others breathe very quietly. You need to have really good hearing for this. Once you hear the first breath, you have to wait for the second breath to do anything because some are known to come up and then just go — so you wait for that second breath. You’re literally listening for breathing. It’s hard to emphasize when you’re in the middle of nowhere and you hear it from within inches. After the second breath, you literally fire straight down. You don’t see it; it doesn’t see you. You are solely hunting on sound. Everything up to that gunfire needs to be really quiet; otherwise, the seal will just flee.

To be with your food and feel your food from that moment to when it’s on your table, to when you give it to your relatives to skin and make clothes from, is really a connection that very few people have. When someone explains about the cultural importance of it, it’s that deep.”

POFO, Evidence, 9 November 2023.

SEALING THE FUTURE: A CALL TO ACTION

As explained by Paul Irngaut (Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.): “Nunavut Inuit are coastal people. We harvest seals like *natsiq*, or the ringed seal; *ugjuk*, or the bearded seal; and also *qairulik*, or the harp seal. Harvesting marine wildlife and the sharing of country food are at the core of Inuit culture. We have a vested interest in ensuring the sustainability of our marine mammals. We exercise our harvesting rights in accordance with the principles of conservation.”⁶⁸ The Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency confirmed that 90% of Canada’s seal harvest occurs in Nunavut and that the harvest takes place year-round.⁶⁹



Two children embrace during a throat-singing performance as part of a celebration of seals in Nunavut.

Photo Credit: Canadian Seal Products

The committee also heard that “[f]or Nunavut Inuit, seal harvesting merges food security, food sovereignty, cultural continuity, health and community well-being, the Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* language and self-sufficiency.”⁷⁰ To help put the importance of the seal harvest into context, a study published in 2021 concluded that for Inuit living in Iqaluit, Nunavut, “the high costs of healthy foods, both traditional (e.g., caribou meat, seal meat, arctic char, etc.), and non-

⁶⁸ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Paul Irngaut), 9 November 2023.

⁶⁹ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Margaret Buiist, Vice-President, Policy, Planning, Communications and Northern Projects Management Office, Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency), 3 November 2022.

⁷⁰ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Paul Irngaut), 9 November 2023.

traditional foods such as beef, milk, eggs, fruits, and vegetables...could be 50% to 300% higher than the prices in the southern part of Canada.”⁷¹

Traditional foods are an important source of nutrients for those living in remote communities. In a brief submitted by Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., it was explained that “[i]n most Nunavut communities that are only connected to the south by air, store bought food can be prohibitively expensive. Therefore, sealing is one of the few viable means for many families to access nutritious food.”⁷²

In addition to cultural and food security considerations, the committee heard about how seals were once essential to the economic wellbeing of Nunavut Inuit. Steven Lonsdale (Qikiqtani Inuit Association) explained that seal harvesting was a good source of food and income for Inuit in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was when many “Inuit were experiencing the colonial practices of being brought into communities from the surrounding land. They were being transformed from a semi-nomadic people to being in a fixed community, which was a huge change.”⁷³ The committee heard that, at that time, seal harvesting provided food for community members. It also allowed the community “to practice the culture of hunting, the preparation and the post-hunt activities, all of which contributed to language retention, cultural practices and the practice of customs. To be able to do all of that, and also provide financially for your family through the selling of pelts, did ease that transition; it’s not to say that it was great, but it did make it easier.”⁷⁴ However, Steven Lonsdale said that the international seal product bans were “devastating” and explained that after their implementation, suicide rates and poverty increased dramatically, and Inuit are “still feeling the effects of that today.”⁷⁵

Similarly, the brief submitted by Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. noted that the “ban-induced collapse of the sealskin market has had – and continues to have – [a] historic and devastating impact on Inuit.”⁷⁶ Sarah Levy (Doctoral Researcher for the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies at the University of Oxford, as an individual) described the “traditional sealing industry” as “[e]ssential to the culture, health, and economic prosperity of many Inuit communities in Canada.”⁷⁷ It is essential that these economic opportunities be revitalized. As explained further in this report, a whole-of-government approach will be required to achieve this important goal.

⁷¹ Victor O. Akande, et al., “[Healthy Dietary Choices and Physical Activity Participation in the Canadian Arctic: Understanding Nunavut Inuit Perspectives on the Barriers and Enablers](#),” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, February 2021, 18(3), 940.

⁷² Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., [Brief](#), 21 November 2023.

⁷³ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Steven Lonsdale), 9 November 2023.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., [Brief](#), 21 November 2023.

⁷⁷ Sarah Levy (Doctoral Researcher, Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, University of Oxford, as an individual), [Brief](#), 17 November 2023.

1.2 East Coast

During the committee's visit to Elliston, Newfoundland and Labrador, senators visited the John C. Crosbie Sealers Interpretation Centre. At the interpretation centre, members of the committee visited an exhibit that showcases the economic and social importance of the seal harvest in the province. Senators learned about the rich and sometimes tragic history that the province has had with the commercial sealing industry. This tragic history was accentuated when members of the committee visited the Sealers Memorial Statue and Monument, which are also located in Elliston.



Senators visit the Sealers Memorial Statue in Elliston, Newfoundland and Labrador.

Committee members also learned about the seal harvest from Keith Bath (Commercial Fisher and Seal Harvester, appearing as an individual) who spoke to the committee about his experiences harvesting, which he started to do at age 15 in Newfoundland and Labrador with his father.⁷⁸ He also spoke about the important decline of the seal harvest over the past few decades.

⁷⁸ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Keith Bath, Commercial Fisher and Seal Harvester, appearing as an individual), 13 September 2023.

As previously indicated, Fisheries and Oceans Canada confirmed that it has not set a commercial total allowable catch (TAC) for seals since 2016 because the harvests have not achieved the previously set TACs. Between 2018 and 2022, only 1% of the TAC was landed for the grey seal harvest and only 7% of the TAC was landed for the harp seal harvest.⁷⁹

As such, the committee has concluded that, at this time, Fisheries and Oceans Canada is not managing seal populations or the Canadian seal harvest.

The committee also learned that there are markets for seal products and a willingness to harvest seals. For example, at the Carino Processing Facility (Carino) in South Dildo, Newfoundland and Labrador, senators visited the tannery, where employees were processing seal pelts, and saw the space where seal oil is encapsulated and packaged. Sherry Turnbull (Sherry's Seal Skin Arts) explained that the seal hunt is needed, for arts and crafts and for culture.⁸⁰ Jenny Brake (Qalipu First Nation) further explained that “[m]any Indigenous communities are striving to reclaim and revitalize their traditional food systems and artisanal practices as they are essential for cultural identity, health and wellbeing. With regard to the cultural significance of the seal harvest, the entire process, from the hunt to the utilization of every part of the animal, is performed with the utmost respect and gratitude. It is in this spirit that seals provide sustenance and materials for clothing, tools and crafts, which are an integral part of cultural preservation. In my own family tradition, I use all parts of the seal, from feeding my family to creating fine art. Revitalization of the seal fishery will empower members of our band in so many ways. We will allow provincial Indigenous communities to employ themselves using their traditional knowledge. We will elevate the socioeconomic status of the ecosystem of our members. We will be stewards of the environment by helping bring balance back to the ecosystem. Qalipu First Nation is poised to embrace revitalization, and we have been focusing on actions like our seal harvesting training program, which will prepare new harvesters to work safely and effectively with proper training. We stand to benefit from the multitude of positive impacts of renewing this industry.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Todd Williams), 29 November 2022.

⁸⁰ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Sherry Turnbull, Owner, Sherry's Seal Skin Arts), 13 September 2023.

⁸¹ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Jenny Brake, Western Vice Chief, Qalipu First Nation), 13 September 2023..

1.3 West Coast

Fisheries and Oceans Canada explained that commercial seal harvests took place on Canada's West Coast until the 1970s.⁸² However, the committee heard that only food, social and ceremonial harvests are currently permitted to ensure that populations return to historic levels.



A large group of harbour seals hauled out on a rocky islet.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada estimated the harbour seal population in British Columbia at approximately 85,000 seals and it was explained that the removal of 5,000 seals would be sustainable.⁸³ Unfortunately, little to no data exists about seal populations on Canada's West Coast. The committee heard that most of the seal research conducted in British Columbia occurs in the south of the province in the Salish Sea area, with some aerial surveys taking place more broadly across the province for population estimate purposes.⁸⁴

The committee heard that salmon stocks in Yukon have been severely depleted in recent decades and that the cultural importance of salmon to Indigenous people in British Columbia, Yukon, and Alaska (United States) cannot be understated. In his experience, Carl Sidney (appearing as an

⁸² POFO, [Evidence](#) (Bernard Vigneault), 6 October 2022.

⁸³ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Rebecca Reid), 6 October 2022.

⁸⁴ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Bernard Vigneault), 6 October 2022.

individual) explained that seal populations in the Northwest have increased.⁸⁵ He spoke to Chinook salmon being part of the diet of harbour seals. He also pointed to climate change, other predators (e.g., beluga whales), and salmon bycatch as possible contributors to the decline of salmon populations in the Yukon River watershed.

The committee would like to highlight that the Yukon River watershed is unique. It is an important Pacific salmon spawning ground and a transboundary watershed that borders Canada (Yukon and British Columbia) and the United States (Alaska). The watershed and the salmon stocks are therefore co-managed by committees and panels pursuant to bilateral agreements, such as the *Yukon River Salmon Agreement* and the *Pacific Salmon Treaty*.⁸⁶

Various witnesses from British Columbia and Yukon were invited to appear before the committee throughout this study. Many were unfortunately unable to appear. Although the committee did hear testimony that discussed the health of Canada's West Coast seal populations, committee members deemed that the evidence collected was woefully insufficient to properly inform its study. As such, although the committee recognizes that the impacts of seal populations on the West Coast are multifaceted and substantial, the committee was unable to draw conclusions regarding the cultural and economic significance of seal populations on this coast.

A lack of data and scientific evidence often seem to be used by Fisheries and Oceans Canada as reasons for inaction, even though anecdotal evidence that seals are negatively impacting fish stocks and ecosystems seems abundant. The precautionary approach must be used in this situation and seal populations must be actively managed by Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

2. COMMONALITIES – A SUSTAINABLE, HUMANE HARVEST

In Canada, the seal harvest is managed as a fishery by Fisheries and Oceans Canada on behalf of the federal government. The Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard is granted this authority through legislation, including the *Fisheries Act*, the *Oceans Act*, and the *Species at Risk Act*, as well as through the *Marine Mammal Regulations*.⁸⁷ The Commercial Fisheries Licensing Policy for Eastern Canada (1996) – created under the authority of the *Fisheries Act* – governs the issuance of commercial sealing licences.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Carl Sidney), 30 November 2023.

⁸⁶ Yukon River Panel, [Yukon River Salmon Agreement](#); and Pacific Salmon Commission, [Pacific Salmon Treaty](#).

⁸⁷ [Fisheries Act](#), R.S.C., 1985, c. F-14; [Oceans Act](#), S.C. 1996, c. 31; [Species at Risk Act](#), S.C. 2002, c. 29; and [Marine Mammal Regulations](#), SOR/93-56.

⁸⁸ DFO, “[Chapter 6 – Seal licensing policy for eastern Canada](#),” *Commercial fisheries licensing policy for Eastern Canada*.

All the seal harvesters the committee heard from echoed the point that Canada's seal harvest is sustainable and humane.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada describes Canada's seal harvesting practices as being "among the best in the world [and] are guided by rigorous animal welfare principles."

Fisheries and Oceans Canada, *Ensuring the seal harvest is humane.*

Jenny Brake (Qalipu First Nation) explained that "[t]hroughout history, our communities have held a deep connection to the land, waters and all living things. This connection is rooted in respect and understanding of Indigenous traditions and has formed a foundation for sustainable resource management practices that have existed for generations. Our core values indicate an inherent respect and responsible approach to harvesting of our natural resources."⁸⁹

Canadians and consumers abroad need to be exposed to a more fulsome picture of the history of the seal harvest and seal products industry and current cultural, social, economic and other ongoing benefits of these activities to the health and wellbeing of remote, coastal and Indigenous communities alike. As discussed later in this report, the committee concludes that misinformation and disinformation have played a negative role in this regard.

⁸⁹ POFO, *Evidence* (Jenny Brake), 13 September 2023.

CANADA'S SEAL PRODUCTS INDUSTRY – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE



The Hon. Céline Hervieux-Payette (appearing as an individual) said that “[o]ur Canadian sealers deserve considerable support because they have suffered very serious harm.”

POFO, *Evidence*, 2 November 2023.

1. PAST MARKETS

As previously indicated in this report, the seal harvest and seal products industry have been of great importance to many remote, coastal, and Indigenous communities. Both the traditional and commercial seal harvests and the resulting products have brought prosperity to many communities, where the availability of other types of economic opportunities are limited.

According to Fisheries and Oceans Canada, “[t]he total value of seal landings [(i.e., the number of seals harvested)] has been decreasing since 2006, when it was valued at over \$34 million and sealers received over \$100 per pelt. Significant drops in both the quantity and value of harvested pelts, punctuated by large fluctuations in pelt prices, mainly accounted for this trend.”⁹⁰ The department also noted that “Canada has been the largest global exporter of seal products for decades.”⁹¹ Seal pelts, seal meat and seal oil have been and continue to be exported to various countries. However, the implementation of various bans on the importation and sale of seal products, such as those instituted by the European Union and the United States, continue to weaken the industry to this day.

⁹⁰ DFO, [2011-2015 Integrated Fisheries Management Plan for Atlantic Seals](#).

⁹¹ DFO, [Seal market](#).

2. CURRENT MARKETS

Fisheries and Oceans Canada representatives explained that Japan, Hong Kong, and Vietnam remain Canada's biggest seal product export markets and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency clarified that Hong Kong and Norway import Canadian seal oil in bulk.⁹² The agency also noted that Hong Kong and South Korea import small volumes of Canadian seal meat and that it is typically exported frozen.

The committee heard from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency that seal export markets have not rebounded since the implementation of the various seal product bans and that the Indigenous Exemption⁹³ does not seem to be enabling Indigenous peoples to export their seal-based products to the European Union.⁹⁴ This concern was also voiced by many other witnesses.

Despite the low level of exports, the market demand for seal products seems to be larger than the current supply. Success stories, such as the trade show portion of the Northern Lights Conference,⁹⁵ where the committee heard more than \$165,000 worth of seal products were sold in 2023, helped demonstrate this fact.⁹⁶ Darren Halloran (Always in Vogue) noted that citizens from countries that have banned seal products have shown genuine interest in purchasing them; retailers unfortunately have had to explain that the bans prohibit such sales.⁹⁷

⁹² POFO, [Evidence](#) (Adwaite Tiwary, Director, Trade and Market Policy, Fisheries and Oceans Canada), 6 October 2022; and POFO, [Evidence](#) (Isabelle Laberge, Senior Director, Food Safety Division, Canadian Food Inspection Agency), 27 October 2022.

⁹³ The Government of Canada challenged the European Union's ban on seal products at the World Trade Organization (WTO). In 2013, the WTO determined that the ban was justified on public moral grounds. However, the exception that was made for Indigenous communities, although reasonable, was found to be discriminatory because Canadian Inuit were not benefiting from it. In 2014, Canada and the European Union, agreed on a way to ensure Canadian Indigenous communities were able to benefit from the exemption. See: Government of Canada, "[Canada Pursues Expanded Access and Opportunities in European Markets for Indigenous Sealers](#)," *News Release*, 10 October 2014; European Commission, [Trade in seal products](#); and Council of the European Union, [Seal products trade: the EU ban adapted to WTO rules](#), 1 October 2015.

⁹⁴ POFO, [Evidence](#), 3 November 2022.

⁹⁵ Northern Lights, [Northern Lights](#).

⁹⁶ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Rowena House, Executive Director, Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador), 13 September 2023.

⁹⁷ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Darren Halloran, Store Owner, Always in Vogue), 13 September 2023.

SEALING THE FUTURE: A CALL TO ACTION



A table displays the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador's sealskin clothing and accessories during a celebration of National Seal Products Day on Parliament Hill.

Seal meat is also served in restaurants in Canada. The Honourable Céline Hervieux-Payette (appearing as an individual) explained that in “the Magdalen Islands, there are restaurants that serve seal. In Montreal, people can eat seal anytime in restaurants whose owners come from the Magdalen Islands.”⁹⁸ She explained that seal prepared by the chef of the parliamentary dining room “was delicious and you don’t need a knife when you eat that because when you eat the filet mignon the way it was cooked by the chef was partly in the oven at 150 centigrade for several hours and then it was finished on the top with the sauce, with butter and the wine.”⁹⁹

⁹⁸ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Hon. Céline Hervieux-Payette), 2 November 2023.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

3. MARKET CHALLENGES

Maximilien Depontailler (former Assistant to the Honourable Céline Hervieux-Payette, appearing as an individual):

“[W]e no longer know what we’re buying. We don’t know what we’re eating. We no longer see the animal, we no longer see how it dies. We’ve lost touch with that. I think it’s fundamental to regain that connection if we’re going to dispel the myths these organizations have created and support these communities.”

Source: POFO, *Evidence*, 2 November 2023.

3.1 Misinformation and Disinformation

From information and communications experts, the committee learned that “misinformation” relates to the generally unintentional spread of false or misleading information, whereas “disinformation” relates to the deliberate spread of false or misleading information.¹⁰⁰ Examples of both misinformation and disinformation related to Canada’s seal harvest and industry were shared with the committee by witnesses throughout its study.

Jaigris Hodson (Canada Research Chair in Digital Communication for the Public Interest and Associate Professor at Royal Roads University, appearing as an individual) explained that misinformation can often do the greatest harm since it is shared by people we trust.¹⁰¹ “Debunking,” which was described as providing people with factual information after the spread of misinformation or disinformation has already occurred, was proposed as a strategy to help inform Canadians who are unknowingly sharing false information. To this end, it was suggested to the committee that local influencers be asked to help circulate factual information from trusted sources about the seal harvest and seal products. In this context, the term “influencer” could include “trusted community members, Indigenous elders, community and faith leaders, even online influencers.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ POFO, *Evidence*, 7 December 2023.

¹⁰¹ POFO, *Evidence* (Jaigris Hodson, Canada Research Chair in Digital Communication for the Public Interest, Associate Professor, Royal Roads University, appearing as an individual), 7 December 2023.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Similarly, Ahmed Al-Rawi (Associate Professor for the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University, appearing as an individual) explained that “future research is needed [on the topic of Canada’s seal harvest], such as conducting systemic digital and content analysis of disinformation about this issue to better identify unfounded claims, their sources and possible impact.”¹⁰³ He also suggested the creation of “a fact-checking initiative at [Fisheries and Oceans Canada], mostly consisting of scientists who are able to debunk misinformation with facts and scientific evidence. These efforts need to be shared with the public via different online platforms.”¹⁰⁴

Ahmed Al-Rawi (appearing as an individual) does “not see a lot of engagement with the public when it comes to this issue. We don’t have, for example, someone young on TikTok from [Fisheries and Oceans Canada] who would be able to use very simple language to talk about this issue.”¹⁰⁵ Marcus Kolga (Director of DisinfoWatch and Senior Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, appearing as an individual) explained the need to popularize Fisheries and Oceans Canada facts and information so that it can be shared on platforms and mediums that people use and see.¹⁰⁶ The committee agrees that social media should be used as a tool to help share factual information about the seal harvest and seal products industry as they are commonly used by Canadians.

The committee understands that the objective of de-bunking would not be to convince everyone that the seal harvest is sustainable and ethical, since that would not be feasible. However, the committee did hear that debunking could focus on sharing factual information to help the majority of people learn about this industry.

Throughout its study, the committee read and heard examples of misinformation and disinformation about Canada’s seal harvest and products industry. However, the committee also heard about regulations, science, Indigenous knowledge and more that helped members decipher what information was real and what information was misinformation or disinformation. Table 2 outlines some of the false information that was brought to the committee’s attention and the facts that helped members debunk it.

¹⁰³ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Ahmed Al-Rawi, Associate Professor, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, appearing as an individual), 7 December 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Marcus Kolga, Director, DisinfoWatch and Senior Fellow, Macdonald-Laurier Institute), 7 December 2023.

Table 2 – Examples of Misinformation and Disinformation about Canada’s Seal Harvest and Seal Products Industry

Misinformation/Disinformation	Facts
Canada harvests baby seals (i.e., whitecoats and bluebacks)	“The harvesting of harp seal pups, known as whitecoats, and hooded seal pups, known as bluebacks, is illegal in Canada and has been since 1987.”
Seal harvests on Canada’s East Coast deplete seal populations/Canada’s seal harvest is unsustainable	Canada’s commercial seal harvest is managed sustainably by Fisheries and Oceans Canada and guided by an integrated fisheries management plan. Canada has not reached the total allowable catch established for commercial grey and harp seal fisheries in recent years. Between 2018 and 2022, only 1% and 7% of the total allowable catches were reached for grey and harp seal harvests, respectively.
Canada’s seal harvest is inhumane	“Canadian harvesting practices are among the best in the world. They are guided by rigorous animal welfare principles that are internationally recognized by independent observers.” Harvesting procedures are outlined in Canada’s <i>Marine Mammal Regulations</i> .
There are no export markets for Canada’s seal products	Fisheries and Oceans Canada representatives explained that Japan, Hong Kong, and Vietnam remain Canada’s biggest seal product export markets. Canadian Food Inspection Agency representatives clarified that Hong Kong and Norway import Canadian seal oil in bulk.

Sources: Table prepared using information obtained from Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), [Ensuring the seal harvest is humane](#); DFO, [2011-2015 Integrated Fisheries Management Plan for Atlantic Seals](#); [Marine Mammal Regulations](#), SOR/93-56; Senate, Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans (POFO), [Evidence](#), 6 October 2022; POFO, [Evidence](#), 27 October 2022; and POFO, [Evidence](#), 29 November 2022.

“Pre-bunking” was described as providing factual information on a topic before people are exposed to misinformation or disinformation to help them better identify it. An example of pre-bunking that was shared with the committee was adding veracious information about Canada’s seal populations and seal harvest to school curriculums. The idea would be that if youth are taught about the seal harvest, then they will be better prepared to identify misinformation or disinformation about this subject.

Committee members agree that proactively educating young people about the environmental and economic significance of the Canadian seal harvest is of vital importance.

Learning about the seal harvest in school would encourage youth to ask questions and be informed about this Canadian industry. It would also help youth learn about the cultural significance of the

seal harvest for Indigenous people and the positive economic impacts this industry has had (and could once again have) for remote, coastal and Indigenous communities in Canada.

Working in collaboration with seal harvesters, provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments, and other stakeholders, the Government of Canada should work with Indigenous communities and curriculum development experts to create culturally rich school materials. These materials would be made available to provinces and territories for them to consider how best to integrate them into their curriculums. In order for this to come to fruition, a collaborative and whole-of-government approach must be quickly undertaken to expedite the creation of such important learning materials.

Zoya Martin (Government of Nunavut) believed there “is a need for real and effective investment in an educational campaign in Canada, and worldwide, to correct the misinformation and the lies on sealing. This would fall within the government’s commitment under the Truth and Reconciliation report.”¹⁰⁷ Storytelling and the use of imagery were also suggested as means to counter misinformation and disinformation.¹⁰⁸ Using storytelling to explain the economic and social benefits of the seal harvest and industry and of the sustainability of the harvest would be another means to help Canadians learn about seals and the communities and people who have been harvesting seals for generations.

The committee therefore suggests a four-pronged approach to countering misinformation and disinformation:

1. De-bunking.
2. Pre-bunking.
3. An initiative to produce and popularize veracious information and to disseminate it using social media and other platforms and mediums commonly used by Canadians.
4. The use of storytelling as a means to help Canadians learn about the social and economic impacts and the sustainability of Canada’s seal harvest, including through school curriculums Canada-wide.

¹⁰⁷ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Zoya Martin), 23 November 2023.

¹⁰⁸ POFO, [Evidence](#), 7 December 2023.

Witnesses spoke to the harm caused and negative perceptions perpetuated by the spread of misinformation and disinformation. These types of negative messages can incite hatred towards people and communities that participate in the seal harvest and that is unacceptable.

John Gillett (Author, Commercial Fisher and Sealer Harvester, as an individual) explained: “The word seal now is like a bad word.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Gil Theriault (Intra-Quebec Sealers Association) stated that, over the past 30 years, “the story of the sealing industry” has been a story of bullying and foreign interference.¹¹⁰ Zoya Martin (Government of Nunavut) explained that “[o]ne of the biggest challenges, though, is that the anti-fur campaign is so strong and, one could say, subtly ingrained in society, especially around sealing, that it’s a barrier.”¹¹¹

The committee heard that the source of much misinformation and disinformation has been certain animal welfare organizations, both when bans on Canadian seal products were being considered and even today. Many of these groups (in Canada and abroad) are registered charities or non-profit organizations (NPO), pursuant to the *Income Tax Act*,¹¹² and raise funds with campaigns that may perpetuate false information about Canada’s seal harvest and industry. According to a brief submitted by the Canada Revenue Agency, some of these organizations could even benefit from tax-exempt status.¹¹³

The committee has learned that, in Canada, there are no provisions within the *Income Tax Act* that would allow the Canada Revenue Agency to suspend the charitable or NPO status of domestic charities that are associated with foreign charities that have been found to raise money by spreading false or outdated information about the seal products industry.¹¹⁴ The committee also learned that registered charities are prevented from leading deceptive or misleading fundraising campaigns. According to the Canada Revenue Agency, non-compliance could lead to sanctions or revocation of status.¹¹⁵ However, the committee discovered that similar actions cannot be taken towards an NPO if it distributes false or misleading information.

These provisions within the *Income Tax Act* should be reviewed by the Government of Canada to consider revisions that would ensure that to maintain their status, registered charities and NPOs in

¹⁰⁹ John Gillett (as an individual), [Brief](#), 15 August 2023.

¹¹⁰ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Gil Theriault, Director, Intra-Quebec Sealers Association), 11 May 2023.

¹¹¹ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Zoya Martin), 23 November 2023.

¹¹² [Income Tax Act](#), R.S.C., 1985, c. 1 (5th Supp.).

¹¹³ POFO, [Brief](#) (Canada Revenue Agency), 6 December 2023.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Canada must not knowingly spread false or misleading information about the seal harvest, the seal products industry, or any other Canadian industry.

Various public reporting requirements and mechanisms are compulsory pursuant to the *Income Tax Act*. Modifying reporting thresholds for registered charities and NPOs could help achieve increased transparency related to the funding sources of these organizations. As such, the public reporting provisions of the *Income Tax Act* could be amended to require registered charities and NPOs to fill out yearly public information returns for donors whose donations exceed \$5,000 in the year. These new requirements would be similar to those imposed on registered journalism organizations in section 149.1(14.1) of the Act and existing mechanisms could be used for reporting purposes.

Recommendation 4 (Modifications to the Income Tax Act)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada urgently review and amend the *Income Tax Act* and all other related acts, as needed, to ensure that registered Canadian charities and non-profit organizations that produce or promote misinformation and/or disinformation about the seal harvest or seal products industry have their tax-exempt status revoked.

In addition, the committee recommends that the Government of Canada amend the *Income Tax Act* to require registered Canadian charities and non-profit organizations to fill out information returns about donors, similar to those that are prescribed for registered journalism organizations in section 149.1(14.1) of the Act, which includes a public information return for the year in the prescribed form that lists each donor whose total gifts to the organization in the year exceed \$5,000.

The Honourable Céline Hervieux-Payette (appearing as an individual) noted that “a national and international advertising campaign should be carried out with communications experts. This could be done in association with a foundation mandated to support the seal hunt. Our Canadian sealers deserve considerable support because they have suffered very serious harm.”¹¹⁶ The committee believes that this harm would not have been suffered by other, more mainstream Canadian

¹¹⁶ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Hon. Céline Hervieux-Payette), 2 November 2023.

industries under similar international scrutiny because the Government of Canada would have taken more immediate and decisive action to defend it from criticism and import bans.

The committee heard that the federal government cannot combat misinformation and disinformation in a silo. As such, key stakeholders could include various federal government departments and agencies; provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments; seal harvesters (commercial and subsistence); fish and seafood harvesters; academic and private research organizations; and community members, among others. Some of these groups indicated that they could contribute knowledge and materials that have already been prepared for such a campaign.

Recommendation 5 (National Educational Campaign)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada develop, in collaboration with Indigenous governments and organizations, local communities, and seal industry members, a national educational campaign regarding Canada's seal populations, seal harvest, and seal products industry. The educational campaign should be informed by educational materials currently available and be completed and ready to launch within one year of the tabling of this report. This educational campaign material and its implementation plan shall be shared with the Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans upon its completion.

Recommendation 6 (Anti-misinformation/Anti-disinformation Campaign)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada, in collaboration with key stakeholders, create and disseminate an effective anti-misinformation/anti-disinformation campaign related to the Canadian seal harvest and seal products industry. Work on this campaign must begin immediately and it is essential that it be a whole-of-government initiative, led by Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

It may take some time to see the positive effects of an anti-misinformation/anti-disinformation campaign and a long-term lens must be applied to measure the success of such a campaign. The committee urges the Government of Canada to get started on developing these campaigns as soon as possible so that seal harvesters and remote, coastal, and Indigenous communities start to feel the positive effects sooner, rather than later.

Finally, strong and sustained federal political will and leadership and a whole-of-government approach will be required to make this type of campaign a success and a useful tool for years to come.

3.2 Access to Seals and Loss of Knowledge

Bruno Vinhas (Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador) explained that:

“[W]e need to understand that a lot of the traditional knowledge in seal has been at risk of disappearing because of the taboo in the industry [and the fact] that people cannot work with the material and cannot export the products that they make.”

POFO, *Evidence*, 13 September 2023.

Various witnesses explained that fishers will not harvest seals if it is not economically viable, adding that in some cases, the price harvesters can fetch for seals does not always pay the gas or vessel insurance required. Morley Knight (appearing as an individual) explained that he has heard anecdotal evidence of insurance deductibles for fishing vessels being as high as \$100,000.¹¹⁷ According to Morley Knight, “[i]f you are going to go seal harvesting, you are putting yourself at risk of \$100,000. If you do damage to the vessel, the first \$100,000 is on your own.”¹¹⁸ He suggested that the Government of Canada consider reviving its fishing vessel insurance program, which he explained it managed until about 1997. This, according to Morley Knight, would create a “level playing field” and a “market-based approach to insurance” that could help encourage increased participation in the seal harvest.¹¹⁹

Sherry Turnbull (Sherry’s Seal Skin Arts) also explained the difficulty in sourcing the pelts needed for Sherry’s Seal Skin Arts¹²⁰ and Rowena House (Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador) also

¹¹⁷ POFO, *Evidence* (Morley Knight), 13 September 2023.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ POFO, *Evidence* (Sherry Turnbull), 13 September 2023.

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mentioned that it is “more and more difficult” to source seal products.¹²¹ In Newfoundland and Labrador, the committee heard that Carino Processing Ltd. is the only facility in the province that buys seals.¹²² However, while visiting the Carino Processing Facility in South Dildo, senators learned that the facility has the capacity to process many more seals and store much more seal oil than it has in past years. Soft markets and the risk management of its capacity were said to be the reasons why the facility’s full processing potential was not reached.



Senator Bev Busson learns about the production of seal pelts and other products at the Carino Processing Ltd. facility in South Dildo, Newfoundland and Labrador.

The committee heard that traditional knowledge about seals is also at risk of being lost due to the stigma associated with the seal products industry.¹²³ This stigma stems from the misinformation and disinformation that was discussed earlier. Jenny Brake (Qalipu First Nation) suggested that a seal harvester training program could help renew the industry.¹²⁴

¹²¹ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Rowena House), 13 September 2023.

¹²² POFO, [Evidence](#) (Keith Bath), 13 September 2023.

¹²³ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Rowena House), 13 September 2023.

¹²⁴ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Jenny Brake), 13 September 2023.

3.3 Other Barriers

The committee heard about various other barriers that have impeded the seal products industry over the past few years. These include: the United States' *Marine Mammal Protection Act*,¹²⁵ the European Union's Indigenous Exemption¹²⁶ (also known as the Inuit Exemption), and market access barriers for seal-based health products.

Gil Theriault (Intra-Quebec Sealers Association) explained how the use of seal bait for crustacean fisheries was tested and that the results were positive.¹²⁷ Fisheries and Oceans Canada highlighted that due to the United States' *Marine Mammal Protection Act*, fisheries that used seal-based bait would not be able to export their products to that country. It was recommended that the Government of Canada advocate that the United States amend its *Marine Mammal Protection Act* to exclude healthy Canadian seal populations from the Act. To that end, Gil Theriault recommended that the United States' *Marine Mammal Protection Act* be challenged scientifically, not necessarily politically.¹²⁸ The committee recognized the United States' *Marine Mammal Protection Act* as an important trade barrier for the seal products industry, both for export purposes and for use domestically as sustainable fisheries bait.

"Despite the repercussions of misguided trade bans and restrictions, [Nunavut Inuit] continue to harvest, eat and use seals and seal products. Inuit-sourced exemptions have failed to counteract the negative impacts of trade bans on the practices, lifestyle and livelihood of Nunavut Inuit."¹²⁹ Similarly, Global Affairs Canada noted that it "has been made aware of concerns regarding the administration of the Indigenous Exemption of the [European Union] Regulation on Trade in Seals Products. The issues identified include onerous reporting requirements imposed by the [European Union's] certification process (e.g., lack of automatic recognition, using more recent technology, like QR codes, instead of attesting paper documents)."¹³⁰

When they appeared before the committee, Health Canada officials confirmed that the department is responsible for regulating natural health products, including seal oil-based products.¹³¹ They went on to explain that Canada has very high standards as they pertain to the certification of natural health products. However, these products may be considered dietary

¹²⁵ United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, [Laws & Policies: Marine Mammal Protection Act](#).

¹²⁶ Council of the European Union, [Seal products trade: the EU ban adapted to WTO rules](#), 1 October 2015.

¹²⁷ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Gil Theriault), 11 May 2023.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Paul Irngaut), 9 November 2023.

¹³⁰ POFO, [Brief](#) (Global Affairs Canada), 22 December 2023; and European Commission, [Trade in seal products](#).

¹³¹ POFO, [Evidence](#), 19 October 2023.

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supplements or drugs in other jurisdictions, such as in the United States or the European Union. This can create export market barriers for Canadian seal oil-based natural health products. With certification falling within Health Canada's responsibility and export market access work falling within Global Affairs Canada's mandate, the international recognition of Canada's natural health product standards seems to fall between the mandates of these two federal departments. This is yet another example of the need for a coordinated, whole-of-government approach, which will be crucial to expanding and facilitating the export readiness of high quality seal-based natural health products.



Bottles of Omega-3 capsules inside the Carino Processing plant.

4. THE FUTURE OF CANADA'S SEAL PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

4.1 *Collaboration is Key*

The committee heard considerable testimony about the roles and responsibilities of various federal departments and agencies as they pertain to Canada's seal harvest and seal products industry (Table 3). However, very little collaboration between federal entities and between the federal government and other stakeholders seems to be taking place.

Table 3 – Responsibilities of Federal Departments and Agencies Regarding Seals and Seal Products

Federal Department or Agency	Responsibilities
Fisheries and Oceans Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Regulates Canada's Atlantic and Arctic seal harvests. ▪ Conducts research and gathers data on seal populations (e.g., distribution, abundance, diet, interactions with other species). ▪ Acts as lead on the market development of new seal products.
Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Helps companies in Atlantic Canada access funding and resources to start or grow their businesses or develop new products, including seal products.
Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Helps companies in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and Yukon access funding and resources to start or grow their businesses or develop new products, including seal products.
Global Affairs Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Helps Canadian companies that have export-ready products connect with international buyers, expand their export markets, and/or solve export-related problems. ▪ Undertakes advocacy activities internationally related to the seal products industry.
Canadian Food Inspection Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Regulates and inspects facilities that process seal meat bound for inter-provincial or international export.
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Holds a market development role as it pertains to products for human consumption or for products that could be used in pet foods or in aquaculture.
Health Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Regulates natural health products, including seal oil-based natural health products. ▪ Licences and inspects sites that manufacture, import, package, or label natural health products.

Notes: Although the committee did not hear from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada officials, the department's role was described by officials from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

The Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency also help companies they are working with "path find" (i.e., connect with the resources they need) within Global Affairs Canada (Trade Commissioner's Office) or Export Development Canada when clients are looking to expand their export markets.

Sources: Table prepared using information obtained from Senate, Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans (POFO), [Evidence](#), 6 October 2022; POFO, [Evidence](#), 27 October 2022; POFO, [Evidence](#), 3 November 2022; POFO, [Evidence](#), 24 November 2022; and POFO, [Evidence](#), 19 October 2023.

Keith Bath (appearing as an individual) explained that, in his view, Fisheries and Oceans Canada does not listen to what seal harvesters have to say and that the department "does its own thing."¹³² Other witnesses explained that during consultations with Fisheries and Oceans Canada, they were not being heard. This cannot continue to be the norm. If the seal products industry is to flourish, collaboration with stakeholders and a whole-of-government approach will be key drivers.

¹³² POFO, [Evidence](#) (Keith Bath), 13 September 2023.

The committee heard that various efforts have been and are being made by Global Affairs Canada (through its trade commissions), Indigenous communities and organizations, and provincial and territorial governments, to expand the market for Canadian seal products. However, it was not clear how much of a priority this issue is for Canada's trade commissioners, nor how effective various activities related to this have been. The committee also heard that these efforts would continue to be less than effective until there is strong federal political will to promote seal products and a much more collaborative approach is taken. Many witnesses indicated they would like to contribute materials, knowledge, and time to such a collaboration. As such, the committee is adamant that a whole-of-government approach, underpinned by increased stakeholder collaboration, is needed to encourage sustained change in the seal products industry. Continued inaction by the federal government or actions taken in a silo by its departments and agencies will have dire consequences for remote, coastal, and Indigenous communities. Canada must increase the visibility of seal products at all opportunities possible.

Furthermore, expanding Canada's seal products industry will require a federal willingness to implement regulatory changes, to invest in innovative product development, national marketing campaigns, an effective anti-misinformation/anti-disinformation campaign, and to support key pieces of infrastructure (e.g., oil processing plants).

4.2 Growing Canada's Seal Products Industry

As previously stated, over the last several years, Canada's commercial harvest has been minimal, well below the total allowable catches set by Fisheries and Oceans Canada. If Canada is to develop and grow its seal products industry, it must take actions to help revitalize the harvest. In order to kick-start the industry, it must be an economically viable endeavour for harvesters, which it is not at present. Reform must start with Fisheries and Oceans Canada re-establishing the vessel insurance program it managed until about 1997 to help harvesters access affordable vessel insurance.¹³³ From what the committee heard, this is an important roadblock to be overcome by harvesters.

¹³³ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Morley Knight), 13 September 2023.

The committee calls upon the Government of Canada to take actions that will see the commercial seal harvest reach the total allowable catches set by Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

The increased commercial harvest will help spur the industry, bring greater economic benefits to various remote, coastal, and Indigenous communities and maximize the value of the products produced. Harvesting the total allowable catch for grey and harp seals would, from what the committee heard, be sustainable and would continue to encourage the full utilization of the animal. This increase is not meant to reduce the seal population per se, it is meant to help protect important fish stocks and ecosystem balance that Canadians and the world rely on to maintain the global food supply.

The committee does not support increasing the seal harvest when there is no available market for the end product or a harvest that does not fully utilize the animal. The committee heard that there is space in the market for additional seal products, both domestically and internationally, and the committee believes that the development of domestic markets would be a logical place to start.

The committee heard that reversing seal product bans would be an extremely difficult task since many were based on emotional campaigns and not necessarily on facts and scientific data. The committee is supportive of efforts to try and reverse seal product bans and a long-term approach must be taken in order to achieve this goal. However, further development of domestic seal product markets and international markets, such as those in Asia identified by Global Affairs Canada, could help advance the seal products industry, and concurrently help normalize seal-based products.

The seal products industry must continue to promote its sustainability and legitimacy at home and abroad. For example, the committee heard from Health Canada that the department has certified 614 natural health products that contain seal oil – a fact committee members were not aware of when the study began.¹³⁴ The Omega-3 fatty acids found in seal oil have many health benefits and the committee learned about how Canada regulates natural health products. In fact, health claims made by each Canadian seal oil product are verified by Health Canada based on the Omega-3 fatty

¹³⁴ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Lisa Lange, Director, Bureau of Product Review and Assessment, Natural and Non-prescription Health Products Directorate, Health Products and Food Branch, Health Canada), 19 October 2023.

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acid profile and content of the product.¹³⁵ Anti-misinformation and anti-disinformation campaigns and a whole-of-government approach to fostering Canada's seal products industry can help promote these facts.

The role of women in the crafts industry was highlighted by witnesses and the committee heard that there is an openness and a willingness to expand this part of the industry if markets could be identified and the availability of seal pelts can be increased. In fact, Zoya Martin (Government of Nunavut) estimated that 100% of those producing seal products for export or for purchase by tourists in Nunavut are women.¹³⁶ The committee also heard that a not-for-profit group in Iqaluit, Nunavut has organized a sewing group to make *kamiks* (i.e., sealskin boots). It was noted that these boots are very difficult to make, yet highly sought after. The program helps reverse the loss of tradition and is primarily organized and supported by women within the community.¹³⁷



Métis artist Cheryl Fennell shows Senator Fabian Manning a sealskin bag at an event celebrating seal products on Parliament Hill.

¹³⁵ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Shawn Lawless, Acting Director, Bureau of Licensing Services and Systems, Natural and Non-prescription Health Products Directorate, Health Products and Food Branch, Health Canada), 19 October 2023.

¹³⁶ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Zoya Martin), 23 November 2023.

¹³⁷ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Steven Lonsdale), 9 November 2023.

Carl Sidney (appearing as an individual) noted that for the Teslin Tlingit First Nation in Yukon, of which he is a member, the art of making items such as moccasins is being passed down to younger generations. He went on to explain that the First Nation has “a lot of different kinds of workshops and stuff like that which happen, especially throughout the winter when it’s too cold...to teach the younger people how to make different things like moccasins.”¹³⁸ Jenny Brake (Qalipu First Nation) noted that “[m]any Indigenous communities are striving to reclaim and revitalize their traditional food systems and artisanal practices as they are essential for cultural identity, health and wellbeing.”¹³⁹

Officials from the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency explained that a key “way of selling arts and crafts in the North is using Facebook, Instagram and other social media tools, where individual artists put their materials up for sale.”¹⁴⁰ While at the Carino facility in Newfoundland and Labrador, the committee learned about Omega-3 seal oil products produced for pets. According to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, in 2020, Canada’s pet population was 27.9 million pets and retail sales of pet food totalled \$4.2 billion.¹⁴¹ Pet food sales are projected to reach \$5.3 billion by 2025, making it one of many interesting potential domestic markets for the seal products industry.

¹³⁸ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Carl Sidney), 30 November 2023.

¹³⁹ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Jenny Brake), 13 September 2023.

¹⁴⁰ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Margaret Buist), 3 November 2022.

¹⁴¹ Government of Canada, *Sector Trend Analysis – Pet food trends in Canada*.



Labels of Omega-3 pet oil inside the Carino processing plant.

Recommendation 7 (Increasing the Seal Harvest)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada immediately take steps to ensure that commercial sealing is economically viable for harvesters, which will help grow the seal products industry so that it can achieve the commercial total allowable catches set by Fisheries and Oceans Canada. Marine and fisheries research and a sustainable seal population management strategy will help ensure that the commercial harvest remains sustainable and is adjusted when necessary. In addition, to expand Canada's seal products industry and to open new domestic and international markets, the Government of Canada must be willing to take actions, such as implement regulatory changes and invest in innovative product development, national marketing campaigns, and an effective anti-misinformation/anti-disinformation campaign.

4.3 Federal Government Action is Urgently Needed

Seal meat was often described by witnesses as an excellent source of protein and a healthy traditional food. As previously discussed, responsibility for the Canadian seal industry is shared by various federal government departments and agencies. For example, Zoya Martin (Government of Nunavut) explained that Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada does not promote seal meat products as it does other sources of protein (e.g., poultry, pork, or beef) and that there is no Canadian federal department advocating for seal proteins.¹⁴² Zoya Martin further explained that Fisheries and Oceans Canada sees its role as a regulator and not as an advocate for the seal products industry. The committee views this oversight as blatantly unfair; the seal products industry deserves as much support and promotion as other Canadian meat product industries. A collaborative, whole-of-government approach to industry support is needed to ensure the seal products industry is treated like all other similar Canadian industries.

Similarly, Greg Pretty (FFAW-Unifor) explained that few people understand the seal harvest and that the seal products industry was once thriving.¹⁴³ He added that, if other Canadian industry exports (e.g., the beef industry) had been affected as the seal products industry had been when various import bans were introduced, the federal government reaction would have been very different. Greg Pretty therefore recommended to the committee that a national champion for the seal harvest be considered.

Certain industries have dedicated centres for excellence. For example, the University of Maine, United States, is home to the Lobster Institute. The Institute's mission is "[t]o foster collaboration and communication in support of a sustainable and profitable lobster industry in the Northeast [United States] and Canada."¹⁴⁴ Such an institute, located in or affiliated with one or more Canadian post-secondary institutions could act as a national champion and hub for the seal industry. Benefits of establishing such an institute could include the utilization of multiple funding sources (e.g., federal, provincial, territorial, private, industry); multi-faceted, collaborative research that includes collaborators specializing in science, international trade, economics, political science, education, and more; advocacy, marketing, and product development capabilities; and longevity (i.e., the institute could be a lasting entity, spanning governments and ministers, and could act as a corporate memory for industry initiatives).

¹⁴² POFO, [Evidence](#) (Zoya Martin), 23 November 2023.

¹⁴³ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Greg Pretty), 13 September 2023.

¹⁴⁴ University of Maine, [Lobster Institute](#).

Under this model, a seal institute or seal studies centre of excellence could hold annual symposiums, conferences, or town hall discussions on various topics, and develop calls to action related to seal populations and the seal products industry. It could also canvas stakeholders and help set research and data collection priorities in collaboration with key stakeholders.

Recommendation 8 (Seal Studies Centre of Excellence)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada immediately begin to establish a seal studies centre of excellence that includes Indigenous organizations, academic institutions, and other relevant stakeholders as partners, and is supported by Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

The committee heard that federal government action (or inaction) will shape the future of the sealing industry and wholeheartedly agrees with this statement. As such, high-level political commitment to Canada's seal harvest and seal products industry will be important. Engaging other levels of government (provincial, territorial, and Indigenous) and those in the industry was deemed essential to its renewal by many witnesses and the committee concurs. In particular, federal government representatives must, much like the committee did, learn about the industry from those within it before they can truly champion its continuation and expansion.

Government of Nunavut officials spoke to the Indigenous harvest exemption and the personal use exemption to the European Union's ban on seal products. The latter, Zoya Martin (Government of Nunavut) explained, "is for tourists, which is the one nobody knows about. We are working with our tourism sector, under Mr. Kunuk's guidance, to make sure that our tour companies and our artists are aware that they can inform the travellers when they come. ... It is having those regulations posted and readily available. For tourists, you don't need the verification of how it was harvested. If it's for your personal use, you're allowed to bring it back into your country."¹⁴⁵ Exemptions such as these must be well known, well understood, and communicated to retailers and the tourism sector by Fisheries and Oceans Canada, the Canada Border Services Agency and other relevant departments and agencies. The industry will not flourish in the short-term without the communication and utilization of such exemptions.

¹⁴⁵ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Zoya Martin), 23 November 2023.

4.4 Thinking More Long-Term

Global Affairs Canada explained that it “engages in targeted advocacy abroad to support the seal products industry as a whole. Advocacy messaging in support of seal products exports has been delivered in a number of markets by various means, including via public events, local media and during closed-door discussions with foreign governments.”¹⁴⁶ Unfortunately, however, when Canada hosted the 19th Canada-European Union Leaders’ Summit in St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador in November 2023,¹⁴⁷ Canadian seal products were not included in the original agenda. The committee believes that, at present, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and by extension the Government of Canada, is not doing enough to encourage and promote Canada’s seal products industry at home or abroad.

Paul Irngaut (Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.) suggested that Inuit organization representatives, along with federal government officials, could travel to countries to help educate their decision makers about Inuit seal harvests and the positive impacts they can have on individuals and communities in an effort to change their minds about Canada’s seal harvest.¹⁴⁸ Paul Irngaut also suggested proactively visiting countries that are considering seal product bans because it is difficult to reverse them.

Canada could also coordinate efforts with like-minded countries. For example, Greenland has also harvested seals and could work with Canada to help expand international markets for seal products. These collaborations could be bilateral or could take the form of global cooperation forums where best practices regarding industry expansion can be shared. Longer-term goals could include marketing seal meat to countries suffering from protein shortages and developing seal products that would be appropriate to fill these nutritional gaps.

Canadian embassies must be better utilized to market and promote Canadian seal products to international partners. This type of work could help normalize the consumption and use of seal-based products internationally and promote the sustainability, and the health and ecological benefits of Canadian seal products. More of this work must be undertaken by Canadian embassies and ambassadors.

¹⁴⁶ POFO, [Brief](#) (Global Affairs Canada), 22 December 2023.

¹⁴⁷ Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, [Canada to host Canada-European Union Summit in Newfoundland](#), 30 October 2023.

¹⁴⁸ POFO, [Evidence](#) (Paul Irngaut), 9 November 2023.

Recommendation 9 (International Market Development)

The committee recommends that the Government of Canada, in collaboration with key stakeholders, urgently develop and implement a domestic and international campaign to promote traditional and innovative Canadian seal products and to work towards the removal of trade barriers and the development of new markets. Work on this campaign must begin immediately and it is essential that it be a whole-of-government initiative, led by Global Affairs Canada.

MINISTERIAL APPEARANCE¹⁴⁹

Minister Lebouthillier:

“It will probably come as no surprise to most of you that I am a strong supporter of a safe, humane and sustainable seal hunt.”

POFO, Evidence, 8 February 2024.

On 8 February 2024, the Honourable Diane Lebouthillier, Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard (the Minister) appeared before the committee about its study on Canada’s seal populations and their effect on Canada’s fisheries, among other topics. The committee would like to express its sincere thanks to the Minister, and the departmental officials who accompanied her, for sharing their thoughts with the committee on this important topic. As this appearance by the Minister occurred at the end of the committee’s study, witnesses did not get an opportunity to respond to her testimony.

The committee was happy to hear that the Minister is “a strong supporter of a safe, humane and sustainable seal hunt” and that, in August 2023, she made the seal portfolio one of the three key priorities she set for herself as minister. Minister Lebouthillier highlighted that seals are an excellent source of “fuel, meat and other products that we as a nation should be focussed on

¹⁴⁹ All the citations within this chapter of the report have been sourced from POFO, Evidence (The Honourable Diane Lebouthillier, P.C., M.P., Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard), 8 February 2024.

developing for international export markets” and domestic markets alike. She also discussed how 98% of a seal can be used for various human purposes, “not only for fur, but also for vitamins, omega 3s,” and more.

On the topic of promoting and marketing seal products, the Minister noted how Canadian lobster serves as a good example. Where this species was once served to prison inmates and used to fertilize gardens, “[b]ecause of the money that was invested and the work that was done, lobster has significant added value on the market... We need to be able to apply that to other species and turn them into value-added products.” Today, Atlantic Canada’s lobster fishery is one of its most lucrative. The committee agrees with this objective and is hopeful that a whole-of-government effort will be undertaken to achieve it for the seal industry without delay. However, the committee is of the opinion that part of this work has already been done by the industry itself, since so many wonderful seal-based products already exist. The next step is for the federal government to help promote and market them.

Committee members were also pleased to learn that the Minister recently discussed the matter of seals and related economic opportunities with the American and Japanese ambassadors and that several federal government departments and ministers are working “to find openings to develop the market.” The committee is hopeful that collaboration between these departments and relevant stakeholders, including provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments and seal harvesters, can help enhance the efforts that are already underway. However, the committee believes that more of this work must be done if Canadian seal products are to gain traction in both domestic and international markets.

It is interesting to note that the Minister observed that, in her experience on the West Coast, “[p]eople are a bit less enthusiastic” and “talk about [seals] somewhat less openly” than people on Canada’s East Coast. However, the Minister also noted that people on the West Coast “agree that it’s true that there are a lot of seals and that seals eat salmon, but they are a little more cautious.” The committee also noted this when inviting and meeting with witnesses from Canada’s West Coast.

The Minister also expressed that the management of seal populations is a matter of food security and that departmental scientists are actively working “with partners to better understand the seal’s role in marine ecosystems and how seal predation may be affecting fish populations in Atlantic Canada.” The committee hopes this commitment is sustained and fortified, and that it is extended to other parts of Canada where less scientific research and data collection take place, such as on Canada’s West Coast and in Arctic and northern regions. The committee strongly

suggests that science and research be conducted in collaboration with Indigenous partners and other relevant stakeholders and that Indigenous knowledge be considered and integrated.

The Minister said that she wants to ensure that Canada's seal harvest remains eco-responsible and sustainable, goals the committee wholeheartedly supports. The committee is hopeful that Minister Lebouthillier's commitment as a "staunch ally" of Canada's seal industry will generate results and will also be shared by other government ministers, now and well into the future, to ensure this industry reaches its full potential.

CONCLUSION

For over a year, committee members learned about Canada's seal populations, about their abundances, their diets, their distribution, how their roles within complex ecosystems are mostly unknown, and how the impact seals have on Canada's fisheries cannot be quantified due to a lack of scientific evidence. The committee was also fortunate to have gained a true appreciation of the social and economic perspectives surrounding Canada's seal harvests and products industry, of how the implementation of international seal product bans has had devastating economic and social impacts on remote, coastal, and Indigenous communities and individuals across Canada, and how misinformation and disinformation have negatively affected those involved in this industry. The committee also heard practical suggestions about how these issues can be addressed and remedied. The Government of Canada must consider these suggestions and take immediate action to implement them, as appropriate.

Data and research on Canadian seal populations are lacking and much of what exists is outdated. Additional science and research capacity is needed to help us understand ocean ecosystems, the roles species play within those ecosystems, and how climate change may impact them in the future. As such, a national seal science strategy could help guide this science and research and make it available to the public. Scientific priorities should be set regionally, in collaboration with various stakeholders, and this work must incorporate the best available science, Indigenous knowledge, and the use of innovative, cost-effective technologies and scientific methods. In order to reach this goal, it will be essential for federal, provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments to work together and with other stakeholders, such as with academics and seal and fish harvesters.

The cultural and economic significance of Canada's seal harvest for remote, coastal, and Indigenous communities cannot be overstated. In certain regions, seal harvesting is one of the only industries in which community members can participate. As such, moratoriums on seal product imports have disproportionately impacted these remote, coastal, and Indigenous communities. Misinformation

and disinformation have played an important role in the implementation of these bans, the shaping of public opinion, and the marked decline of the seal products industry over the past two decades.

The revitalization of the seal products industry could help strengthen local economies and sustain families. For this revitalization to take place, the development and implementation of a comprehensive and effective anti-misinformation/anti-disinformation campaign must be undertaken by the Government of Canada without delay. Indigenous communities, provincial and territorial governments, commercial seal harvesters, and other stakeholders must be included in the development and delivery of this campaign.

Finally, a strong and sustained federal political commitment must be made and sustained to ensure that measures taken persist and the seal harvest and seal products industry are once again vibrant and positively contributing to the economies of remote, coastal, and Indigenous communities.

This report is meant to serve as a call to action. The Government of Canada – and each of the appropriate departments and agencies – must take immediate and concerted steps to implement the recommendations in this report with expediency. In addition, the committee looks forward to getting an update from Fisheries and Oceans Canada on the progress made six months after the tabling of this report and beyond. At these updates, the committee will seek to know which recommendations the Government of Canada accepts and the progress made towards their implementation, and which recommendations it does not accept and the reasons why.

APPENDIX A – Witnesses

Thursday, October 6, 2022

Adam Burns, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Fisheries and Harbour Management, *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*

William McGillivray, Regional Director General, Newfoundland and Labrador Region, *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*

Rebecca Reid, Regional Director General, Pacific Region, *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*

Adwaite Tiwary, Director, Trade and Market Policy, *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*

Bernard Vigneault, Director General, Ecosystem Sciences Directorate, *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*

Thursday, October 20, 2022

Ginny Boudreau, Executive Director, *Guy'sborough County Inshore Fishermen's Association*

Robert Hardy, Fisheries Consultant

Laura Ramsay, Research & Liaison Officer, *Prince Edward Island Fishermen's Association*

Kris Vascotto, Executive Director, *Atlantic Groundfish Council*

Thursday, October 27, 2022

Isabelle Laberge, Senior Director, Food Safety Division, *Canadian Food Inspection Agency*

Kathy Twardek, Director, Food Safety and Consumer Protection Directorate, *Canadian Food Inspection Agency*

Thursday, November 3, 2022

David Boland, Director General, Regional Operations, Newfoundland and Labrador, *Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency*

Margaret Buist, Vice-President, Policy, Planning, Communications and Northern Projects Management Office, *Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency*

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Rob Mallay, Acting Director, Enterprise Development, *Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency*

Karen Skinner, Vice-President, Newfoundland and Labrador Region, *Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency*

Thursday, November 17, 2022

Paul Bentzen, Professor, Dalhousie University

Daniel E Ruzzante, Killam Professor, Dalhousie University

Fred Whoriskey, Executive Director, Ocean Tracking Network, Dalhousie University

Thursday, November 24, 2022

Nigel Neale, Director, Inclusive Trade, FTA Promotion and Trade Missions Division, *Global Affairs Canada*

Sarah Pye, Executive Director, Agriculture, Ecommerce, IP, Mining, Responsive Sectors, and Bureau Coordination, *Global Affairs Canada*

Jordan Reeves, Director General, Trade Sectors, *Global Affairs Canada*

Marc-André Savage, Policy Advisor, Trade Sectors, *Global Affairs Canada*

Tuesday, November 29, 2022

Nell (Cornelia) den Heyer, Research Scientist, Population Ecology Division, Science, Maritimes Region, *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*

Ken Smedbol, Acting Senior Director, Science, Maritimes Region, *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*

Todd Williams, Acting Director General, Fisheries and Resource Management, *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*

Thursday, December 1, 2022

Sara Iverson, Professor, Department of Biology, Dalhousie University and Scientific Director, Ocean Tracking Network

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David Rosen, Assistant Professor, Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia

Carl Walters, Professor Emeritus, Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia

Thursday, May 11, 2023

Gil Theriault, Director, *Intra-Quebec Sealers Association*

Andrew Trites, Professor and Director of the Marine Mammal Research Unit, Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia

Wednesday, September 13, 2023, at 9:15 a.m.

Keith Bath, Commercial Fisher and Seal Harvester

Greg Pretty, President, *FFAW-Unifor*

Lorelei Roberts, Assistant Deputy Minister, Fisheries and Aquaculture Branch, *Department of Fisheries, Forestry and Agriculture of Newfoundland and Labrador*

Wednesday, September 13, 2023, at 12:45 p.m.

Jenny Brake, Western Vice Chief, *Qalipu First Nation*

Doug Chiasson, Executive Director, *Fur Institute of Canada*

Dion Dakins, Chief Executive Officer, *Carino Processing Ltd.*

Darren Halloran, Store Owner, *Always in Vogue*

Rowena House, Executive Director, *Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador*

Morley Knight, Fisheries Consultant and Former Assistant Deputy Minister of Fisheries Policy, Department of Fisheries and Oceans

Bill Penney, Business Development Seal Products, Mi'kmaq Commercial Fisheries, *Waspu Oil*

Sherry Turnbull, Owner, *Sherry's Seal Skin Arts*

Bruno Vinhas, Events and Outreach Director, *Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador*

SEALING THE FUTURE: A CALL TO ACTION

Thursday, October 19, 2023

Kim Godard, Acting Director General, Health Product Compliance Directorate, Regulatory Operations and Enforcement Branch, *Health Canada*

Lisa Lange, Director, Bureau of Product Review and Assessment, Natural and Non-prescription Health Products Directorate, Health Products and Food Branch, *Health Canada*

Shawn Lawless, Acting Director, Bureau of Licensing Services and Systems, Natural and Non-prescription Health Products Directorate, Health Products and Food Branch, *Health Canada*

Thursday, November 2, 2023

The Honourable Céline Hervieux-Payette, P.C., LL.L., Former Senator

Maximilien Depontailler, Former Assistant to the Honourable Céline Hervieux-Payette

Thursday, November 9, 2023

Paul Irngaut, Vice-President, *Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.*

Steven Lonsdale, Conservation Program Advisor, Marine and Wildlife Department, *Qikiqtani Inuit Association*

Thursday, November 23, 2023

Angus Cockney, Community Engagement and Northern Specialist, *Arctic Research Foundation*

Tom Henheffer, Co-CEO, *Arctic Research Foundation*

David Kunuk, Deputy Minister, Economic Development and Transport Department, *Government of Nunavut*

Zoya Martin, Director of Fisheries and Sealing, Department of Economic Development and Transportation, *Government of Nunavut*

Thursday, November 30, 2023

Carl Sidney

SEALING THE FUTURE: A CALL TO ACTION

Thursday, December 7, 2023

Ahmed Al-Rawi, Associate Professor, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University

Jaigris Hodson, Canada Research Chair in Digital Communication for the Public Interest, Associate Professor, Royal Roads University

Marcus Kolga, Director, DisinfoWatch and Senior Fellow, Macdonald-Laurier Institute

Thursday, February 8, 2024

The Honourable Diane Lebouthillier, P.C., M.P., Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard

Annette Gibbons, Deputy Minister, *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*

Mario Pelletier, Commissioner, *Canadian Coast Guard*

SEALING THE FUTURE: A CALL TO ACTION



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