Assessing the hunting practices of Namibia's commercial seal hunt

Authors:
Stephen P. Kirkman[1]
David M. Lavigne[2]

Affiliations:
[1]Animal Demography Unit, University of Cape Town, South Africa

[2] International Fund for Animal Welfare, Guelph, Canada

Correspondence to:
David Lavigne

email:
dlavigne@ifaw.org

Postal address:
International Fund for Animal Welfare, 40 Norwich Street East, Guelph, Ontario, Canada N1H 2G6

How to cite this article:
Kirkman SP, Lavigne DM. Assessing the hunting practices of Namibia's commercial seal hunt. S Afr J Sci. 2010;106(3/4), Art. #166, 3 pages. DOI: 10.4102/sajs.v106i3/4.166

Note:
Zoologists Stephen Kirkman and David Lavigne were members of the EFSA's Working Group on the animal welfare aspects of the killing and skinning of seals.

This review is available at:
http://www.sajs.co.za

Following mounting public concerns regarding the treatment of animals in recent years, there has been increasing interest in the development of science-based guidelines for animal welfare in industries such as agriculture and hunting.[1,2,3] In the latter case, for example, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) was requested by the European Commission, in 2007, to issue a scientific opinion regarding welfare aspects of seal hunting and to assess the most appropriate killing methods, to reduce unnecessary suffering. As part of its assessment, EFSA's *Scientific opinion*[4] compared seal hunting to the killing of livestock in abattoirs. It noted that while slaughter conditions vary considerably, the goal should be the same: to kill animals with the minimum amount of pain, distress and fear and without causing any avoidable suffering. The report concluded that there was strong evidence that effective killing is not always practiced during seal hunts and that unnecessary and avoidable pain and suffering occurs. Subsequently, Russia ended its commercial hunt for harp seals *Pagophilus groenlandicus* in the White Sea in February 2009[5] and banned the killing of all seals under the age of one year in March of 2009.[6] Two months later, the European Parliament voted 550–49 in favour of a resolution banning the importation of seal hunt products, which comes into effect in 2010.[7] Canada and Norway have subsequently lodged challenges against the EU ban with the World Trade Organization.[8]

The hunt that is most familiar to followers of the sealing debate around the world is Canada's commercial harp seal hunt. This and other Northern Hemisphere seal hunts, mainly for pagophilic seals, comprise nearly 90% of the ca.750 000 pinnipeds (fur seals, sea lions, walrus and true seals) hunted each year.[4] Less well known, is the only remaining Southern Hemisphere seal hunt, where the other 10% is taken. The annual hunt for the Cape fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus pusillus* occurs at breeding colonies situated along Namibia's desert coastline. This article focuses on the mode of hunting in the Namibian seal hunt which, it is argued, is inherently unsuited to ensuring humane killing standards that are in keeping with hunting best practices. Where applicable, comparisons are made with hunting techniques in the Northern Hemisphere, in particular with Canada's commercial harp seal hunt.

Firstly, some background is required on the best practices for ensuring humane killing of seals during commercial hunts, as put forward by EFSA[4] and, previously, by other veterinary panels, including the report of the Independent Veterinarians Working Group on the Canadian harp seal hunt.[3] The recommended best practice involves a 'three-step' killing process consisting, in rapid succession, of (1) stunning, (2) monitoring and (3) the bleeding out each individual seal killed. Stunning refers to an effective method of destroying brain sensory function (e.g. rifle shot, hakapik or club). After stunning, an animal immediately must be carefully monitored and, if there is any doubt that the animal is irreversibly unconscious or dead, it should be immediately re-stunned. Palpation of the skull[3] or observing the presence or absence of a corneal (blink) reflex,[4] are the recommended ways of assessing and monitoring effective destruction of the brain. Bleeding out, whereby major blood vessels are severed, must then be carried out immediately to ensure 'humane slaughter'.

Canada's commercial harp seal hunt targets weaned pups when they are about 1 to 3.5 months old. These animals tend to lie on the ice where they are shot (usually from a boat) or approached by hunters and stunned with a hakapik or club. In contrast, the bulk of the Cape fur seals killed in Namibia's commercial seal hunt (at least 90%) are older pups between the ages of 7 and 10 months.[4] Most of these animals are, however, still nursing because, unlike harp seals, weaning in Cape fur seals occurs between 8 and 11 months of age.[9,10]

Some other important factors distinguish the hunt for Cape fur seals from northern hunts for true seals, such as Canada's commercial harp seal hunt. The harp seals that are targeted by the hunters are scattered across the ice on which they were born. In contrast, Cape fur seal pups are hunted on

Source: Photo taken by Leshia Upfold

Cape fur seals at rest in their colony

land in their natal breeding colonies, which – characteristically of fur seal species – are extremely crowded.[11] The particular colonies that are subjected to the hunt in Namibia are three of the four largest Cape fur seal colonies, together producing approximately 135 000 pups each year.[12] Variable numbers of lactating mothers, sub-adults and adult males are always ashore at the time of the hunt.[11] Within these colonies, pups that are not suckling tend to congregate in large, dense groups; the density of these congregations and the relatively small size of individual pups make them unsuitable targets for marksmen.[13] Clubbing, therefore, is the only method used for stunning.

Another characteristic of fur seals is their agility on land. Whereas harp seals and other true seals have restricted mobility on solid substrates and move using a crawling or swimming motion, fur seals are able to walk[14] and even 'gallop' on solid terrain and are capable of moving nearly as fast as an average man can run over rough terrain.[15] Their locomotory abilities, their dense occurrence and the fact that they flee from advancing humans, entail that approaching pups individually to club them is impracticable. Instead, pups are rounded up into a large group before they are clubbed. The regulations for the hunt stipulate that small groups of animals must then be released from the large group, once it is secured, to move between rows of clubbers as they try to escape in the direction of the sea.[16]

Because the probability of accurately striking a moving target is lower than for a more stationary one (especially on rough terrain), there is an even greater likelihood of ineffective stunning in the Cape fur seal hunt than in a harp seal hunt, assuming that the latter is conducted under suitable environmental conditions and that sealers are conscientious about their work. Veterinarians representing the USA Endangered Species Division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, who were tasked with observing the Cape fur seal hunt in the early 1970s, found that stunning was often ineffective and in many cases, several blows were landed before an animal was rendered unconscious, or animals were stunned so lightly that consciousness was regained or partially regained before bleeding out occurred.[17,18,19]

Regarding the comparison made by EFSA[4] between seal hunting and the slaughter of livestock, it may be argued that the hunting of seals and many other wild animals (excluding the use of any form of trapping or poisoning techniques) is inherently more humane than livestock slaughter in abattoirs – wild-hunted animals are generally not subjected to the stresses associated with gathering, transporting, driving and lairaging of livestock prior to abattoir slaughter. Such arguments, however, are not applicable to large-scale hunting of wild animals – including Cape fur seals – that occur in herds. Rounding up and driving seals, then containing the group while animals are released and clubbed, causes exertion and stress, both among the animals that are eventually killed and those that escape (including adult animals that are rounded up in the group and then allowed to escape). Pups held in the group are extremely tightly bunched and it is not uncommon for some to succumb to hyperthermia or suffocation before they can be clubbed.[4,20] Besides the animals that are rounded up, disturbance also affects other animals in the colony, including lactating mothers and pups, with animals in the vicinity of hunting operations typically fleeing into the sea.[4] Considering the nature of the hunting operations and their frequency and duration – hunting occurs at the same three colonies throughout the hunting season, from 1 July to mid-November – the stress associated with the disturbance can be defined as chronic. Chronic stress may lead to disruption of normal physiological function and suppression of the reproductive and immune systems.[21] Behavioural effects of such disturbance are likely to include reduced nourishment of surviving pups, on account of disruption of nursing or even abandonment of pups, inducing hunger and potentially starvation.

The diverse nature of welfare issues in the Cape fur seal hunt entail that efforts to lessen animal suffering in one area of concern, are likely to intensify suffering in other areas. For example, excluding herding from the operation altogether to avoid some of the negative effects associated with this practice will greatly compromise the effectiveness of clubbing, because the alternative is that clubbers would have to charge into the colony and contend with a mêlée of frenzied, stampeding animals as targets. This would have serious implications both for animal welfare and for human safety. Along the scale of effects on individually targeted seals (ineffective killing) to effects on whole colonies (disturbance and disruption of lactation), inhumane killing practices will invariably be the norm, rather than the exception, in the hunt for Cape fur seal pups. We contend, therefore, that the Namibian seal hunt is inherently inhumane and that science-based guidelines for 'humane slaughter' will never be adequate to address the multifarious welfare concerns associated with this and other hunts that involve large-scale slaughter in crowded seal colonies.

In addition to the animal welfare concerns with the regulated seal hunt in Namibia, undercover video footage of the hunt at Cape Cross in July 2009, presents clear evidence of hunting regulations being contravened (http://www.wspa.org.uk/latestnews/2009/Namibian_seal_hunt.aspx). The footage shows multiple clubbers striking pups within a large group of several hundred animals, contradicting the regulation that only small groups of pups, once they have been released from the large group, may be targeted.[16] The purpose of this regulation is to avoid the ineffective stunning of pups that can be expected if attempting to strike individual targets within a dense, teeming mass of seals. Indeed, several instances of mistimed strikes are evident in the footage. Also apparent is that no attempt was being made to monitor and bleed immobilised pups immediately after stunning, as required by the recommended 'three-step' killing procedure. Thus, the footage indicates a disregard both of hunting regulations and of humane hunting practices intended to minimise avoidable pain and suffering.

Recent video evidence from the Russian hunt for North Pacific fur seals *Callorhinus ursinus* on the Commander Islands obtained in October 2009 (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxqtM8nhqNc) demonstrates that the animal welfare issues associated with Namibia's Cape fur seal hunt are shared by this hunt. Also, since the EFSA report, a Canadian hunt for grey seal *Halichoerus grypus* pups has been extended to include the 'protected wilderness area' of Hay Island, Nova Scotia.[22,23] This hunt also involves herding animals and the clubbing of weaned pups, in the presence of other animals, including females with nursing pups. Therefore, it more closely resembles fur seal hunts than it does Canada's commercial harp seal hunt and other Northern Hemisphere hunts involving true seals. It also raises animal welfare concerns similar to those outlined above for Namibia's Cape fur seal hunt. Also of concern with regard to this and the other Canadian hunts, is that despite minor changes in Canada's Marine Mammal Regulations in 2009,[24] they still do not require sealers to follow the 'three-step' killing procedure recommended by EFSA and other veterinary experts.[25] On the other side of the Atlantic, reports are now emerging about inhumane killing practices observed during Norway's 2009 commercial harp seal hunt on the West Ice east of the island of Jan Mayen.[26,27]

In light of the available evidence of indifference to hunting regulations and best practices in the Namibian and in other seal hunts, little appears to have changed since long-standing concerns about the inhumane killing of seals were reiterated in the EFSA *Scientific opinion*.[4] Whether best practices for humane slaughter can ever be implemented successfully in large-scale seal hunting operations, remains doubtful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Jason Bell-Leask and Sheryl Fink for comments on the draft manuscript. ■

REFERENCES

1. Duncan IJ. Thirty years of progress in animal welfare science. J Appl Anim Welf Sci. 1998;1:151–154.
2. Mench J, Swanson J. Developing science-based animal welfare guidelines. A speech delivered at the 2000 Poultry Symposium and Egg Processing Workshop, University of California [document on the Internet]. 2000 [cited 2010 Feb 15]. Available from: http://animalscience.ucdavis.edu/Avian/mench.pdf
3. Smith B, Caraguel C, Crook A, et al. Improving humane practice in the Canadian harp seal hunt. A report of the Independent Veterinarians' Working Group on the Canadian harp seal hunt [document on the Internet]. Canada: BL Smith Groupwork; 1995 [cited 2010 Feb 11]. Available from: http://www.thesealfishery.com/files/IVWGReportAug2005.pdf
4. European Food Safety Authority. Scientific opinion of the Panel on Animal Health and Welfare on a request from the Commission on the Animal Welfare aspects of the killing and skinning of seals [homepage on the Internet]. The EFSA Journal. 2007;610:1–123 [updated 2008 Feb 15; cited 2010 Feb 1]. Available from: http://www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/efsa_locale-1178620753812_1178671319178.htm
5. Embassy of the Russian Federation in Canada. Baby-seal hunting banned in northern Russia [document on the Internet]. 2009 Mar 5 [cited 2010 Feb 20]. Available from: http://www.rusembcanada.mid.ru/pr2009/009.pdf
6. Halpin T. Slaughter of the seals in Russia is stopped by Vladimir Putin. TimesOnline [serial online]. 2009 Mar 20 [cited 2010 Feb 20]. Available from: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article5941460.ece
7. European Parliament. Position of the European Parliament adopted at first reading on 5 May 2009 with a view to the adoption of Regulation (EC) No .../2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council on trade in seal products [document on the Internet]. European Parliament Consolidated Legislative Document. 2009 May 5 [cited 2010 Feb 12]. Available from: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TC&reference=P6-TC1-COD-2008-0160&language=EN&format=PDF
8. World Trade Organization. European communities – Measures prohibiting the importation and marketing of seal products: Disputes DS400 and DS401. Belgium: Brussels [document on the Internet] 2010 Feb 11 [cited 2010 Feb 19]. Available from: http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2007/may/tradoc_134652.pdf
9. Rand RW. The Cape fur seal (*Arctocephalus pusillus pusillus*). Distribution, abundance and feeding habits off the south-western coast of the Cape Province. Invest Rep Div Sea Fish S Afr. 1959;34:1–75.
10. David JHM. South African fur seal, *Arctocephalus pusillus pusillus*. In: Croxall JP, Gentry RL, editors. Status, biology and ecology of fur seals. Proceedings of an International Symposium and Workshop; 1984 Apr 23–27; Cambridge, England. NOAA Technical Report NMFS 1987;51:65–72.
11. Rand RW. The Cape fur seal (*Arctocephalus pusillus pusillus*). 3. General behaviour on land and at sea. Invest Rep Div Sea Fish S Afr. 1967;60:1–39.
12. Kirkman SP, Oosthuizen WH, Meÿer MA, Kotze PGH, Roux J-P, Underhill LG. Making sense out of censuses and dealing with missing data: Trends in pup counts of Cape fur seals between 1972–2004. Afr J Mar Sci. 2007;29:161–176.
13. David JHM. Seals. In: Payne AIL, Crawford RJM, editors. Oceans of life. Cape Town: Vlaeberg Publishers; 1989. p. 288–302.
14. Lavigne DM, Kovacs KM. Harps & hoods: Ice-breeding seals of the northwest Atlantic. Waterloo, Canada: University of Waterloo Press; 1988.
15. Bonner WN. Seals and sea lions of the world. London: Blandford; 1994.
16. Namibia. Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources. Regulations relating to the exploitation of marine resources. Government Gazette of the Republic of Namibia, No. 153 Namibia: Windhoek [document on the Internet]; 2001 Dec 7 [cited 2010 Jan 31]. Available from: http://209.88.21.55/opencms/export/sites/default/grnnet/MFMR/Laws_and_Policies/docs/MarineRegulations.pdf
17. McDonald LE. Report to the Endangered Species Division of the National Marine Fisheries Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Washington DC on visit to South and Southwest Africa fur seal harvest sites; 1974.
18. Wass WM. Letter to the Endangered Species Division of the National Marine Fisheries Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, concerning impressions of seal harvesting in South and South West Africa. Washington DC; 1974.
19. Wass WM. A report of observations and recommendations concerning harvesting of fur seals in South and South West Africa. Report to the Endangered Species Division of the National Marine Fisheries Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Washington DC; 1975.
20. Best PB. Sealing practices and humaneness of the harvest. Report of the Subcommittee of the Sea Fisheries Advisory Committee appointed at the request of the Minister of Environment Affairs and Water Affairs, to advise the Minister on the scientific aspects of sealing. Cape Town: Sea Fisheries Research Institute; 1990.
21. Cyr NE, Romero LM. Identifying hormonal habituation in field studies of stress. Gen Comp Endocr. 2009;161:295–303.
22. Novia Scotia. Bill No. 50. An Act to amend Chapter 27 of the Acts of 1998, the Wilderness Areas Protection Act. Progress of Bills for 1st Session, 61st Assembly, Nova Scotia House of Assembly [statute on the Internet]. 2009 [cited 2009 Feb 9]. Available from: http://www.gov.ns.ca/legislature/house_business/ status.html#50
23. Hayes C. Hay Island seal hunt set to open. Cape Breton Post [serial online]. 2010 February 2 [cited 2010 Feb 17]. Available from: http:// www.capebretonpost.com/index.cfm?sid=323247&sc=145
24. Canada. Regulations amending the marine mammal regulations [homepage on the Internet]. Canada Gazette. 2008 Dec 27 [updated 2009 Oct 2; cited 2010 Feb 16]; 1:3268–3276. Available from: http://www.gazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p2/2009/2009-03-04/html/sor-dors66-eng.html
25. Lavigne D, Fink S. Comments on: Regulations amending the marine mammal regulations. Canada Gazette part 1 [document on the Internet]. 2008 Dec 27 [cited 2010 Jan 15]; 3268–3276. Available from: International Fund for Animal Welfare. http://www.ifaw.org/Publications/Program_Publications/Seals/asset_upload_file3_52103.pdf
26. Sørensen PO. Inspektørrapport – Selfangst 2009 [document on the Internet]. Bergen: Fiskeridirektoratet. 2009 [cited 2010 Feb 21]. Norwegian. Available from: http://www.dagbladet.no/download/rapport1.pdf
27. Egeberg K, Hanse A. [Felt threatened by fire kate sealers] Dagbladet [serial online]. 2010 Feb 20 [cited 2010 Feb 21]. Norwegian. Available from: http://www.dagbladet.no/2010/02/12/nyheter/selfangst/innenriks/dyrenes_nyheter/fiskeri/10335646/