The Canadian harp seal hunt: observations on the effectiveness of procedures to avoid poor animal welfare outcomes

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Abstract

The Canadian harp seal (Pagophilus groenlandicus) hunt has, for several decades, raised public concerns related to animal welfare. The field conditions under which this hunt is carried out do not lend themselves easily to detailed observations and analyses of its killing practices. This article reports observations carried out over several seasons that aimed at obtaining more specific information about the conditions under which seals are killed, in order to assess potential welfare issues and explore avenues for possible improvements in its practice. A standardised three-step process for killing seals (ie stunning, checking by palpation of the skull, and bleeding) was recently implemented to maximise the proportion of animals that are killed rapidly with minimum pain. Based on field observations, the rifle and the hakapik, when used properly, appeared to be efficient tools for stunning and/or killing young harp seals. All carcases of seals observed to be killed with a rifle, either on the ice or in the water, could be recovered. However, shooting seals in water rather than on ice carried a higher risk of poor welfare outcome because of the limited opportunities to shoot the animals again if not stunned with the first shot. Based on current practices, there is no reliable evidence that the Canadian harp seal hunt differs from other forms of exploitation of wildlife resources from the perspective of animal welfare. Although opportunistic field observations may be less amenable to generalisation than structured studies, we believe that they reflect the reality of the hunt and provide valuable information to direct the evolution of its practice.

Keywords: animal welfare, Canada, hakapik, harp seal, hunt, killing methods

Introduction

The Canadian harp seal (Pagophilus groenlandicus) hunt has been the subject of much controversy for several decades. ‘Beaters’ (young harp seals, approximately one to three months old, that have been weaned and left by their mother at approximately 10 days of age and have completely shed their white coat) are the main target of this hunt; over 95% of the seals taken during the hunt since 2000 were one-year old or less (Stenson 2009).

Depending on ice conditions, these seals are hunted mainly with one of two regulation tools (Anonymous 2010): the hakapik, a long wooden club with a metal ferrule at the striking end (the blunt part, rather than the spike, being used to strike the animal on the top of its head) (Figure 1), which is used mainly in the Gulf of St Lawrence (hereafter referred to as the Gulf) (~47°-49°N; ~59°-62°W) in years of good ice, when the sealers can get down on the ice and approach the animals; or a rifle with ammunition of specified minimum velocity (1,800 ft s–1 [549 m s –1]) and energy (1,100 ft-lb [1,500 J]), with the animal’s head as the target, which almost exclusively is the tool used at the Front, east of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador (~49°-52°N; ~53°-56°W), where ice floes are typically much smaller and more spread out.

Efforts to assess animal welfare (hereafter referred to as welfare) concerns related to this hunt were reviewed by Daoust et al. (2002). The debate on the ethics of this hunt has nonetheless continued between opponents who argue that it fails on many levels of welfare standards (Burdon et al. 2001; HSUS 2010; IFAW 2010), and those claiming it to be a well-monitored and regulated hunt that is commercially important for coastal communities (DFO 2010; FIC 2010). A number of reports were produced in recent years by independent groups of veterinarians and marine biologists that intended to assess objectively the different killing methods used during seal hunts in Canada and other countries (Smith et al. 2005; EFSA 2007; NAMMCO 2009). These reports generally concluded that the tools used in most hunts can kill the majority of animals quickly when used properly, but that improvement may be needed in the implementation of their use in order to ensure consistent positive welfare outcomes.