

One of nature's great wonders: Annual birth of seal pups off coast of Eastern Canada

(Charlottetown, Canada - 8 March 2005) - One of the wonders of the natural world - the annual birth of thousands of baby harp seals - is now underway on the pristine ice floes off Eastern Canada, according to IFAW (International Fund for Animal Welfare www.ifaw.org).

Each winter, the entire northwest Atlantic harp seal population migrates to the east coast of Canada to give birth and mate. Unfortunately, the window for enjoying this spectacular phenomenon is short. Canadians will begin hunting hundreds of thousands of the baby seals in just a few weeks.

"The harp seal migration is one of the earth's last great wildlife spectacles," IFAW President Fred O'Regan said. "The herd should be respected as a global treasure, not slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands for the sake of obtaining a luxury item."

From late February to mid-March, female harp seals congregate on the frozen ocean off Canada's east coast. Each female gives birth to a single pup. Pups are nursed for about 12 days and then weaned abruptly, at which time they begin to moult their fluffy white coat. Once a baby seal begins to moult it can be legally hunted in Canada.

More seals are killed today than were during the 1950s and 60s when overhunting significantly reduced the seal population. This year, up to 319,500 seals will be killed.

Modern sealing boats are large enough to accommodate several snowmobiles, which are used to access a greater area of ice and to haul the pelts back to the boat. Some boats even have a helicopter for spotting herds of seals on the barren ice.

"Opposition to this hunt is really a clash of values, between those who place an economic value on a seal and those who value protecting wildlife for future generations," O'Regan said. "The annual birth of seals is an awe inspiring spectacle unique to Canada and should be a source of pride for Canadians. However, instead of protecting the seals, the Canadian government is directly supporting a needless and vicious cull."

About IFAW (International Fund for Animal Welfare)

IFAW was founded in 1969 to end the Canadian baby seal hunt. Over the next two decades, IFAW won many hard fought victories for seals, including the 1982 European Union ban of whitecoat and blueback sealskins. These aggregate victories almost stopped the baby seal hunt in the 1980s. Three years ago the seal hunt returned to levels unseen in decades and it is bigger than ever. To learn how to help IFAW protect seals, visit www.ifaw.org