

Hunt for 320,000 seals begins on Canadian ice

(Charlottetown, Canada - 29 March 2005) - Canada's annual seal hunt began today, watched by campaigners from IFAW (International Fund for Animal Welfare www.ifaw.org).

Over the next few weeks 319,500 seal pups will be killed for their fur, assuming the Canadian government quota is not exceeded. In the Gulf of St Lawrence, seals are clubbed with hakapiks (clubs with nails in the end); further north off the coast of Newfoundland, seals are shot in the water and on ice floes, and are often wounded and die slowly.

Canada's annual seal hunt is the largest marine mammal hunt in the world with a three-year quota of almost one million seals. Last year, according to statistics provided by the Canadian government, 365,971 seals were killed and almost all of those were less than three months old. Seals pelts are sold to fur distributors to feed demand from the fashion industry.

In 2001 IFAW commissioned an independent team of vets to investigate killing methods. They examined 76 seal carcasses picked at random and found that 42 per cent did not have significant head injuries likely to have rendered them unconscious. They had probably been skinned while conscious. This scientific evidence matches appalling scenes of cruelty witnessed every year by IFAW observers.

"Many people mistakenly think Canada stopped hunting seal pups decades ago," said Phyllis Campbell-McRae, Director of IFAW UK and Canada. "But the size of Canada's modern, commercial hunt is bigger now than it has been in 50 years."

Each spring the entire Northwest Atlantic harp seal population of around five million migrates to the East Coast of Newfoundland to mate, give birth and nurse their young. In one of nature's great wildlife spectacles, thousands of seals are born on the pristine ice floes off eastern Canada in early March.

The hunt begins in late March when the seal pups are weaned from their mother and begin to moult. Seal pups may legally be killed once they begin to moult their fluffy white coats, usually at 12-14 days old.

IFAW was founded in 1969 to campaign against the cruel and unsustainable nature of the hunt. It is the only organisation in the world to consistently observe and document it each year, and bring media and government officials from around the world to see it first hand.

The European Union banned the import of pelts from whitecoat harp seals in 1982, and the Canadian seal hunt declined dramatically in the decade that followed. In 1995 it was revived by the Canadian Government, which said a seal cull was necessary to help fished out cod stocks recover, and provided subsidies to support the sealing industry. There is no scientific evidence to support the claim that fewer seals will mean more cod.