

# **Cultural Violence, Stigma and the Legacy of the Anti-Sealing Movement**

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## **Introduction**

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# Introduction

The movement against the Canadian/Newfoundland seal hunt by environmentalists and animal rights groups started in the early 20th century and continues to this day, but arguably reached its height in the late 1970s–1980s. To some organizations, such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and their supporters, their work to undermine the sealing industry and to highlight their perceived wrongs with sealing practices is a source of pride and accomplishment (e.g. IFAW 2019; PETA 2017; also see Phelps Bondaroff and Burke 2014). Many organizations involved in anti-sealing activism, past and present, pushed for the end of commercial seal hunting and, in some cases, almost all seal hunting (thought eventually many made an overt caveat for traditional Indigenous subsistence hunting) (e.g. Allen 1979; Woods 1986; Phelps Bondaroff and Burke 2014). According to Mark Nuttall (1990, 240) “Animal rights groups have frequently depended on public opinion for the success of their anti-sealing campaigns, but little sympathy has been shown for the people for whom such opposition has precipitated cultural disintegration”. There are cracks now, however, in the legacy of the anti-sealing activism which invite pause and consideration for the cultural harms it has caused and continues to cause.<sup>1</sup>

Sealing has been practised most prominently throughout rural and isolated parts of Canada, most notably, but not exclusively, in parts of the Canadian Arctic and the Northeast in coastal communities in Newfoundland and Labrador, the Quebec North Shore and the Magdalen Islands by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples for hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of years (Sinclair et al. 1989; Burke 2021c; Farquhar 2020; Hawkins and Silver 2017).<sup>2</sup> Using the case of seal hunting in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador, this book argues that the protracted anti-sealing activism, which has involved many environmental and animal rights organizations and their supporters over the decades, has collectively contributed to the infliction of cultural violence against Newfoundland and Labrador sealers, their families and communities, and by extension has also harmed and undermined Indigenous self-determination through limiting sustainable economic growth for seal products by caging Indigenous nations into a pre-ordained

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and limited category of traditional subsistence hunting. As such, this book explores the question, how can the literature on cultural violence and stigma help us understand the experience of the 50 plus years of the anti-sealing campaigning on sealers, their families and coastal communities in Newfoundland and Labrador from the local perspective?

The book makes the case study that the Newfoundland and Labrador experience, particularly those of rural and coastal fishers/sealers, their families and communities at the hands of anti-sealing campaigners (organizations, activists and their supporters), has amounted to cultural violence. In making this case, the book seeks to push scholarly consideration about perpetrators of cultural violence beyond state-centric actors and to acknowledge the growing power and influence of non-state actors, focusing here on environmental and animal rights activist organizations. In pushing for this consideration, the book hopes to foster critical thought about the power of activist organizations in Western society; the scope and impact of colonial actions, attitudes and behaviours in environmental and animal rights activism; and the need for greater awareness about the interconnectedness of long-established Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures and traditional economic practices in Canada to foster greater accountability for activist organizations so they more fully consider and account for the impacts and potential externalities of their campaigns.

Furthermore, despite Newfoundland and Labrador being ground zero of the anti-sealing campaigning, research into the negative impact of this activism tends to give more focus on the Inuit/Indigenous experiences and economic impacts without adequate acknowledgement or exploration of the depth of the negative experience on traditional, but not exclusively Indigenous, sealing communities (e.g. Hawkins and Silver 2017; Burke 2020; Farquhar 2020). The book argues, therefore, some of the critical scholarship and activist and media discourse on the anti-sealing protests is problematic in two key ways.

First, there is arguably a tendency, in this author's view, for the Newfoundland and Labrador experiences and cultural connections to sealing practices, and those of non-Indigenous sealers in general, tend to be minimized. This is illustrated, for example, by Greenpeace's 2014 apology to Inuit, Indigenous and coastal peoples which emphasizes the organization's impact on Indigenous peoples, particularly Inuit, but provides little substance about their impact on, and contrition toward, coastal non-Indigenous sealers, their families and communities (Kerr 2014). Further indication of efforts to skirt acknowledgement of non-Indigenous cultural connections to sealing is the framing of subsistence sealing as an Inuit/Indigenous cultural activity (e.g. The Canadian Press 2014; Wilkin 1998; Wenzel 1987), excluding traditional subsistence practices by non-Indigenous people, and imposing the image of the "legitimate way to hunt is that symbolised by the Noble Savage, or rather the 'Noble [Inuit]' dressed in furs and hunting seals with a harpoon" (Nuttall 1990, 241).

Second, our ability to comprehend and investigate the severity of Inuit/Indigenous experiences with the fallout from anti-sealing activism is undercut

because there is a tendency in anti-sealing leaning scholarship and activist and media discourse to focus on the morality of seal hunting from a “is it cruel” perceptive or a focus on whether sealing provides adequate economic benefits for the Canadian economy (e.g. Sumner 1983; Butterworth and Richardson 2013). These approaches can result in ignoring the substantial cultural role of sealing in minority-dominated areas and the negative experiences had by non-Indigenous sealers at the hands of protesters and their supporters, which is also an important dimension to the sealing debate.

When local voices have tried to document and disseminate a counter-perceptive to academic assessments and activist narratives, they risk being targeted for bigotry, psychological and physical violence, such as Newfoundland filmmaker Anne Troake. Troake recounts that, among other things, she received death threats, ethnic slurs from prominent activists and a brick through her home window after releasing her 2005 documentary *My Ancestors Were Rogues and Murderers* in which she documented her family’s struggle with anti-sealing activists and the fallout of decades of their campaigning (Interview with Anne Troake 2022 - see Burke 2023).<sup>3</sup>

While it might not be readily apparent why non-Indigenous experiences with anti-sealing campaigning undermine Inuit/Indigenous peoples, this book notes that there are close links between the two in the context of the public relations and broad cultural considerations given to sealing practices, economies and cultures by peoples outside of the cultural communities.<sup>4</sup> Many Inuit have been very open “that any opposition to the seal hunt, commercial or otherwise, harms Inuit by destroying the market for seal furs” (The Canadian Press 2014). Inuit pro-sealing campaigner Aaju Peter, for example, spoke out in 2017 in response to anti-commercial sealing videos by PETA. Peter argued that PETA “says there is no market. They crushed the market ... They made life very, very difficult” (CBC News 2017). At the time PETA released campaigning material against the North Atlantic commercial seal hunt in 2017, it also stated that it supports Inuit hunters. Peter, however, said work by organizations like PETA “creates a bad taste and a bad image” because their materials are misleading and promote a negative stereotype against the industry. Peter noted that “when PETA says baby seals are slaughtered ... They’re not babies. Human beings have babies” (CBC News 2017), but the use of the “baby seal” trope continues to be very prevalent in anti-sealing narratives and framing.

The dehumanization of one class of sealers (commercial hunters, most especially non-Indigenous and non-observably Indigenous) as cruel savage slaughters while casting another class of hunters (Indigenous) as acceptable traditionalists makes it more difficult for Inuit/Indigenous sealing advocates to argue to external audiences like European policy makers why the European Union (EU) commercial seal product bans should end (for more information on Inuit attempts to overturn EU seal product bans see: Zilio 2013; Hennig 2015; also see European Commission 2016; 2019a, 2019b, for more on the

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EU ban).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this book posits that the normalization and devaluation of experiences of violence and trauma against certain cultural groups involved in the sealing debate, while framing others as deserving of some exception, has created a grey area for cultural violence to occur, and Newfoundlanders and Labradorians have fallen into this grey area.

### Notes

- 1 In 2014 Greenpeace Canada apologized to Canadian Inuit and other Indigenous and coastal peoples for its anti-sealing conduct. In particular, Greenpeace Canada's 2014 apology expressed organizational awareness that its anti-sealing work was poorly executed to the detriment of others, with Greenpeace Canada particularly acknowledging the colonial approaches exhibited by anti-sealing protesters designed to impose their views and values on Indigenous (especially Inuit) and coastal peoples (Kerr 2014). Reflecting on Greenpeace's time campaigning against commercial sealing, Mads Flarup Christensen, executive director at Greenpeace Nordic acknowledged: "We got things wrong in the 70s around the sealing issue where I think we did not have sufficient know[ledge] or grounding in those areas and communities to really be able to, as city people and other countries, to go into areas and have a massive impact on local life" (Interview with Mads Flarup Christensen 2019 - see Burke 2020). Christensen's reflections and Greenpeace's 2014 apology for elements of its anti-sealing legacy point to some emerging awareness within the environmental movement that in the case of the anti-sealing protests, activist narratives and moral positioning of organizations and their opinions on seal hunting and the peoples involved in it may not be as congruent with the realities of what actually transpired, and continues to transpire, as those who support the anti-sealing cause might be led to believe.
- 2 Sealing also occurs to a lesser extent in parts of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.
- 3 The full interview with Anne Troake is published, open access, as part of the *Arctic* journal InfoNorth series (Burke 2023).
- 4 According to Jukka Nyssönen, for example, in their work on Finnish Sámi and disputes over forest management in the 2000s, environmentalists sometimes have very romanticized views of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous Traditional Knowledge. The implication is that environmentalists sometimes have high expectations of Indigenous morality and knowledge with regard to their relationship with nature which can display "paternalism and intolerance". The idea, for example, that Indigenous peoples are inherently "natural conservationists", for example, can be "belittling" and limiting in terms of what people are encouraged to perceive as acceptable Indigenous uses of, and relationships with, non-human resources (Nyssönen 2022, 2).
- 5 The EU ban is based on a moral objection (European Commission 2016; 2019a; 2019b). This ban is informed by anti-sealing advocacy and narratives from organizations like IFAW (IFAW n.d.) which also wants to be seen as supportive of Inuit/Indigenous seal hunters (Wilkin 1998). Presently, the EU ban only makes allowances for seal product imports if they are (1) from Indigenous people and (2) only from subsistence hunting (European Commission 2016; 2019a; 2019b). This both ignores subsistence hunting practices and traditions by non-Indigenous peoples and limits Indigenous peoples from expanding locally based renewable sealing economies.