

A way out for Canada's seals

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Relentless campaigning by Chinese animal-rights activists may have sealed the fate of the North American seal hunt, writes Xu Nan.



Chinese animal rights activists gathered earlier this month in Beijing to reiterate a message to the world: China will continue to say "No!" to Canadian seal products.

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"The seal campaign has been something of a coming of age for China's domestic animal-rights movement."

The [Canadian Sealers' Association](#) has expressed frustration that this year's seal hunt looks doomed because China, the industry's biggest hope since Russia [introduced](#) a seal-fur ban late last year, has failed to fling open its doors. In November, China [postponed finalising a deal](#) to import Canadian seal meat following an organised and effective animal rights campaign.

The hunt is seasonal and short: most of the activity happens in March and April. If the seals survive this period, they will likely evade the hunters' clubs for another year. And they will have animal rights activists from the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan to thank.

In a normal year, [hundreds of thousands](#) of harp seals and grey seals are clubbed to death in Canada for their fur, meat and oil in a tradition critics argue is barbaric. But as country after country has closed its doors to seal products, the industry has faced a growing [crisis at home](#), and interest groups have put increasing hopes in the Chinese market.

China has received visits from two Canadian fisheries ministers in the past year – first Gail Shea in early 2011 and then her successor, Keith Ashfield in November last year – both pushing for closer trading ties. Meanwhile, animal rights groups have been actively working to sabotage the seal-product trade. The two sides are locked in stalemate.

A year ago, a jubilant Shea brought back to Canada a signed trade memorandum on the export of seal-products to China. She [told](#) a meeting of the Atlantic Seal Advisory Committee: "I have no doubt that the creative chefs for which China is so well known will develop bold new ways to

prepare and present seal meat." Soon after, Canada approved the highest seal-hunt quota since 1971.

For animal welfare activists, particularly participants in mainland China's growing animal-rights movement, this was unacceptable. They stepped up their campaigns, organising public events and distributing images of blood-soaked seas and corpses piled high on Canadian ice.

In Hong Kong and Taiwan, persistent activist efforts have borne fruit. When the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals paid an official visit to the Hong Kong legislature late last year, the majority of legislative members agreed that seal products should not form part of Sino-Canadian trade, the *South China Morning Post* reported in November. The same month, campaigners also met with officials from the Canadian consul-general in Hong Kong to explain why they believe seal products should not be allowed onto Chinese territory.

In Taiwan, the results have been even more striking. Some 40 retailers agreed to take seal-oil products off their shelves, and more than 600,000 people signed a petition calling for a boycott of seal products in the region. Taiwanese trade and wildlife department officials and members of parliament agreed to consider revising laws on wildlife protection after meeting animal-rights campaigners.

Their belief is that Taiwan can consider banning the import of seal products on the basis of a clause in World Trade Organisation (WTO) accord [The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade](#) (article 20, first clause in the "general exceptions"). This states that a country is allowed to refuse the import of a product in order to protect public morals. As a WTO member, mainland China can also use this provision. Canada, meanwhile, is already [challenging](#) European Union and Russian bans at the WTO.

The seal campaign has been something of a coming of age for China's domestic animal-rights movement. Groups have used seminars, music, theatre and other activities to spread information to the public. At the same time, they have made formal recommendations to China's two parliamentary bodies, the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Representatives have met with government officials many times to present evidence of inhumane practices in the seal trade, as well as a lack of adequate food-safety supervision.

It was this flow of information that prompted China to delay signing off the deal made with Shea last year. All of these signs suggest that, on this issue, Chinese government departments are listening to public opinion.

Polls in Canada indicate the vast majority of Canadians also oppose the seal trade. The seal industry, based on the east coast and far north of Canada, is hardly mainstream: it currently involves around 6,000 people, a figure that is steadily shrinking. Moreover, campaigners [point out](#) that the seal hunt typically makes up only 5% of a sealer's total income (the rest comes from fishing other species such as lobster and crab) and is far from an irreplaceable pillar of the local economy.

So why is the government pushing so hard to keep it going? One reason is that Ashfield, Canada's current fisheries minister, is an elected member for a seat in New Brunswick, part of the sealing region, and naturally advocates local interests.

Rebecca Aldworth, executive director of animal rights NGO [Humane Society International](#) (HSI) in Canada, believes the Canadian government is supporting the seal industry in order to win the votes of the wider fishing community in eastern Canada. After returning from China with her trade memorandum in 2011, Shea said: "I am thrilled to demonstrate our government's continued support of the thousands of Canadian families in coastal and northern communities who will directly benefit from this new market access arrangement with China."

Clearly, many in China were not so thrilled – and they have continued to make the case against the seal trade. The most recent gathering of activists in Beijing was triggered by news that Canada's prime minister, Stephen Harper, was about to visit China. Reports that Canada's seal hunters had stepped up lobbying activities in recent months (even raising funds for public relations work in China, according to HSI) and were hoping for good news from Harper's visit, stoked concerns.

Li Jianqiang, associate professor of East Asian politics at University of Houston, researches animal-protection issues in China and is also the China policy consultant for HSI. He said: "From Canadian reports, we conclude that the Chinese side is unwilling to talk. Seal traders have said that they will not give up, and they will continue to ask the government to put pressure on China."

Since the 1970s, 30 countries including the United States, Mexico, Croatia and European Union nations have successively banned the import of seal products, causing the seal market to contract: the 2010 hunt was cut short because of a fall in demand for seal pelts. As a result, Canada now views China as its foremost market for seal products – and animal welfare groups around the world see Chinese civil society as the key to saving the seal.

They will be saving it from a grim fate: traditionally, hunters strike the seals on the head with a wooden club or axe. The aim is to kill it, but sometimes the seals are only knocked out and HSI claims that, in 66% of cases, hunters fail to make sure a seal is dead before skinning it. "Seal pellets" sold as traditional medicine in Asia, are made by chopping off the genitals of male seals, who are left to die in the water. Every year, tens of thousands of male seals go through this agony.

Hua Ning, project director for the China branch of the International Fund for Animal Welfare said Canada's commercial seal hunt is the biggest global massacre of marine mammals. Thanks to the continued efforts of animal rights groups, trends in international trade and the fact those who would like to continue the hunt are concentrated in a shrinking industry, the massacre may be coming to an end.

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