

N.S. missing sealing opportunities, says fishermen

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A grey seal cow nurses her pup on a Pictou Island beach. A Cape Breton fishermen's association says the seal population is out of control and that efforts to get a grey seal hunt started in northern Cape Breton have failed. (ERIC WYNNE / Staff / File)

Nova Scotia is missing the boat on the potentially lucrative development of a grey seal industry, some proponents said Tuesday.

"The grey seal population is now totally out of control and it's because we've failed to find a market so we could do something with the animals," Robert Courtney, president of the North Smokey-Inverness South Fishermen's Association, said in an interview.

Courtney, from Dingwall, Victoria County, made his comments as a cull of about 70,000 grey seals in the Gulf of St. Lawrence was endorsed by the Senate fisheries committee in Ottawa Tuesday.

There are estimates the herd has swelled to more than 350,000 animals. Sable Island is a major breeding ground, but the herd around Hay Island, which is off the eastern coast of Cape Breton near Scatarie Island, is growing rapidly, said Courtney.

About 400 dead grey seals were found on Hay Island in March of this year. Courtney said it is distressing that the implications of these fatalities on the area's natural habitat and on other species was not fully investigated.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada officials want the gulf herd culled by about 70,000 to contribute to the recovery of the cod fishery.

Courtney said efforts to get a grey seal hunt started in the Hay Island area of northern Cape Breton have foundered.

There are markets around the world for meat, fur and oil from the grey seal, he said, but effort to access these markets have not gained traction in Nova Scotia for several reasons, so a harvest of the animals makes little sense.

Good market prospects in China and Russia collapsed last year, along with hopes for a grey seal harvest in Hay Island area, Courtney said.

The grey seal offers tremendous commercial potential, even if it is never developed to the scale of the harp seal industry, said Shannon Lewis, executive director of the Northeast Coast Sealers Co-operative, in Fleurs de Lys, N.L.

“There is a future for the seal industry, and it is not based on fur,” said Lewis.

He said there is potential market opportunities in the food and food-supplement (omega-3 fat acids) industries and even in the field of medical esthetics (collagen injections).

Grey seals in the gulf breed and congregate in the waters off Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, but Lewis said the development of this potential economic resource has not moved ahead despite different studies that identified benefits.

“An initial stumbling block for Nova Scotia is the lack of available processing like we have here in Newfoundland-Labrador for the harp seal.”

Lewis said it is a shame the federal government is talking about a cull without considering how markets for grey seal may be developed.

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