


Moving in for the kill



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Activists say the hunt is on its last legs; politicians optimistic it will bounce back

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Last in a two-part series

This is exciting. There's blood in the back of the boat, and this is about as close to seal hunting as the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) has been in hours.

Mostly, scanning along the northeast coast, they've just seen millions of empty ice pans.

Sheryl Fink is clearly getting frustrated.

The director of the seal campaign for the IFAW, she was up at 4:30 a.m. — too pumped to sleep.

For the past few days, her crew of anti-sealing activists have been grounded by freezing rain, low fog and wind.

But now they're in the air, under clear skies and brilliant sun.

Word is there are a couple of small boats north of Fogo Island and, after refuelling, the helicopter finds a tiny open bay.

Witnessing the hunt first-hand is a bizarre experience.

Anybody can go on YouTube and watch IFAW videos of the seal hunt, complete with commentary from Fink.

The experience in the helicopter is nearly identical. Sitting in the chopper, you watch the hunters on screens.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) regulates seal hunt observers, and they're not allowed to get too close enough to see any detail with the naked eye. Instead, they use a high-powered camera mounted on the outside of the helicopter's screens.

On the screen, though, you can clearly see that the two hunters have cut the engine and they're lounging in the front of the boat.

"What's he having for lunch, Sheryl?" asks cameraman Stewart Cook.

Zooming in, you can clearly see the two men eating sandwiches.

"They should share some," the pilot jokes.

Frustrated by the lack of hunting activity, Fink moves on.

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As recently as five or six years ago, there were thousands of boats participating in the hunt.

This year, though, the two men having lunch are in one of only a handful of vessels the IFAW has been able to find a

"I can't remember the last time we've been this — empty," Fink says. "This is definitely not the commercial seal hunt

Observing the seal hunt this year was more or less a bust for the IFAW and their compatriots at Humane Society Int

On April 14, the IFAW chopper covered a massive stretch of Newfoundland coastline, from Deer Lake, out over the (Anthony. They scanned bays choked with empty ice floes along the northeast coast before refuelling in Gander and Fogo Island.

During that one day, the helicopter travelled well over 900 kilometres and only managed to film a single seal kill.

Both groups left the province earlier this week declaring the seal hunt to be on its last legs.

"It really struck me this year just how low the participation was, despite the offer of government financing, said Humane Society director Rebecca Aldworth.

"I think it really shows that the industry is coming to an end."

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But like so many aspects of the hunt, that's open to interpretation depending on your perspective.

In the past couple years, the hunt has been at a low ebb. The total value of the pelts harvested in 2011 was a meagre fishery.

Things may be on an upswing, though. As of press time, according to DFO more than 47,000 seals have been taken in 2011, when 37,839 animals were harvested.

But pelt prices are way down from the 2006 high of \$105 apiece. This year, a top quality pelt sells for around \$27.

Earlier this year, the provincial government extended a \$3.6-million loan to seal pelt processor Carino — an amount equal to the value of the pelts harvested in 2011, according to provincial government statistics.

Fisheries Minister Darin King says it's the government against the animal rights activists, and in recent years the government has been

"We're fighting a huge PR war, there's no question about it," he said.

"There's not enough money in government today to combat that, I don't think. I don't think we're winning the fight, because we'd have the challenges we have today. But I think, on balance, we're doing a better job of educating people and cutting back on the hunt."

King, and his federal counterpart, Keith Ashfield, both say they believe the industry will rebound.

In fisheries terms, the resource — roughly nine million harp seals — is just too large to walk away from. Even if the full potential for harvesting tonnes of meat and seal oil is tantalizing.

Both Ashfield and King also talk about the impact those animals have on the ecosystem.

"We've seen a dramatic increase in the numbers of seals that are in our oceans on the East Coast, nine to 10 million

impact on our fish stocks,” Ashfield says.

But if the industry doesn’t rebound, it seems possible the controversy surrounding it could fade in the coming years.

Sending a plane and a helicopter was worth it for the IFAW back in 2005 and 2006 when there were hundreds of the past couple of years they’ve only been able to find a few hunters harvesting relatively few animals.

“Each year we re-evaluate,” Fink says.

“What are the objectives? What do we need the footage for? And we kind of weigh the costs and the benefits.”

Still, she says she’s not ready to walk away from the anti-sealing campaign just yet.

But the tenor of the debate seems to be changing. In recent weeks, King has had what he calls “very positive” meetings with the Sealers’ Society International.

Both groups are pushing for government buyouts of seal licences to end the hunt once and for all.

“One piece of me thinks that for everything they’ve done and all the successes they claim, that they may be coming out on top unless they buddy up with industry,” King says.

“Because we are at lower levels than we’ve been, which they declare as a victory. And if it’s a victory, why do you not accept it?”

It may be a while before there’s any sort of buddy relationship between seal harvesters and animal rights activists, though.

There’s still an animosity among sealers from the heated fights of years ago.

Jack Troake of Twillingate says he’s surprised no one has ever shot at an IFAW chopper when it’s hovering over sealers.

“You could class these groups as terrorists — moderate terrorists — it’s as simple as that,” Troake says.

“You know, I’ve had calls in the middle of the night (saying they’re) going to come beat my brains out with a hakapik, barbecue my wife and kids.”

But after more than 50 years of harvesting seals, 76-year-old Troake is winding things down and hasn’t been out to the water in years.

He says he doesn’t miss it.

“That’s something that I didn’t enjoy doing; I went at it to put food on my table and keep my roof from leaking,” Troake says.

“Any man that gets any enjoyment out of anything like that — killing anything, you know — as far as I’m concerned, he’s a sick man.”

When he hears about the two hunters hunkered down with sandwiches when the IFAW helicopter was overhead, Troake says he’s glad they took their lunch break when they heard the chopper.

When he was sealing, they’d always stop working when they heard a helicopter, he says.

“We don’t cater to these bastards, we just shut everything down and go below,” he recalled.

“You know, drop our pants and tell them to kiss our ass, then go get a cup of tea.”

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