



POSITION STATEMENT Thursday, March 08, 2012

# Harp Seal Hunt in the Northwest Atlantic

## Ecoregion

### What is happening to the Arctic environment?

The Arctic is warming at more than twice the global average, in response to escalating global emissions of GHGs, and this is resulting in reductions in the extent and duration of sea ice, which in turn present pressures on ice-dependent wildlife species, including many Arctic marine mammals.

### What does the future hold for newborn seal pups?

During the last three years, the sea ice distribution in eastern Canada (south of Labrador) has been less than usual. This is most likely part of a trend with decreasing sea ice in the Arctic, but this can change from year to year.

WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which people live in harmony with nature. To achieve this mission and to ensure lasting success, conservation efforts must take into account cultural diversity as well as historical and economic realities. WWF recognizes that local communities play a significant role in, and benefit economically from, the sustainable use of natural resources.

For over 40 years the Canadian harp seal (*Phoca groenlandica*) hunt has been controversial. Many people have strong objections to the commercial hunting of wildlife and of marine mammals in particular. Animal welfare organizations both inside and outside Canada continue to press for improvement of humane hunting methods and tighter monitoring, while some oppose the seal hunt altogether. In the past, largely due to considerable international pressure, several measures were taken that affected the Canadian seal hunt. In 1972, the United States prohibited the import of seal products under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. In 1987, the Canadian government prohibited the hunting of the harp seal pups, at the "whitecoat" stage. More recently, the European Union and Russia have imposed a trading ban on commercial seal products altogether.

The long history of controversy reflects both the diversity of individual values and the diversity of cultural and national experiences with wildlife and wildlife hunting. WWF respects this range of diversity. As well, WWF recognizes that hunting seals is an important part of the local economy, culture and heritage of many coastal communities in Atlantic Canada, the Arctic, and other maritime nations.

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Each year more than one million pups are born on the sea ice. It is estimated that annually more than 40% of the pups have succumbed during the last years due to poor ice conditions. The population can for the moment to withstand this loss.

We anticipate that the pups will be born further north than the normal pupping areas, where there is still enough sea ice, e.g. between Labrador and Greenland.

### WWF's role in the future of the harp seal population.

WWF works with our partners to address the immediate threats to the harp seal population, including the changing environment and getting binding regulations in place to prevent oil spills and shipping accidents.

More importantly, from the perspective of a conservation organization, the harp seal population is at a near record high with an estimated eight million individuals. Current harvest levels pose no threat to the long-term health of the species at this time.

While there are no conservation grounds on which to end the seal hunt at present, we continue to monitor the impacts of harvest and changing environmental conditions on an annual basis. It is becoming clear that climate change is beginning to have an affect the availability of sea ice, which plays an essential role in the birth and weaning process of harp seal pups. In the past few years there has been growing concern over sea ice conditions in the harp seal range.

An important component of WWF's work in the Atlantic region includes reducing the ecological footprint of nations fishing on the Grand Banks. This means reducing bycatch and habitat impacts of all fisheries and ensuring all quotas are sustainable, including those in high seas areas adjacent to Canadian waters. These are critically important changes in order to secure the recovery of this overexploited ecosystem. It is also key to securing the long-term sustainability of coastal communities in Newfoundland and Labrador as well as those European communities that historically have benefited from the region's marine bounty.

We will continue to monitor the situation and the impacts it has on the harp seal herd. WWF will also continue to work on an ecosystem-based management approach in the Northwest Atlantic Ecoregion that will take into account the overall health of the marine environment and the role of all species, including harp seals. Furthermore, WWF runs a global program to reduce the effects of climate change, which poses a major threat to our conservation efforts in every corner of the world.

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