

© 2012 Universities Federation for Animal Welfare
The Old School, Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead,
Hertfordshire AL4 8AN, UK
www.ufaw.org.uk

Animal Welfare 2012, 21: 445-455
ISSN 0962-7286
doi: 10.7120/09627286.21.4.445

The Canadian harp seal hunt: observations on the effectiveness of procedures to avoid poor animal welfare outcomes

P-Y Daoust[†] and C Caraguel[‡]*

[†] Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre, Department of Pathology & Microbiology, Atlantic Veterinary College, University of Prince Edward Island, 550 University Avenue, Charlottetown PE C1A 4P3, Canada

[‡] School of Animal & Veterinary Sciences, Roseworthy Campus, The University of Adelaide, SA, Australia 5371

* Contact for correspondence and requests for reprints: daoust@upe.ca

Abstract

*The Canadian harp seal (*Pagophilus groenlandicus*) hunt has, for several decades, raised public concerns related to animal welfare. The field conditions under which this hunt is carried out do not lend themselves easily to detailed observations and analyses of its killing practices. This article reports observations carried out over several seasons that aimed at obtaining more specific information about the conditions under which seals are killed, in order to assess potential welfare issues and explore avenues for possible improvements in its practice. A standardised three-step process for killing seals (ie stunning, checking by palpation of the skull, and bleeding) was recently implemented to maximise the proportion of animals that are killed rapidly with minimum pain. Based on field observations, the rifle and the hakapik, when used properly, appeared to be efficient tools for stunning and/or killing young harp seals. All carcasses of seals observed to be killed with a rifle, either on the ice or in the water, could be recovered. However, shooting seals in water rather than on ice carried a higher risk of poor welfare outcome because of the limited opportunities to shoot the animals again if not stunned with the first shot. Based on current practices, there is no reliable evidence that the Canadian harp seal hunt differs from other forms of exploitation of wildlife resources from the perspective of animal welfare. Although opportunistic field observations may be less amenable to generalisation than structured studies, we believe that they reflect the reality of the hunt and provide valuable information to direct the evolution of its practice.*

Keywords: animal welfare, Canada, hakapik, harp seal, hunt, killing methods