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## Canada's seal hunt sends a different message about the Olympic nation

By **Stephan Michaels**  
Special to the Times

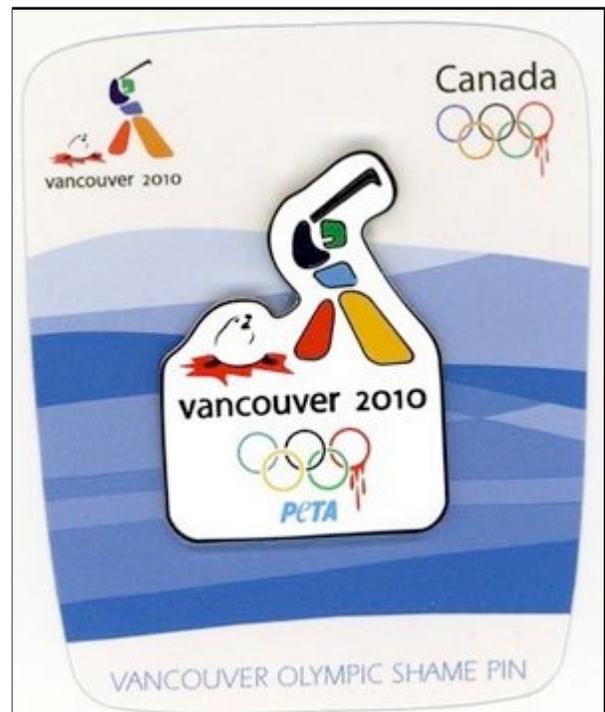
BARELY two weeks after Canada commanded the Olympic world stage to showcase what it means to be "Proudly Canadian," the Harper government proudly sent the world another message. On March 15, Fisheries Minister Gail Shea upped the quota for the country's beleaguered seal hunt from 280,000 to 330,000 harp seals. If met, that would represent nearly 5 percent of the estimated North Atlantic harp seal population.

This pronouncement comes at a time when record low ice floes threaten the survival of northern seal pups, and just days after members of the Canadian Parliament publicly feasted on bacon-wrapped seal meat. That event was clearly a nose-thumbing aimed at the European Union for banning Canadian seal products last year.

Dramatically raising the seal quota "the very day that organized protests were being staged around the world" plays like more political theater and makes questionable scientific or economic sense.

Defending the yearly clubbing and shooting of harp, gray and hooded seals, Canada champions traditional seal hunting by the Inuit people for food and points to "the importance of the sealing industry to ... the economies of Canadian coastal communities." No question, sealing is a sensitive challenge for the government, which must weigh issues of subsistence, traditional and modern day belief systems and struggling economies.

In a recent appearance on YouTube, Prime Minister Stephen Harper responded to an opponent of the hunt, saying, "that's a minority view of among Canadians." Where did he get that statistic? A 2008 Environics poll commissioned by the International Fund for Animal Welfare concluded that roughly six out of 10 Canadians opposed the hunt, while a 2008 Ipsos-Reid poll found 39 percent of respondents were in favor while 52 percent opposed the annual slaughter.



PETA

PETA's Vancouver 2010 Olympic Shame pin is not subtle.



Curiously, the prime minister connected the commercial seal hunt, where taking seal pelts is the prime objective, with the smaller Inuit hunt, where older and larger seals are taken primarily for their meat.

"Just because, you know, it's only our Inuit people or a few other traditional communities doing sealing doesn't mean you should be able to single them out and treat them differently than you would treat the cattle industry or any other industry," Harper said.

Yet the EU ban exempts the Inuit's subsistence hunt and small-scale trade. It is the world's largest commercial seal hunt on Canada's Atlantic coast that is being targeted.

Harper also maintained, "regulations put in place over the past generations have made this a very humane hunt."

In a perfect world, maybe, but regulations alone don't render the hunt humane if those regulations can't be met. Many recent online videos document the repeated clubbing of young seals as they try to escape, suffering blow after blow until killed. "Humane" is not the word that comes to mind.

Ironically, the seal quota is being raised when the market for seal pelts has been significantly reduced by the EU boycott. Even Canadian sealers have complained, as raising the quota amid shrinking demand will predictably drive down the value of seal products.

At a meager \$15 a pelt, this higher quota stands to make the venture less profitable for the industry and more costly for Canadian taxpayers, because the government promotes and indirectly subsidizes the sealing industry.

The whole quota issue may be moot. Extremely low ice floes this year have already reduced the number of animals that can be taken.

The market will ultimately shape the future of Canada's sealing industry, while Mother Nature and climate change may prove the most efficient at thinning the seal population.

*Stephan Michaels is a Northwest Washington freelance journalist who writes about animal behavior and ecology.*

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