

Sugar
SPECIAL
REPORT



DEATH ON THE ICE

Last year nearly 300,000 seals were brutally killed by fishermen. This year it will probably be more. Our reporter, Danny Fryer, investigates...

Anyone who stares into these big, black eyes peering from pillows of dewy white fur can't help falling in love with this gorgeous baby seal. And it's impossible to imagine that anyone would want to harm it.

Yet every year, all over the world, hundreds of thousands of seals, just like this one, are being brutally clubbed to death. And I wanted to know why.

An end to the killing?

Twenty years ago, the world was scandalised by the publication of pictures depicting helpless baby seals having their skulls crushed by hunters' clubs – and all for the sake of providing rich women with eye-catching fur coats or snug seal-skin boots and gloves.



The shocking pictures tugged at the world's heart strings and led to huge protests by animal rights campaigners. People marched on Governments, displayed 'Save our seals' stickers on their cars and signed petition after petition.

Thanks to their determination and the involvement of environmental groups like Greenpeace, the number of seals killed each year was reduced and the slaughter of defenceless white baby seals was made illegal.

For a while it seemed that the battle to save the world's seals was over. The disturbing pictures of seal hunters leaving blood trails on the ice were replaced with heart-warming photos of former seal hunters taking tourists onto the vast ice fields to cuddle the seal pups.



The cruelty continues

Tragically, though, seal slaughter has begun hitting the headlines again. Recent reports from animal rights groups like the International Fund For Animal Welfare (IFAW) and environmental groups like EarthKind, have revealed that huge seal hunts, or culls, are still operating around the world. Seal cullings take place in Russia, Norway, South Africa and Canada, where over 250,000 seals were killed last year alone.

And, for many of the unfortunate creatures, it is a far from painless death. The helpless mammals can be legally shot, clubbed or killed with a hakapik, a long pole with a hammer on one side and a hook on the other.

The hammer side of the hakapik is used to crush the seal's skull, then its body is hooked and dragged back to the sealer's boat. The idea behind this method is that the seal's death should be painless, but unfortunately mistakes

"Wounded seals are left to bleed to death"

are made and some seals can suffer tremendous pain.

When shooting, seal hunters are often in boats firing at the seals from a great distance. If the seal is shot and wounded rather than killed, it can escape into the sea and slowly bleed to death and a seal that has been clubbed might not necessarily die instantly either.

Governments do try to regulate the sealing industry but they cannot guarantee that the animals are always killed humanely and some laws can be got around.

In Canada, for example, it is against the law to kill younger seals which have completely white coats. However, once they have even a speck of grey on an otherwise snow-white coat they're fair game even though they might only be a matter of weeks old.

Why does it happen?

Now, I've been lucky enough to see baby seals in their natural environment. I've watched them basking in the sun on rocks off the coast in Cornwall and laughed at them playing in the water. They are amazingly beautiful creatures and I find it impossible to understand why or how anyone could make a living out of killing them.

I talked to Christina Thomas of Earthkind and she told me, "Fish-farmers claim that the seals are ruining their livelihood." Apparently, seal hunters in Newfoundland, Eastern Canada, are usually local fishermen who believe that seals eat the fish that they need to catch and sell.

So, by getting rid of the seals they reckon there'll be more fish for humans to eat. They can also sell the seals' corpses which are used to produce meat, oil, seal-skin and fur clothing. Seal organs (including their penises) are also

sold to the Far East where they are used in traditional medicines.

Maybe the hunters genuinely think they're doing the right thing by increasing the amount of fish in the sea, but surely the fact that the culls provide jobs and money for hunters is an important part of their reasoning?

It seemed strange to me that Canada, a country normally associated with a love of nature should allow such a disgusting trade. The Canadian Tourism Commission argues that "the harvesting of animals is never a pleasant matter. Society utilises many different animals for food and clothing. In this sense, the harvesting of seals is not fundamentally different from the exploitation of livestock".

But, to me, the painful way seals are killed makes the matter very different from the way we farm cows and chickens.

How you can help

So what can we do to put an end to this horror? Well, I'm lending my support to environmental groups such as IFAW, Earthkind and Greenpeace and then I'll be writing to my local MP to voice my disgust at this cruel slaughter. Maybe if there's enough public outrage, we can make the world's Governments think twice about allowing the seal cullings.

Let's hope so for the sake of the seals.



Photos: Dobson Agency, Sipa, Colourific, IFAW, Impact.

