

# **Living with ‘Barbarians’ - Within the Commercial Sealing Industry<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The commercial hunt for seals in Newfoundland cannot be considered merely a profession, but it encompasses a livelihood and necessity for the people involved in it. In times of drastic socio-economic change in this easternmost Canadian province, both the seal hunt and the sealing industry are increasingly important as a denominator for a distinct identity. Given the international discursive and legal pressures the hunt and industry are subject to based on simplified information, this paper presents socio-economic characteristics of the industry in order to make its significance for the people more understandable.

## **Introduction**

Over the past decades, commercial sealing and commercial sealers have been exposed to depictions and policies that locate them and their activity of conducting the commercial seal hunt within a discourse of barbarism, a lack of need, and inherent inhumanness or cruelty. Especially the Canadian commercial seal hunt, which is carried out in the Magdalen Islands and Newfoundland, served as the incentive for the establishment of global anti-sealing movements. Due to this movement, the sealing industry and the employment and identification it provided in the past has experienced drastic declines, in particular with the adoption of the European Union’s ban on trade in seal products, adopted in September 2009, followed by the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan in December 2011. Problematic in the adoption of the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper constitutes the first written attempt to summarize the results of the author’s fieldwork in Newfoundland. Thorough anthropological analyses based on the fieldwork as part of the doctoral dissertation will be undertaken in 2014, currently under preparation.

EU ban is the absence of knowledge on the living conditions in rural communities in Newfoundland in which commercial seal hunting and processing is conducted and the predetermined stance in the political process of the ban's crafting condemning the activity (Sellheim 2013). This article provides the first insight from *in-situ* observations from within the commercial sealing industry.

Results stem from fieldwork carried out by the author on a sealing vessel sailing from Woodstock, northern Newfoundland, and in a seal products processing plant in Dildo, southern Newfoundland in April 2013. The community of La Scie is also included in this article, as crew members stem from there and the boat landed and disembarked in La Scie's harbour.

An inductive research approach was chosen in order to gather information on the sealing industry and in order to generate first-hand knowledge on the sealers, their families and the workers in the sealing industry. A deductive element therefore attempts to underline the hypothesis that labeling of 'evil' in EU seal products trade ban of commercial sealing practices does not correspond to reality that the commercial hunt on seals is a necessity to maintain living standards. Participant observation as well as un- and semi-structured interviews were chosen to enable the author to provide an insight of the status of the 2013 seal hunters and sealing industry employees.

### **The Seal Hunt in a Socio-Economic Context**

Images and footage from the Newfoundland commercial seal hunt primarily stems from organizations demonizing the hunt and the hunters. Albeit the notion of providing a socio-economic context when assessing the impact of an EU ban on trade in seal products, also the study commissioned by the European Commission and carried out by the COWI consultancy firm (COWI 2008) did not provide an adequate account on the seal hunt's and sealing industry's socio-economic context.

### **Woodstock and La Scie**

Building on the results from the fieldwork carried out in Newfoundland, especially three communities are taken into the focus of attention: Woodstock and La Scie in northern

Newfoundland as well as South Dildo in Southern Newfoundland. Woodstock and La Scie constitute those communities where the vessel set out from and landed respectively, while most of the crew stemmed from Woodstock as well as La Scie. In South Dildo, Newfoundland's largest seal processing plant is located.

Change in the two communities of Woodstock and La Scie is omnipresent. Two factors shift into the focus of attention when quantifying change, namely demographic shifts. Since 1991, every five years the Canadian government has conducted population censuses throughout the whole country. Looking at Newfoundland, it becomes clear that especially the north (Division 8 of the censuses where both Woodstock and La Scie are located) has experienced drastic population losses between 1996 and 2011/12 and lost about 14.000 inhabitants from around 49.000 to around 35.000, whereas the urban area around Newfoundland's capital St. John's has gained around 14.000 from around 186.000 to 200.000 people. All other Divisions in Newfoundland have experienced population losses (Statistics Canada, Demography Division, February 7, 2013).

Looking at Woodstock, between 1991 and 2011 its population has dropped from 311 to 190, with a rise of the median age in 1996 of 38.4 years to 51.5 years in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population; Statistics Canada, 2011 Census of Population). Similarly, La Scie's population has dropped from 1.412 in 1991 to 1.198 in 2011. While no data is available on the median age in the 1990s, between 2001 and 2011 it has risen from 39.7 to 47 years in La Scie (Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population; Statistics Canada, 2001 Census of Population; Statistics Canada, 2011 Census of Population). The loss of particularly young people, i.e. the moving away of young people to either urban areas or to other areas in Canada, ultimately challenges the sustainability of both the integrity of the communities and the continuation of traditional or vital livelihoods. In 2008, the provincial government closed down Woodstock's primary school, forcing school children to attend school in Baie Verte, 25 kilometers to the west from Woodstock.

In Woodstock, interview partners that were around 20 years of age have revealed that although they would like to become fishermen like their fathers, and grandfathers, they are advised against it since the yield of the fishermen has undergone a dramatic decline in the last

few decades. Therefore, in order to be able to earn money, they are forced to move away (Three Woodstockers, personal communication, April 2013). Currently, in the whole of Newfoundland, the landed value of all fish and seals varies drastically from year to year (Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture, Newfoundland and Labrador).

### **Woodstock's Economy**

Woodstock's economy is dominated by primary industries, meaning that according to the latest available data from 2006, of the 199 inhabitants with a work force of 85, 25 were fishers with an additional 10 working in the fish processing industry (Statistics Canada 2006). Two more occupational fields exist in the community, namely retail sale and clerk, as well as mechanics. These numbers have changed significantly since 2001 when 120 people were employed with a more diverse employment sector, ranging from fishers and loggers, to school teachers and construction workers (Statistics Canada 2001).

Woodstock does not have cell-phone coverage but outside communication is dominated by landline telephone, fax or email. In the community only one small store can be found which employs 3 people and which serves as the retail backbone of the community also for all commodities that are necessary for going out to sea that can be obtained there. The store therefore goes beyond groceries, but holds for example fishing gear, engine oil and a small variety of tools necessary for fishing (Field notes, April 2013).

While no data on the current situation exists, it can be assumed that the diversity of the labour market has further decreased since the 2006 census due to the sharp decline in Woodstock's population. Therefore, the role of fisheries and sealing in the community gains even more importance and stimulate the local economy in a manifold way.

### **Fisheries and Sealing in Woodstock**

Fishermen living in Woodstock are susceptible to federal and provincial legislation which regulates the licensing, compliance and enforcement in the fisheries sector, under which also the seal hunt falls. For the fishermen in Woodstock and other communities in northern Newfoundland, fisheries can only be conducted in a limited period of time throughout the year

and the generation of the annual income is therefore only possible during the months of April through to October and they are therefore considered seasonal workers and thus eligible for Employment Insurance in the off-season. According to interviews conducted with the crew of the boat, sealing constitutes an important means for income generation in one year. Although the price of an individual pelt has declined drastically since the imposition of the legislative process in the European Union in 2006 from around 102\$ to around 33\$ in 2013 (Sellheim 2014), the economic benefit of a sealing trip justifies investments for sailing and constitutes the first opportunity of the year after the spring break-up of the ice to generate income (Field notes, April 2013).

According to the sealers that were interviewed in the sealing season 2013 on the sealing vessel, round 10-15% of the annual income is based on sealing – depending on the number of the hunted seals, quality of the pelts, oil and flippers, and prices for those products. From the conducted interviews it becomes clear that contrary to many publicly accessible depictions of the sealers, the hunt does not constitute a means for enjoyment, but an integral part of income generation: “I don’t really like it, but you gotta live” (Field notes, April 2013). The investments that enable a boat and a crew to set out to hunt seals are significant and the prospect of the hunt’s revenues exceeding a mere amortization of the investments serves as the incentive to prepare for setting sail to participate in the seal hunt. The owners of the 45 ft vessel on which the fieldwork was conducted invested around 15.000\$ prior to the trip for fuel, equipment, and supplies to be able to maintain a crew of 7 (including the author) for a time span of 3 weeks on open water in the north and northeast of Newfoundland, referred to as ‘The Front’ (Fisherman 1, personal communication, 21 June 2013).

Of the crew, three held a Commercial Sealing License, enabling them to shoot seals from the vessel. Since 2004, a freeze was put on the issuing of commercial sealing licenses in order to increase the professionalization of the hunt by making advance training mandatory (DFO Canada). Four, including the author, held a Temporary Assistance License, enabling them to participate in the bleeding, and pelting of seals. Revenues are split among the crew. The yield is firstly used to amortize the prior investments enabling the crew to go out to hunt seals. The

remaining revenues are split in half: 50% going to the owner of the boat and the skipper; 50% split evenly among the rest of the crew.

Since the seal hunters are primarily fishermen, quota, prices and seasons for e.g. the north Newfoundland crab fishery influence the 'ifs' and 'hows' of the commercial seal hunt. In the season 2013, the opening of the crab fishery and the seal hunt (April 8 and 9 respectively) overlapped. It was therefore uncertain whether it would be economically more viable to focus on the crab fishery or on the seal hunt. Due to the low price-per-pound for crab, which was allocated by processors at 1.83\$, and the associated strike of fishermen to engage in the crab fishery, the boat's skipper decided on setting out for the seal hunt in order to be able to earn money for himself and the crew. Upon return of the vessel after 12 days at sea, the crab dispute was settled and after disembarking the boat, preparations were made to prepare the vessel for the crab fishery, which was launched 3 days later since the processors agreed on an additional 0.17\$ per pound for catches until May 4 (FFAW 2013).

Thus, fisheries, including sealing, constitute direct income for the fishermen and their families and provide employment for approximately half of the year. Interviews with the sealers showed however that although they "have the sea in their blood", "sealing means a lot, but is not everything" (Field notes, April 2013). In combination with the uncertainty in the fishing industry, there is great discrepancy within local families on the will to conduct fishing and sealing in the future: while coming from a family with a history of fishing, men now in their late 30s to mid-40s have decided to move away to seek other employment opportunities in the public sector field. Only a minority has decided to stay to continue the fishing tradition of their family.

The picture changes when taking into consideration the local sons which are now in their late teens to early 20s. These young men wish to work in the fisheries sector and work with their fathers on the fishing vessels. To this end, both in the preparation of the trip and upon landing, young men were in and on the boat, assisting in preparing and disembarking the vessel. As mentioned earlier, however, due to the unstable situation in the fishery sector, the investments to purchase a boat and to engage in the fisheries, as well as the unstable and uncertain future of the seal hunt, fathers advice their sons against becoming fishermen.

Instead, interview partners revealed that they themselves, their brothers, friends or other relatives have sought employment as equipment operators in Fort McMurray, Alberta, an important hub of the Canadian oil industry. The combination of difficulty of obtaining higher education in northern Newfoundland, the current lack of employment opportunities within the fisheries and other sectors and the wish to remain in their home region therefore force young people to seek employment far away from their homes which generates fast and high revenues,<sup>2</sup> enabling them to return to their homes as much as possible (Field notes, April 2013).

### **Social Characteristics of Sealers and Sealing Crews in the Light of Change**

Woodstock's and La Scie's social construct is dominated by close proximity to the sea. Both communities are located within protected coves that have enabled the communities to establish small ports in which fishing vessels are anchored during the off-season.

Geographically, the water constitutes the centre of both communities which is furthermore reflected in both the economy and identity prevalent amongst the inhabitants.

While Woodstock does not hold any bigger retail or gastronomic enterprises, La Scie is a larger centre of employment and diversity than Woodstock. However, also here the sea dominates the landscape of identification. Apart from direct employment in the fishing sector, also secondary employment and tourism play a, albeit small, role. Notwithstanding, maritime references can be found all over the community and the two small diners in the community offer sea food from the area.

A prevalent feature of the crew on the boat and fishermen, their families and friends, is hospitality. Although the author appeared in the villages with introduction from the Canadian Sealers Association (CSA), suspicion towards outsiders interested in the seal hunt is great. Notwithstanding, the author's presence on the boat was accepted and he was greeted with openness both with regard to explaining the hunt itself as well as life aboard the vessel, and with no intent to boycott the research project. Indeed, the presence of a foreigner who joins a sealing vessel is a rarity; therefore the author became quickly known amongst the crews and families in Woodstock and La Scie and was invited to many conversations, to sealers' homes yet

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<sup>2</sup> As of May 21, 2013, according to <http://www.fortmcmurrayonline.com/jobs/welcome.aspx>, 1.432 jobs are available in Fort McMurray, to the largest extent related to oil producing activities.

greeted with curiosity. However, even upon first arrival in Woodstock before getting to know the crew, the author was welcomed in a retired fisherman's home and provided with all necessities for the hunt (Field notes, April 2013).

A characteristic that stands out both on the boat itself and ashore amongst the fishermen is the degree of merriment and good will. While there were countless occasions in which jokes were made, a smile was cast or a friendly tap on the shoulder was brought forth, two concrete situations exemplify the well-spiritedness of the fishermen:



Picture 1: Pelting

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Due to a mistake that was made by the crew, several pelts lost value. While frustration of the monetary loss was grave, within approximately one hour smiles had returned to the crew's faces. Although disciplinary measures were taken, none of the involved felt dire towards each other, but rather resolved the issue by accepting the disciplinary consequences. Upon approach of the crew in reference to this

situation, the individual crew members were in unison on the team-work notion of the situation: "We are all sitting in the same boat, eh?" (Field notes, April 2013). Ultimately, selfishness and maximum individual benefit succumb to the fact that no money can be earned without the other crew members. Therefore, conflict resolution on the vessel does not aim to punish a culprit, but to re-establish good will and camaraderie and ultimately efficiency among the crew.

Several days within the seal hunt when the energy of the crew had reached its low-point, the crew was very efficient having hunted almost the total allowable catch of 400 per day. Due to the application of the three-step-process (stunning, checking, bleeding) the main pelt on



board the vessel was not able to keep up with the incoming seals. In general, in order to avoid pelt-value decrease, the seals are pelted right away in order to wash and cool the pelts. The situation demanded the utmost physical effort of the crew and after the hunt itself, everybody engaged in the pelting of around 350 seals. It takes an experienced sealer around 1 minute to pelt a seal in a bent-over position, while rather inexperienced sealers take around 2-3 minutes, but the physical toll the hunting, gaffing, and bleeding takes, shows itself when the catch of the day needs must be pelted. Albeit the lack of energy, the crew members were joking and jesting continuously. The low-point of the day in terms of energy was overcome by the good spirit and self-motivation the crew employed.

Also ashore the crew goes hunting and small-scale fishing, to their cabins or spends other free time together. Camaraderie and merriment serve as key characteristics for the crew. Through a brief visit to another crew upon landing in La Scie, the author furthermore experienced the same merriment, open welcoming and 'working together.' Although the reputation of the seal hunt has suffered greatly in the last decades with death threats against the political side of the seal hunt, labeling of the sealers and their families as barbaric, heartless people, also older accounts of the large-scale seal hunt at 'the Front' in 1977 (Winter 1999), 1979 (Wright 1984), and 1997 (Dwyer 1998) document the camaraderie and well-spiritedness that has been an integral part of the hunting crews and their families. Also Ryan (1994: 386) makes reference to the meaning of jokes in the seal hunt of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In light of the ongoing resistance and the hardships – both economically and physically – the seal hunting fishermen have to endure and the highly politicized context in which the commercial seal hunt is located, exemplified by the EU seal products trade ban, they have not lost these character traits and welcome strangers with hospitality and humour.

### **The Processing Sector**

In Newfoundland two plants process seal products: 1. A plant located in the community of Fleur-de-Lys in northern Newfoundland, run by the Northeast Coast Sealers Co-Operative, an organization representing around 500 sealers in the northern communities, which prepares seal skins for tanning; 2. A larger plant located in South Dildo, southern Newfoundland, run by

Carino Processing Ltd., a subdivision of the Norwegian GC Rieber Group. In Catalina on Bonavista Peninsula a seal processing plant was run by NuTan Furs, which closed down in 2012 due to a lack of demand for seal products. Also the Carino plant has experienced economic difficulties, which resulted in a loan of 3.6 million CAD by the government of Newfoundland in 2012 and 2013 (Fisheries and Aquaculture 2012; Fisheries and Aquaculture 2013).

### **The Characteristics of the Carino processing Plant**

Fieldwork was conducted at the Carino Processing plant in South Dildo. As in northern Newfoundland, the community experienced a population decline from 1.792 in 1991 to 1.198 in 2011 with a median age of 48.3 years (Statistics Canada, 2011 Census of Population). According to the plant's CEO, the Carino plant employs 38 workers full-time and up to 100 during the 'wet season' – when seal pelts from the hunts in April are delivered. Due to the closure of the plant in Catalina, that community experienced a drastic rise in the unemployment rate, which was partly rectified by the taking over of workers to the Carino plant. However, in order to be able to work at the plant, the taken-over workers had to re-settle to Dildo, where they now live in company-paid apartments. Apart from the permanent work the plant provides for the area, it also provides seasonal employment for age-groups ranging from high school students to elderly people. Work at the plant is an important factor of employment in the region and on many occasions reference to the employment opportunities and wish to be employed could be heard from random people (Field notes, April 2013).

The processing of seal products at the Carino plant undergoes several steps from the delivery itself via trucks, the separation of the fat from the skin, further processing of the fat into seal oil, drying, grading, salting and tanning and dyeing the furs until the final product is reached. Since most of the steps are repetitive in nature and do not demand for a long-term training, the plant offers employment to individuals of both sexes with different educational levels and no required background in processing activities. It is thus that the author bore witness to 5 individuals within 2 days applying for a job in the plant (Field notes, April 2013). Apart from the work in the actual processing of the seal products, the plant furthermore offers work for equipment operators, administrative and financial staff, and a chemist.

### **Contextualizing the Plant Workers in a Changing Discourse**

In the public depiction of the seal hunt, the labeling of those involved in the industry focuses mainly on the hunters and partially on the political representation of the industry.

Considerations for the workers that make a living from and in the sealing industry but that have never been engaged in the active hunting of seals do largely not exist. Yet, two relevant factors emerge when taking into account political decisions made elsewhere, and the associated public debate on commercial seal hunting.

The economic situation of the plant workers and their families is significantly shaped by the reputational environment of the commercial seal hunt. With a declining reputation, the closure of markets such as in the European Union and the associated reluctance of buyers to purchase seal products, the processing ability of a seal processing plant decreases as markets dwindle. Ultimately, plants such as the NuTan Catalina plant needed to close down, changing the socio-economic situation of the employees. Since also the fish processing industry experiences decline in Newfoundland, alternative employment opportunities are scarce. Ultimately, while fishermen do have the possibility to shift to other species when the demand for seal declines, seasonal and permanent plant workers have little or no local employment alternatives once a plant closes down. Therefore, although not playing a role in the public debate, the effects of larger political decisions hit hardest in the seal processing sector.

Two inherently opposing discursive positions towards seal hunters prevail in Newfoundland and outside the island. While the latter condemns the hunt, the hunters and the economic benefits associated with the killing of seals, random interviews in Newfoundland in different urban and rural settings suggest a high level of support for the hunt (Field notes, April 2013). Amongst the plant workers the resistance towards the seal hunt is approached with discomfiture and incomprehension. This is based on the fact that the hunters provide the means to sustain the workers' livelihood. In order to do so, the hunters endure physical hardships and dangers, triggering utmost respect among the plant workers for the work they do. Therefore, the outside labeling of the hunters as 'barbarians' contradicts the Newfoundland perception of intrepidity and bravery. Thus, interview partners in the plant indicated a high

level of pride to be part of an industry which for them is associated with these characteristics. This is particularly true for families whose working history dates back to the establishment of the plant in 1945 (Field notes, April 2013; Two plant workers, personal communication, 27 April 2013).

### **Social Characteristics of the Plant Workers**

Apart from the solidarity towards the seal hunters, plant workers – similar to the crew on the vessel – show a high degree of solidarity towards each other. Intra-plant hierarchies are broken up through the support of one another and the work that needs to be done. For instance, in order to make the seal pelts last for the time after the ‘wet season’ before they are tanned, they are put into brine pits, which hold 2000 each. The work is mentally and physically demanding, because of its repetition, bent-over or crawling position and throwing of shuffles of sea salt. Due to the vast number of pelts that need to be pelted, the salters are on some days not able to keep up. Therefore, also workers from other areas of the plants, such as the chemist or the CEO, get down into the pits to assist in the salting process. As on the vessel, the notion of ‘sitting in the same boat’ prevails over title or employment field. The perception of efficiency for the good of all therefore takes precedence over the hierarchical structure within the plant.

In the same manner, conflict resolution occurs within the plant which indicates a working mentality which is based on efficiency and motivation instead of punishment. A situation to exemplify this occurred when an error occurred in one group of salters during the salting process. In order to ensure highest quality of the pelts, the salt needs to be spread evenly on the pelt, also on the edges which tend to roll up. This did not occur which, if not discovered, would have destroyed the outer edges of the pelt and had therefore significantly decreased its value. Since around 250 pelts had been salted in that fashion, they had to be taken out and re-salted in a different pit. However, instead of punishing the group, the CEO and another long-term plant worker and pelt expert explained in detail the significance of proper salting in order to make the salters understand the importance of a correct performance in their job. The CEO then spent his after-hours in the salting pits to ensure efficiency.

The frustration over the extended work of the day was compensated with good spirit (“Got any plans for tonight? Better get down into the pits then”) and the will to “just get it done”. As on the vessel itself, the plant workers, especially in the salting pits, showed a high degree of humour and good spirit, especially towards the author as “finally is interested in us” (Field notes, April 2013).

## **Conclusion**

The commercial hunt for seals in Newfoundland cannot be considered merely a profession, but it encompasses a livelihood and necessity for the people involved in it. Those interview partners that were conducting the hunt are first and foremost fishermen with the seal hunt being an integral part of the communities’ fisheries. As in the processing sector, they stem from families and communities which are to a large extent dependent on the yields of the all-encompassing sea and whose identification occurs through the sea. Therefore, the seal as a species cannot be considered in isolation from the social construct of the communities. However, due to the reputational loss of the seal hunt, the fishermen have been forced to shift their catch to other marine species, which, given the slow decline of the commercial fishing industry, does not provide sufficient income for future generations to stay in their home area and continue the tradition of fishing and sealing. Similarly, seal industry workers that do not have alternative employment are forced to move away. Ultimately, employment is sought elsewhere to sustain a livelihood.

With commercial sealing still ongoing in 2013, the sealers are considered by the workers in the processing plant to provide the goods to be able to support their own families. Although the workers themselves are not directly verbally attacked in public forums, they feel a great degree of solidarity with the sealers, who in their eyes are bold seamen. Ultimately, by attacking the seal hunt and reducing the number of seals killed, outside decision makers heavily impact small communities in Newfoundland altering the socio-economic composition of communities outside their jurisdictional scope.

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