

Sealing: background

Across the world in the region of 1 million seals are deliberately killed each year. Seal hunting is practiced in many countries for a variety of reasons. The largest commercial hunts in the world occur in Canada, Namibia and Greenland, collectively killing around half a million seals annually, Norway and Russia also carry out large commercial hunts. The main reason for commercial slaughter is the seals' pelts, though other parts of some seals are used in so-called 'traditional medicines' as aphrodisiacs.

Subsistence sealing takes place in many Arctic regions, whilst many tens of thousands of seals are killed each to 'protect' fisheries, including in the UK and other European countries. The most commercially exploited seal species are harp seals, ringed seals, grey seals, hooded seals and Cape fur seals.



Is sealing cruel?

WSPA believes that large-scale sealing is inherently inhumane. There are a variety of methods employed to kill seals, none of which can ensure a humane death for these intelligent, sociable mammals. The two most widely used methods – clubbing and shooting – frequently cause slow and agonising deaths. To the sealers time is money and they often kill hundreds of animals in just a few hours. The speed of the killing – and the adverse conditions in which it is often carried out such as ice floes or rocky exposed beaches – frequently leads to animals being wounded and immobilised but not killed; it can be tens of minutes before the sealer returns to end the animals' suffering, and untold thousands of animals may be skinned alive.

The very clear welfare concerns associated with sealing prompted the European Commission to undertake a detailed scientific assessment of the welfare implications of killing and skinning seals. You can read the full report [here](#). It concludes that whilst many seals may be killed rapidly and without pain, '*strong evidence suggests that effective killing does not always occur*', though a lack of impartial data made it impossible to say how many animals endure inhumane deaths.



The summary of the report continues:

'When seals are hit or shot, but are not dead, they may have to be hit or shot again or they may be moved or skinned whilst conscious, resulting in avoidable pain, distress, fear and other forms of suffering. In addition, seals may be struck and lost with injuries that may cause suffering and affect their survival in the wild.'

Left: Cape fur seal pup: 80,000 pups and 6,000 males are killed in Namibia each year.
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The report finds that sealers do not always effectively monitor each seal to ensure death or unconsciousness before bleeding them out, and that this can result in seals feeling the skinning cuts before loss of consciousness. The current lack of a reliable and practical method for sealers to determine when a seal is irreversibly unconscious is also raised as a barrier to ensuring humane slaughter.

Finally, as well as the physical welfare concerns for hunted seals, the report also finds that the process of herding seals prior to killing them, and separating nursing pups from their mothers, could cause fear and suffering.

Existing European legislation to protect seals

Concerns over the severe welfare implications of seal hunting has lead Belgium, The Netherlands and Slovenia to implement national legislation to ban the import and use of seal skins and seal products. Several more EU Member States are considering the introduction of similar bans. In autumn 2006, the European Parliament adopted a declaration requesting the European Commission to regulate the import, export and sale of all harp and hooded seal products, whilst taking into consideration the needs of traditional Inuit seal hunters. The Habitats Directive also protects seals from unsustainable exploitation.

In 1989 the EC adopted a directive (89/370/EEC) to permanently ban the commercial import and trade of skins of whitecoat pups of harp seals and of pups of hooded seals by European Member States. In 2008 the EC has a real opportunity to extend this ban to all seal species of all ages – the EC wants to know what the public thinks so if you object to the cruelty of sealing please tell them! Denmark, Finland and Sweden have made it clear that they do not favour a ban on trade in seal products so if you live in any of these countries your input is especially important.

Guidance on completing the form

The questions on the [EC consultation form](#) are all multiple choice but in some cases the options available do not reflect a wide range of animal welfare views. The important thing to remember is that all of the questions are optional so if you don't feel that any of the answers reflect your opinion, it's fine to leave it blank.

In the section entitled 'methods of seal killing' you are encouraged rank, by order of priority from the most appropriate to the least appropriate, the seal killing methods which in your view will cause least pain and suffering. WSPA doesn't believe this is a particularly fair or helpful question, as most people will have very little knowledge on which to base such an opinion. To avoid advocating any of these four inhumane methods as 'most appropriate', one option available is simply to pick the method you consider to be most inhumane and rank it as '4', leaving the other options blank.

