

# Doing nothing not an option for controlling seal population

By Virginia Boudreau; for Guysborough County Inshore Fishermen's Association

*"So, just for the bait you need to go out there and fight the seals." (Fishermen, Pettit-de-Grat 2002)*

The gray seal population in Eastern Nova Scotia has been increasing since 1960 and has been without control mechanisms since 1983, when the Dept. of Fisheries and Oceans discontinued the annual seal cull and bounty paid to fishermen, for the carcasses of grey and harbour seals.

The population has now reached 350,000 and is increasing by 11% annually (DFO 2004). There is no fishery for grey seal in eastern Nova Scotia and seals are permanent residents of the inshore areas. (SRSF 2002) Seals' natural predators are killer whales and large sharks, which have declined in numbers partly due to the commercial shark and tuna fisheries.

This seal population explosion costs the inshore fisheries hundreds of thousands of dollars yearly, in gear damage and loss of catch due to seal predation and diversion of fish out of the traps and nets. (SRSF 2002; Cairnes et al 2000; Lunneryd and Westerberg 1997)

The inshore fishermen see seals as a marine resource that could be managed and exploited with a maximum return. A cull, or a bounty, does nothing to develop processing methods and markets for this resource.

While seals are perceived as destructive predators to commercial fishermen, they are often cute'n cuddly animals to the public and regarded as an important part of the food web by ecological groups.

The reality is that they are very large predators who are interrupting the marine food web and their increased population is extremely costly to commercial fisheries.

These divided perceptions and subsequent arguments have fostered political inactivity. Although research has been completed, on the adverse effects of grey and harbour seals to the commercial fisheries and has been presented to DFO and the public, there has been no

action taken to reduce the effects. (FRCC 2001 - 2004; Eminent Seal Panel 2001)

The main concern of the inshore fishery is the added cost of bait, due to seal interactions. Fishermen have, up until as recently as 1999, set and tended spring and fall mackerel/herring nets and traps, which supplied the majority of their bait for use in their commercial fisheries.

A sheet of net costs from 80 to 100 dollars and may not last one set before seals destroy it to the point where it is no longer usable and is beyond repair. The loss can be six to ten nets per night, which makes the bait fishery too costly to engage.

Now fishermen must purchase bait from other areas at an increased cost and, in times of scarcity, it can cause delays or poor quality bait, resulting in further cost and loss of catch. This jeopardizes the viability of the bait dependent commercial fisheries in the area and reduces time spent on the water for fishermen.

Fishermen are very concerned about the effects of the seal population and in face to face interviews with Chedabucto Bay fishermen and SRSF, there were 276 mentions of seal and gear interactions

"Last year I was fishing I rigged up, I think it was 10 new nets. Rigged them all up and even set them. We got 1,200 pounds of mackerel in them and they (the seals) ruined the whole six. They ain't good enough for anything." (Fisherman, Queensport 2002)

Although there are 212 bait licenses in Guysborough County, less than 10 per cent are active and the alternative trap licenses are few. Of those available, few are fished due to seal damages to the trap.

The bait is at their doorstep but so are the 600 lbs seals in herds of 50 -60 per rock ledge. This results in lost revenue for the bait fishery and increased cost to the very lucrative fisheries such as snow crab, lobster and shrimp trap. When the seal population controls were in place, the impact was bearable and cost effective to the inshore fishery.

A management plan is long overdue and should include sensible cost effective measures to control the grey seal population and utilize

this resource to the fullest. Current research completed by the processing industry show low returns for pelts and harvesting challenges.

There are some very positive possibilities within the fur farming industry for high sales of seal meat both in Nova Scotia and beyond. Research is also underway by companies specializing in dietary supplements for use of the seal oil products.

(Grey Seal Harvesting Committee 2003)

Any new grey seal management initiative must be supported financially by the commercial fishing industry, the ecological preservation groups and by the federal fisheries department. The federal government must be willing to go one step further and politically support and promote a grey seal management plan that

will address the population problem and how it affects the marine ecosystem web and the inshore bait fishery. Mackerel bait prices in 2004 have reached sixty-five cents per pound, with no quality. As we approach the 2005 spring lobster season there may be a drastic increase, as fishermen do not have the personal supply to open the season, as they traditionally would have. They will be

purchasing 100% of the bait at this increased price and will see a further reduction in the bottom line of the bait dependent fisheries. The grey seal issue may be political suicide for politicians but left ignored, will destroy our inshore fisheries.

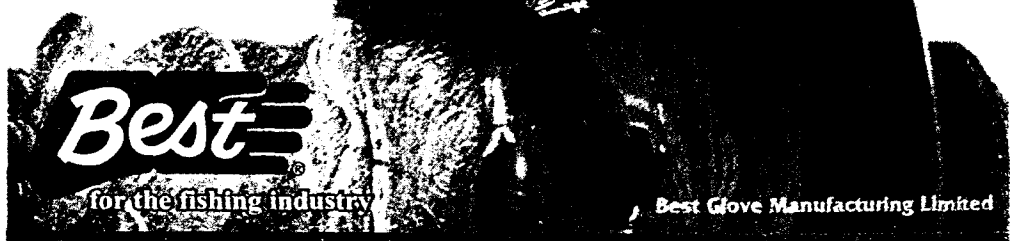
\*Virginia Boudreau is with Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries (SRSF) a partnership linking university researchers with Mi'kmaq and non-Mi'kmaq fisheries community organizations.

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