



**WWF** for a living planet®

## **WWF Position Statement**

### **Harp Seal Hunt in the Northwest Atlantic Ecoregion**

**March 2009**

WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which people live in harmony with nature. To achieve this mission and to ensure lasting success, conservation efforts must take into account cultural diversity as well as historical and economic realities. WWF recognizes that local communities play a significant role in, and benefit economically from, the sustainable use of natural resources.

For over 40 years the Canadian harp seal (*Phoca groenlandica*) hunt has been controversial. Many people have strong objections to the commercial harvesting of wildlife, and of marine mammals in particular. Animal welfare organizations both inside and outside Canada continue to press for improvement of humane hunting methods and tighter monitoring, while some oppose the seal hunt altogether. In the past, largely due to considerable international pressure, several measures were taken that affected the Canadian seal hunt. In 1972, the United States prohibited the import of seal products under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. In 1987, the Canadian government prohibited the hunting of the harp seal pups, at the "whitecoat" stage. More recently, there has been a movement to impose a trading ban of seal products altogether particularly at the European Union.

The long history of controversy reflects both the diversity of individual values and the diversity of cultural and national experiences with wildlife and wildlife harvesting. WWF respects this range of diversity. As well, WWF recognizes that hunting seals is an important part of the local economy, culture and heritage of many coastal communities in Atlantic Canada, the Arctic, many other maritime nations.

Most importantly, from the perspective of a conservation organization such as ours, the harp seal population is at a near record high with more than 5 million individuals and current harvest practices pose no apparent threat to the long-term health of the species.

While there are no conservation grounds on which to end the seal hunt at this time, vigilant monitoring of the impacts of harvesting and environmental conditions will be important. Climate change may affect the availability of sea ice, which plays an essential role in the birth and weaning process of harp seal pups. WWF will continue to work on an ecosystem-based management approach in the Northwest Atlantic Ecoregion that will take into account the overall health of the marine environment and the role of all species, including harp seals. Furthermore, WWF has launched a global campaign to reduce the effects of climate change which poses a major threat to all Arctic species.

An important component of WWF's work in the region includes reducing the ecological footprint of nations fishing on the Grand Banks. This means reducing bycatch and habitat impacts of all fisheries and ensuring all quotas are sustainable, including those in high seas areas adjacent to Canadian waters. These are critically important changes in order to secure the recovery of this overexploited ecosystem. It is also key to securing the long-term sustainability of coastal communities in Newfoundland and Labrador as well as those European communities that historically have benefited from the region's marine bounty.