



The European Parliament Shuts Down Seal-Product Imports – *Again*

by Aaju Peter

In the spring of 2007, my son, Aggu, and I went to the Netherlands to oppose that country's proposed seal ban. A crowd of protesters assembled in front of the Canadian Embassy. Youth holding posters of bloody seals on the sea-ice told us that we should grow vegetables instead of hunting seals. The simple truth they apparently failed to grasp is, we live in a very different geographical area from them. We live in the Arctic. Ten months of the year, the land is covered with snow. We cannot grow crops such as potatoes or wheat, or many of the foods that others can, who live in warmer climates, for reasons that should be obvious to them: months of darkness and the permafrost, just to mention two. Inuit, like many others around the world, harvest that which our land and waters provide for us. We harvest and rely upon the seal.

Everyone seemed to enjoy their lunch. Just moments before, we had witnessed 600 parliamentarians passing judgement on the livelihoods of thousands of people in Canada, denouncing their sustainable harvest of seals in the wild, calling it inhumane. Yet, strangely, no one seemed to make the connection that the meat they were biting into came from animals raised in confinement and slaughtered in abattoirs, and no one questioned whether they suffered during their captivity or whether they experienced pain as they were being slaughtered. That was the biggest display of hypocrisy I have ever witnessed.

HOW CAN THESE SAME PEOPLE PASS A REGULATION THAT WILL HAVE SUCH GRAVE EFFECTS ON SO MANY LIVES IN REMOTE ARCTIC COMMUNITIES, YET REMAIN SO TOTALLY UNAWARE, UNTOUCHED?

Two years later, the movement, which began in the Netherlands, had spread throughout the European Union. On May 5, 2009, I was sitting inside the European Parliament building in Strasbourg, France. The Members of the 27 countries that form the European Union were voting on whether to ban the import of seal-products into the European Community. The vote was cast: 550 for, 50 against. After all the work that anti-sealers had done over the past three decades, the outcome did not come as a surprise. Still, this was a very sad moment. My thoughts went to the families in Nunavut and the other Arctic regions whose lives would be so gravely affected by this ban, and yet, they were, at that moment, so very far away.

A couple of days earlier, I had travelled to Europe as part of an Inuit delegation, along with representatives of the Canadian east coast sealers, to meet with some Members of the European Parliament in Brussels, to tell them that we were opposed to the ban and to explain why. Canadian and European media interviewed Meeka Mike, Natsiq Kango and Joshua Kango, members of the Inuit delegation from Iqaluit, Nunavut, who had travelled for three days in advance of the crucial vote in Strasbourg. They all said the same thing: that they were opposed to the proposed ban and that the Inuit exemption was not going to save them, or other Inuit, from the effects of the ban.

The regulation on trade in seal-products grew out of public concern in Europe that seal-hunting is inhumane, that stunning seals with hakapiks, bludgeons or guns provides undue suffering for the animals.

The ban on importing seal-products into the European Union provides for an Inuit exemption, requiring that all exempted Inuit seal-products result from hunts conducted “traditionally” which contribute to the “subsistence” of Inuit. The regulation does not contain a definition of “a traditional hunt” or of “subsistence.”

Following the vote, many in attendance went downstairs to a buffet luncheon. Hundreds of people lined up. Rows of tables were set up in the large cafeteria displaying a vast array of meats, salads and desserts. Tiny pictures of cows on little sticks were sticking out of steaks. There were also veal, pork, and chicken dishes. We all filled our plates and went to sit among others who I assumed had also attended the vote.

For me the central question was simple: how can these same people pass a regulation that will have such grave effects on so many lives in remote Arctic communities, yet remain so totally unaware, untouched? Do they not see the connection here? What, in their minds, is the difference between their own farmers and our seal harvesters?

In the evening we were taken to a local restaurant where we were treated to local delicacies: big juicy sausages and pâté de foie gras. Foie gras, I was told, is made from the livers of ducks that had been force fed for no other purpose than to make them nice and fat, supposedly making this European delicacy much tastier. That very same day, their parliament had voted to ban cruel, inhumane killing of seals. Somehow that evening, however, it was perfectly okay to feast on a delicacy made from birds that had been force fed in their own backyard.

For me, the proposed seal-products ban is a very one-sided proposition. Hunting is our way of life. We have depended on the seal for as long as Inuit have occupied the Arctic regions. In fact, the seal made it possible for us to survive there. Seal harvesting provided for many, sometimes all, of the needs of our people and our dogs for millennia.

It is no surprise, then, that Inuit would unanimously object to the European seal ban. Inuit leaders, government, Hunters and Trappers Organizations, and individuals have all expressed their opposition to the ban on seal-products. The opposition coming from Nunavut cites the dire effects that the 1983 ban* had on Inuit, saying that despite the fact Inuit were not targeted at that time, the legislation had devastating social and economic consequences for Inuit. There is ample evidence to support this assertion, which perhaps needs to be more effectively communicated to European parliamentarians.

The Nunavut Legislative Assembly has passed motions stating their opposition to the ban. It also has issued press releases claiming the exemption is “pointless” and that the hunt is sustainable. One of the studies conducted for the Government of Nunavut concludes that promoting sealing is one of the most economical and healthy options for the territory today.

Recognizing that sealing offers the benefits derived from country foods, the Government of Nunavut has committed to purchase the sealskins harvested by hunters, even after the ban on importing seal-products, which resulted in no Nunavut sealskins being sold at the annual fur auction last year. Even if \$500,000 is paid to hunters for the sealskins, the replacement value of country food harvested in Nunavut is estimated at more than \$30 million annually, so it would be a worthwhile investment. This estimate does not factor in the health benefits of country food, the cultural and social importance of hunting, or the opportunities it provides people to participate productively in their community’s economic and social life.

There are distinct difficulties with the so-called Inuit exemption to the regulation. One real problem is that there is no definition of what constitutes hunting for subsistence. If the hunter’s wife prepares the skin and makes mittens out of the skin and sells them, is this subsistence?

Another is that for a seal-product to be exempt from the ban it not only has to “contribute to Inuit subsistence” but also must be “traditionally hunted” by an indigenous

* In 1983, the European Union banned the import of white-coats, the baby harp seals previously hunted on Canada’s east coast. This is not even the same seal hunted by Inuit, for the most part, but nonetheless the impact on Inuit sealskin sales was profound and long lasting.



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What Can We Do to Educate Europeans?

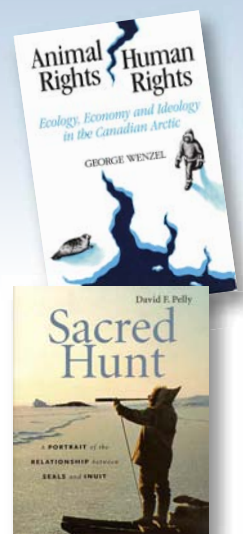
For starters, why not send every member of the European Parliament a copy of this article? It would help if they were to read something written from the Inuit perspective, for which they claim to hold some sympathy.

Then, to follow up, it would be a good idea if Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., Makivik, and/or the Government of Nunavut — all together, and perhaps with the federal government's help — were to present each member of the European Parliament with copies of two books. It would cost the governments and NGOs a minor sum, and it would probably be well received by the (let's presume) intelligent members of the European Parliament, to provide each of them with copies of *Animal Rights, Human Rights* by George Wenzel, and *Sacred Hunt* by David Pelly. Together these books explain the unique

relationship between Inuit and seals, the economic importance of the hunt and the negative impact of the European ban. They do this in a palatable, even engaging and attractive, manner and with more effectiveness than any lobbying or government publication can ever hope to accomplish.

Once that is done, the same bodies could consider funding production of a TV documentary — designed for broadcast in Europe, in English, French and German — on the special role that seals play in the lives of Inuit.

The objective of all this would be education. The assumption is that to date, the people of Europe have been misinformed by the animal rights activists. It's time to set the record straight, in an intelligent manner, which can engage both the politicians and the public.





Inuit Sue the European Parliament

In January of this year, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), representing Canada's Inuit, along with ICC Greenland, several hunters and trappers organizations, individual Inuit and others, commenced a lawsuit in the European General Court to overturn the European Union's pending seal ban regulation.

The main legal argument is that the EU only has jurisdiction over the functioning of the market. The purpose of the seal ban is not to improve the market and facilitate trade, but rather the opposite, to prohibit trade in seal products. Its real aim is animal welfare, which is not within the EU's jurisdiction.

Mary Simon, President of ITK, commented on the EU ban: "It is bitterly ironic that the EU, which seems entirely

at home with promoting massive levels of agri-business and the raising and slaughtering of animals in highly industrialized conditions, seeks to preach some kind of selective elevated morality to Inuit. At best this is cultural bias, although it could be described in even harsher terms."

The matter will not be resolved in the Court before the August date when the regulation is due to come into force. It will take months, and the chances of success are uncertain at best. Perhaps more important is drawing public attention to the issue — this is, after all, a battle of public opinion and public education.



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Nunavummiut, Pakak Innuksuk and Aju Peter, perform an Inuit drum-dance. The author, Aju Peter, is wearing her sealskin clothing.

This is a custom that has been practiced by Inuit for thousands of years. It is a matter of pride to serve the best that nature has to offer, part of our ancient tradition of sharing. Her acceptance was labelled by some European media and politicians as “bloodlust.” These people owe the Inuit an apology.



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TO THE INUIT, [MICHAËLLE JEAN’S] ACCEPTANCE WAS A DEMONSTRATION OF RESPECT FOR BOTH INUIT CULTURE AND FOR THE SEAL. TO THE ANTI-SEALING LOBBY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION, THE ACT WAS BOTH BIZARRE AND DISGUSTING.

member of the Inuit homelands. This stipulation is very colonial — it implicitly paints a picture of Inuit out on the land, without any contemporary aid, such as store bought clothes, snow machines, or rifles. The regulation defines Inuit as “members of the Inuit homelands where they hold aboriginal rights.” This does not recognize that according to the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, 1993, Inuit in Nunavut have the right to define who is Inuit, not the European Parliament.

The regulation does recognize that under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples “the hunt is an integral part of the culture and identity” of indigenous peoples. However, the regulation omits to mention that the UN Declaration also states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”

In trying to limit Inuit economic development to subsistence hunting, the regulation does not recognize the fact that Inuit are not frozen in time, but must pursue economic opportunities just like everyone else in Canada or Europe. The anticipation of this European ban already led to zero sales at last year’s fur auction, despite the promised Inuit exemption. The longer-term consequences will be devastating. Income that hunters receive from selling sealskins enables them to go hunting again for food for their families, and allows their families to purchase goods from the stores. What will replace that income?

In May, 2009, right after the European vote to ban seal-products, Canada’s Governor General, Her Excellency, Michaëlle Jean, made a seven-day visit to Nunavut. Her first stop was Rankin Inlet, where she was offered a piece of seal heart to eat. For her, this was an act of respect for Inuit and their culture. To the Inuit, her acceptance was a demonstration of respect for both Inuit culture and for the seal. To the anti-sealing lobby and the European Union, the act was both bizarre and disgusting.

Instead, the regulation to ban the import of seal-products into the European community comes into effect in August 2010. The development of this ban arises out of the sort of thinking evident in the reactions described above, and was done without consultations with Inuit. We remember the devastating effects of the 1983 ban on white-coats, even though that ban also claimed — more logically, then, one might say — not to target Inuit seal hunting. With the cost of living in the Arctic regions many times that of southern regions, it is important that Inuit are able to sell sealskins at a reasonable price and that Inuit artisans and fashion-designers have equal opportunity to develop a viable world market for their inspired creations. Even with an Inuit exemption, the effect of a ban on seal-products will render the price of sealskins so low as to make it virtually pointless for seal hunters to sell them.

Regardless what the Europeans may do, the seal-hunt remains an integral part of our culture, our identity and our economy. Just as the seal has been an essential source of sustenance for millennia, their harvest remains an important and necessary right, central to our healthy, sustainable existence and economic viability, now and for the generations to come. We are, and shall remain, a seal-hunting culture, and a seal-eating people. 🐾

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