

Report of Webinar 15.11.2023:

Seal management under a trade ban – how to promote sustainable resource use?

Marina Nyqvist, Ostrobothnian Fisheries Association



Svenska Jägarförbundet



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SUMMARY

This webinar was organised 15 November 2023 through Microsoft Teams by the Ostrobothnian Fisheries Association. The webinar was a part of the project “Seals – valuable game species”, primarily funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The webinar was moderated by Professor Markus Vetemaa of Tartu University.

The aim of the webinar was to raise the questions on sustainable seal management within the context of a trade ban, pondering the promotion of sustainable seal use. The webinar unfolded in three segments.

Firstly, it provided a historical backdrop on the conflicts between seals and the fishing industry, highlighting efforts spanning three decades to address these challenges. It then shifted focus to underscore the value of seals as a game species while noting the challenges posed by the trade ban.

The second part offered an overview of current seal management practices in the EU member states Sweden, Estonia, Finland, and the Åland Islands, along with a glimpse into Norway's approach, giving an example of seal management outside the EU.

Lastly, the webinar delved into an analysis of Baltic seal management as detailed in a 2023 Marine Policy publication. Subsequent commentary and perspectives were offered by representatives from the European Commission, European Parliament, Finnish Parliament, North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO), and the Swedish Association of Hunting and Wildlife Management. A general discussion on the next steps was subsequently held. The webinar had 59 participants.

1. SEALS IN THE BALITIC SEA- PROBLEMATIC RESOURCES

Welcome address

Markus Norrback, chair of the board/Ostrobothnian Fisheries Association welcomed participants to the webinar. He highlighted the cultural significance of seal hunting in Finland, Sweden, and the Åland Islands, dating back thousands of years. Norrback shared a historical example of a harpoon found in his hometown of Närpes, which is evidence of seal hunting from around 6000 years ago.

While emphasizing the ethical aspects of small-scale seal hunting today, Norrback drew attention to the growth of seal populations in the Baltic Sea, leading to challenges for fishermen. He recounted efforts in the early 2000s to address the issue through EU-funded projects, resulting in books on ethical hunting and products like seal meat being available in exclusive restaurants.

Norrback expressed concern about the EU trade ban in 2009, leading to a decline in the interest in seal hunting and causing economic losses for fishing communities. He argued that the ban, despite seals' thriving populations, restricts potential socioeconomic benefits and hinders the utilization of hunting quotas. He called for a balanced approach that considers both seal conservation and the socio-economic impact on coastal fisheries.

Norrback suggested that allowing a small-scale, regulated trade on seal products within Baltic Sea countries could restore seals as a resource and contribute to local green economies. He emphasized the complexity of the conflict between seal conservation and coastal fishery, urging collaboration and information exchange for finding constructive solutions.

[Damages caused by seals to fisheries – a timeline of research and findings](#)

Sven-Gunnar Lunneryd at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences highlighted the multifaceted nature of the conflict, where seals impact fisheries and ecosystems while humans affect seals through various means like hunting, by-catches, and pollution.

In 1994, Sweden initiated efforts to mitigate the conflict, involving stakeholders to develop solutions, including new fishing gear resistant to seal attacks and studies on seal behaviour. Lunneryd emphasized the significant damage seals cause to fish populations and fishing gear, leading to a decline in catches over the past two decades. Despite collaborative efforts and innovative solutions like the pontoon trap, challenges persist, including limited funding for research and the need for alternative fishing methods. Lunneryd highlighted the decline in fishing boats and catches along the Swedish coastline, signalling a crisis in the fishing industry.

While discussing mitigation options, such as the bottom seine net and long seine net, Lunneryd stressed the importance of active engagement from authorities to support these initiatives. Additionally, he highlighted the impact of seals on the ecosystem and the need for comprehensive diet studies. According to Lunneryd the current decrease of seal hunting quotas will lead to further seal population increases and deepen the conflict.

In conclusion, Lunneryd urged for urgent action to address the escalating conflict between seals and the fishing industry, emphasizing the need for collaborative efforts, innovative solutions, and increased support from authorities to achieve a sustainable balance in the Baltic Sea ecosystem.

[Seal- a valuable game – project outcomes](#)

Marina Nyqvist at the Ostrobothnian Fisheries Association presented the outcomes of the two-year project titled "Seal – a Valuable Game Species," through which this webinar also was organised. The project involved collaboration between hunting associations and authorities from Finland, Sweden, and Åland. Funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers and other Finnish funds, the project aimed to share knowledge on seal handling and develop collaboration between hunters and fishermen.

In the project valuable EU-funded books on seal handling and cooking from 2000s were digitized, ensuring broader accessibility. Educational videos were produced, covering topics like tanning, hunting, butchery, and cooking. The project found that seals are valued as a game species, with potential interest from new hunters. However, the trade ban poses challenges, impacting the sustainability and interest in seal hunting. The growing seal population is seen as negatively affecting coastal fisheries, emphasizing the need for policy changes to utilise seals sustainably in these communities.

2. MANAGEMENT IN PLACE

Finnish management plan for seals

Ida Anomaa at the Ministry of Forestry and Agriculture of Finland presented the current draft of the management plan for Baltic Sea grey seals and ringed seals in Finland, stressing that it's a work in progress subject to changes. The main objectives of the plan are to maintain a favourable conservation status for grey seals and ensure the conservation status of Baltic ring seals does not deteriorate by 2030, ultimately reaching a favourable status. The plan aims to enhance cooperation between authorities, conservationists, and fishermen to mitigate seal-related damages to the fishing industry.

Key measures in the plan include intensifying monitoring and research efforts and collaboration with neighbouring countries and international bodies. The plan advocates for sustainable seal hunting, improved utilisation of seal products, and developing seal-watching tourism. Updates on past management practices, such as quota-based hunting and compensation schemes for fishermen affected by seal damages, were provided. Anomaa emphasized the need for an ongoing evaluation and adaptation of management strategies, and thus, a monitoring group is going to oversee the implementation of the plan and assess its progress every five years. Finally, Anomaa highlighted recent legislative changes and Finland's efforts to influence EU policies regarding seal management and trade bans.

Swedish hunting quotas of seals in the Baltic Sea

Christine Aminoff from the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) presented the seal management practices in Sweden. Responsibilities for seal management, including compensations for damages, are divided among various authorities, primarily by SEPA and the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management (SwAM). Historically, protective hunting was the primary form of seal hunting, regulated under the hunting ordinance. However, recent changes have introduced licensed hunting for grey seals and harbour seals, with quotas set annually.

SEPA's strategy aims to manage seals effectively to reduce conflicts with humans while promoting sustainable utilization of seal resources. The introduction of licensed hunting is seen as a more suitable management tool compared to protective hunting, allowing for more targeted and preventive measures. The hunting quotas, adjusted over the years, remain higher than the actual number of seals killed. Hunting seasons are designed to consider seal reproductive cycles, with breaks during moulting periods for surveys.

While grey seal populations have increased, hunting quotas have not been fully fulfilled since the introduction of licensed hunting. Similar trends are observed for harbour seals. However, no licensed hunt is proposed for ringed seals due to their unfavourable conservation status. Challenges in seal hunting include the demanding nature of the activity and limited participation from hunters.

Estonian management of seals

Markus Vetemaa from the University of Tartu presented the historical significance of seal hunting in Estonia, particularly on islands like Ruhnu and Kihnu. Seal hunting has been an essential livelihood for coastal communities, with Swedish-speaking populations actively engaging in it. Vetemaa highlighted the impact of historical events, such as the Russian occupation during World War II, on the disappearance of seal hunting traditions on certain islands.

Estonia has a Grey Seal Conservation Action Plan from 2015-2019, and although there is no new plan, the government considers the content of the previous plan still valid. Seal hunting in Estonia involves data collection by hunters to ensure the seal population's health and sustainability. The yearly seal quota of around 50-60 animals is divided into different areas, with more than half allocated to hunters in the Gulf of Riga, where the tradition of seal hunting is still alive. However, the quotas have not been fully exhausted due to limited demand for seal products. Vetemaa emphasized spatial restrictions in hunting areas and challenges in retrieving seals from deep waters.

The establishment of seal sanctuaries, once essential for protecting the seal population, is now questioned as seal numbers have increased. While Vetemaa acknowledged the significance of lifting the trade ban on seal products, he also suggested that local initiatives and solutions within Estonia can contribute to addressing the challenges associated with seal hunting.

Norwegian management of grey and harbour seals

Arne Bjørge from the Institute of Marine Research presented the Norwegian management approach for grey and harbour seals. He highlighted the challenge of balancing sustainable utilisation and protection for these charismatic animals, emphasizing their value as a resource and the need for active management due to their impact on local fisheries.

In 2010, Management Plans for grey and harbour seals were adopted in Norway, aiming to secure viable populations throughout their natural range. The plans incorporated hunting quotas to regulate populations and mitigate interactions with fisheries. However, setting Target Levels for population sizes proved challenging, and the government did not provide clear directives. As a result, the Target Level was recommended to be set equal to the population sizes in 2006.

For harbour seals, the Target Level is determined by counting 7000 hauled out moulting seals in August, corresponding to about 10,000 harbour seals. The hunting quota is set at 460 harbour seals. A genetic mapping project is underway to divide the population into biologically meaningful Management Units, allowing for more precise harvesting guidelines.

Grey seal populations are monitored by counting white-coated pups, with a Target Level of 1200 pups annually. Three Management Units are established based on genetic differences, and quotas are adjusted accordingly. The southern and northern Units have comparatively large quotas, as a significant proportion of hunted seals come from larger colonies in other regions.

Despite local utilisation of seal products in Norway, Bjørge argued against a trade ban, stating that such a ban should be related to the conservation status of the species. He

emphasized that a ban on entire taxonomic groups, regardless of their conservation status, could negatively impact sustainable resource use. Bjørge also mentioned an emerging discussion on the possibility of restricting the monkfish fishery to reduce bycatch levels and addressed the importance of annual quotas, licenses, shooting tests, and immediate reporting for hunters.

Management of seals on the Åland Islands – Viktor Eriksson, Government of Åland

Viktor Eriksson discussed the management of grey seals on the Åland Islands, focusing on the hunting regulations and historical context. Grey seals have been a valuable resource for the population on Åland for thousands of years, with regulations dating back to the 1500s to protect seal pups and females. Due to pollution and bounty hunting in the 1900s, deliberate killing of seals was prohibited on Åland Islands from 1982 to 1999.

As an autonomous region of Finland, Åland Islands has its own parliament and legislation rights, but EU mandates also apply. The current hunting regulations involve a protective hunting scheme with a set yearly quota and specific regulations. Hunters are no longer required to have a personal permit, but they must report shot seals promptly. All edible game, including seals, must be utilized according to Åland's hunting law.

Eriksson highlighted changes in seal hunting regulations, including the removal of personal permits in 2016. There was a spike in shot seals in 2019, possibly attributed to more hunters participating for the experience. The yearly quota for grey seals on Åland Islands between 450 and 550 has never been fulfilled. Protected areas exist for seals in the South, North, and West of the islands. Compensation schemes for fishermen involve tolerance payments, and between 2006 and 2021, €1.67 million was paid to commercial fishers.

3. REASSESSING MANAGEMENT POLICIES

Reassessing the management criteria of growing seal populations: The case of Baltic grey seal and coastal fishery

Petri Suuronen at the International Seafood Consulting Group presented an analysis of the grey seal issue in the Baltic Sea, highlighting the escalating conflict between the growing grey seal population and its impact on coastal fisheries and aquaculture. Various solutions, such as the Ponton trap and seal scaring devices, have been developed, but they are only partially functional and often expensive. Despite the increase in the seal population, management efforts have primarily focused on conservation and protection, posing a complex situation with no easy solution.

Key points include the continuous growth of the Baltic grey seal population at 5% yearly rate, with higher as well as lower rates in specific regions. Hunting, despite having quotas, has not been fully utilized, and there are challenges such as strict rules, protected areas, and high costs. Additionally, a trade ban imposed by the EU has reduced the value of seals, affecting motivation for hunting.

The analyses presented questions the basis of management recommendations from institutions like HELCOM and the EU, pointing out inconsistencies and outdated information

in their guidelines. Suuronen emphasized the need for a more realistic approach, considering the current size and distribution of the grey seal population.

Suuronen raised concerns about the trade ban on seal products, limiting socio-economic benefits and contributing to the underutilization of hunting quotas. He called for a reconsideration of the ban, emphasizing the abundance and potential benefits of the grey seal as a natural resource. The need for a balanced approach involving local conditions, fishing sector viability, and cooperation between conservation and fishing sectors was stressed. Ultimately, the presentation suggested a revision of management criteria and a more comprehensive evaluation of the situation to address this complex issue effectively.

EC: s perspective on seal management

Anne Delvaux at DG environment/European Commission addressed the EU Seal Regime, covering trade regulations, the seal pups Directive, and related exceptions. The presentation highlighted the history, including the 1989 Council Directive inspired by concerns raised by French actress Brigitte Bardot. The presentation outlined the basic regulation adopted in 2009, subsequent amendments, and the challenges faced by member states.

While the initial regulation allowed certain exceptions, a 2015 review resulted from a WTO case brought by Norway and Canada, leading to the prohibition of member states placing seal products on the EU market. Delvaux acknowledged concerns from states around the Baltic Sea and Canada regarding the perceived total ban on seal products and the lack of awareness about existing exceptions.

Due to dissatisfaction with the current regulation, an evaluation of the EU SEAL regime is set to begin in 2024. The evaluation, performed by a selected contractor, will involve public consultations, targeted consultations with specific member states, and a call for scientific evidence. The goal is to consider amendments, repeal, or other measures based on the evaluation's findings, addressing both ecological and socioeconomic impacts.

Following questions at the end of the presentation, Delvaux clarified the following points:

- Recognition of Government Bodies: member states can apply for recognition of a government body to issue attesting documents. Commission decisions recognizing bodies are short documents, examples for Greenland and Canada can be found.
- Contractor Selection Process: The Commission will work under a framework contract with four contractors. Technical specifications will be sent to all four, and they can accept or decline. The process is quicker than an open call, facilitating a prompt evaluation launch.
- Neutrality and Conflict of Interest: Contractors are neutral and have signed a conflict-of-interest agreement. They are standard contractors used by the Commission for various contracts.

Delvaux encouraged participation in the public consultation and provided the web page link for more information: [EU Commission Web Page](#), and welcomed participants contact with further questions after the webinar.

Political perspectives on the trade ban and seal management

MEP Nils Torvalds reflected on his childhood spent on the shores of the Finnish archipelago and learning the fisherman's livelihood. He noted a remarkable 50 % growth of the grey seal population in the last decade, projecting a continued rise if unchecked. Seals, being intelligent and adept at fishing, now explore areas they avoided before, impacting traditional fishing grounds.

Torvalds emphasized the changing behaviour of seals, their impact on fishermen (finding half-eaten fish in nets), and the need for urgent action. He argued that the ban on seal products needs to be lifted to incentivise hunters and fishermen, as without a market, there is little motivation to hunt seals. He also noted that shorter winters have a negative effect on hunting conditions.

Finally, Torvalds expressed concern about the European Commission's attitude. He called for fast measures to control the growing seal population, and initiatives to support the livelihoods of fishermen along the Baltic Sea.

Finnish MP Anders Norrback emphasized the need for small political steps and a broader perspective that includes tourism, restaurants, and culture rather than focusing solely on hunting. Politically, it is more feasible to address the issue comprehensively according to Norrback.

In the current Finnish government program, adjustments to the hunting period have been proposed, signalling acknowledgment of the problem. Norrback believed this won't drastically increase hunting but it serves as an important recognition by politicians.

Being the chairman of the Federation of Finnish Fisheries Associations, Norrback raised concerns about how fisheries quotas are determined, emphasizing the lack of using data on the amount of fish consumed by seals in regulatory decisions. Norrback stressed the importance of increasing public understanding of the seal problem and fostering a broader discussion. The speaker acknowledged the limitations imposed by EU regulations on national politicians, limiting their scope of action.

Reconciling conservation and use of marine mammal resources in the North Atlantic

Naima El bani Altuna, the deputy secretary at NAMMCO, the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission, discussed the organization's mission to achieve sustainability by balancing the conservation and use of marine resources in the North Atlantic. NAMMCO, formed by the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland, and Norway, focuses on providing science and knowledge-based recommendations to manage marine mammals responsibly.

El bani Altuna emphasized the crucial ecological, cultural, and socio-economic roles played by marine mammals in the North Atlantic, similar to the Baltic states. While recognizing regional differences, the countries within NAMMCO consider marine mammals as valuable resources, balancing the rights and needs of coastal communities with a strong sense of responsibility.

NAMMCO manages 27 marine mammal species, including pinnipeds like Atlantic walruses and various seals. The organisation's scientific committee regularly assesses research and offers recommendations, such as quotas and conservation strategies, to member countries.

El bani Altuna also addressed the question of whether seals can be a sustainable resource. A study presented showed that locally hunted seals in Greenland have the lowest carbon footprint compared to imported poultry or pork. Beyond carbon footprint, the sustainability of seal hunting in Greenland was examined through parameters like land use, freshwater use, animal welfare, and cultural preferences, indicating seals as the most sustainable food choice.

El bani Altuna noted challenges arising from the EU trade ban on seal products, leading to wasted sealskins and economic insecurity. The decline in seal hunting activities has increased reliance on imported alternatives, affecting the sustainability of local communities and threatening cultural heritage. The presentation emphasized the importance of addressing climate change and sustainable solutions at the local level, considering specific environmental and social contexts, and incorporating societal needs and economic viability into management practices.

Human dimension from a hunter's perspective

Per Zakariasson aimed at providing a human perspective on seal hunting and emphasized the ethical guidelines followed by hunters in Sweden, stating that game, including seals, is seen as a natural resource. The ethical guidelines involve conducting hunts within the bounds of the law, managing game populations responsibly, and treating hunted animals with respect and consideration.

Zakariasson stressed the importance of a wise and sustainable interaction with nature, acknowledging the impact humans have on the environment. Hunting is not just a practical activity but a way of life and a carrier of traditions. While there is interest in seal hunting among young people, he noted that it is not a pursuit for everyone, and it is crucial to preserve the knowledge and traditions associated with it. Zakariasson expressed a strong aversion to treating seals as waste products, emphasizing the discomfort and disapproval among hunters when excess seal products are discarded, potentially harming the environment.

In conclusion, the Zakariasson advocated for a more sustainable and respectful approach to seal hunting, highlighting the need to honour seals as a valuable species deserving better treatment. The hope is for future practices to align with sustainability and wisdom in handling natural resources.

4. DISCUSSION AND REFLECTIONS. NEXT STEPS.

The discussion delved into various perspectives on the seal trade ban and its implications for coastal communities, tourism, and conservation efforts.

Markus Vetemaa emphasized the potential economic benefits for small coastal communities if seal meat could be incorporated into local establishments, citing the example of Kihnu Island where even occasional consumption by tourists could significantly support the local economy. He acknowledged the challenges in changing attitudes towards seal products, noting the prevailing opposition in European parliamentary and commission circles influenced by misconceptions and lack of information. Vetemaa discussed the big impact of seals on fish populations and that removing only human impact will not help the fish populations, advocating for further scientific inquiry into this field.

Petri Suuronen emphasized the limited potential of the seal product trade in the EU, stressing that it would never become a large-scale trade but rather cater to specific consumer preferences. Viktor Eriksson reiterated the objective of revising the trade ban to enable the sale of seal products in coastal areas, aiming to support small communities rather than flood the broader European market. He emphasized the significance of such sales for rural economies, even if the revenue appears minimal in national GDP comparisons.

Nils Torvalds discussed seal meat as an exotic culinary offering for tourists in coastal regions, aligning with the niche economy of archipelagos. He emphasized the importance of sustaining tourism by providing locally sourced products, including seal skins as souvenirs, to generate year-round income in areas with short tourist seasons. In response to a question about exceptions to the ban for communities in the Baltic Sea, Nils Torvalds recommended seeking support from indigenous populations like those in Greenland to lend moral weight to such a campaign.

Anne Delvaux provided clarity on the legislative framework governing exceptions to the ban. Communities hunting seals for their subsistence is found in Article 6 of the implementing regulation. The member states competent authorities control of the issuing of attesting documents by recognised bodies established and active in that member state. This means that the assumption was that member states would have such communities, who hunt seals for their subsistence and could have a government body recognised for issuing the attesting documents. Delvaux noted that imports of seal skins from Greenland have increased compared to the previous four-year period. In addition, she informed the webinar that the next report on the implementation of the Habitats Directive is due shortly. Delvaux expects an improved conservation status of the seals compared to the report based on the period 2013-2018.

Sven-Gunnar Lunneryd highlighted the challenges posed by the increasing seal population and emphasized the need for political discussion to manage it effectively. As a first step Lunneryd proposed a review of the HELCOM seal recommendation from 2006 at a political level, noting the support for increased seal hunting in the Swedish parliament. He underlined the need to rearrange the recommendation with the aim to achieve a balanced seal population, and suggested changes to protective areas as a crucial step. Such actions could set a precedent for EU regulation adjustments and assert that although challenging, achieving a balanced seal population is feasible through strategic measures.

Stefan Pellas from the Finnish Wildlife Agency expressed gratitude to NAMMCO for their valuable reports on seal hunting practices and suggested building connections with organisations from the Baltic Sea region. Pellas stressed the urgency of acting and highlight the specialized nature of seal hunting, contrasting it with larger-scale hunts like those for

deer or moose. Additionally, Viktor Eriksson extended thanks to participants and emphasized the importance of broadening the discussion and engaging a wider segment of society in addressing seal-related issues.

Marina Nyqvist highlighted the importance of scientific studies, such as the one presented by NAMMCO, confirming the sustainability of hunted seals as a food source. A representative of NAMMCO highlighted the shared challenges faced by communities in Norway, Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands regarding traditional resources that cannot be fully utilised, drawing parallels with the situation in the Baltic. The representative of NAMMCO supported collaboration in the revision process of the seal ban and noted a shift in public perception towards hunting as a sustainable food source.

In concluding remarks, participants expressed gratitude for the discussion and emphasized the importance of collaboration, scientific research, and broadening perspectives to address the complex challenges posed by the seal trade ban and its impact on coastal communities and ecosystems. The moderator Markus Vetemaa was commended for his exceptional moderation. Gratitude was also expressed to the Nordic Council of Ministers for funding the project “Seals – valuable game species”, enabling the organisation of this webinar.