



REPORT

Towards sustainable management and trade possibilities of seal products

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Co-chaired by:

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&**

Nils Torvalds MEP, Vice-Chair of the Intergroup

MEP Christel Schaldemose, Shadow Rapporteur in IMCO (S&D) and Chair of the "Arctic" Working Group of the Intergroup

The current debate on the trade of seal products is about the regulation, i.e. to ensure compliance with the WTO ruling, at the same time as trying to ensure sustainable development, especially for Inuit communities.

Karl-Kristian Kruse, Minister of Fisheries, Hunting and Agriculture, Greenland

The Minister in his speech asked for equal dialogue and mutual understanding between all the parties involved in this debate. He called for cooperation on this particular issue that affects Greenland.

The sustainable use of all living resources in Greenland is based on sound biological advice.

Greenland is a contrasting country: its culture and traditions go 4000 years back in time. Yet, at the same time it is now a modern society with a self-ruling government. Greenland is depending on its own national resources, including marine resources. It therefore strives to ensure that future generations will also benefit from these resources in a sustainable way.

The Minister stressed the importance of sound ecosystem-based management of all living resources. Nowadays, there are a large and increasing number of seals in Greenland, which are the greater competitors to Greenlandic fishermen.

Biologists estimated the population of harp seals to be 7.4 million in 2014 and 2 million ringed seals.

Greenland is severely affected by politics in the EU and other countries. The effect of the trade ban is clear: even with the IC exception, the market in Greenland is killed because of the international effect on other markets.

Seal is a traditional food that has been evaluated by doctors and scientists who have advised to not change the food consumption.

The Minister then made reference to the 2007 UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous People, i.e. the right to determine their own identity and self-determination for their own means of social and economic development. Nevertheless, it is proved that the IC exception is not benefiting the Inuits.

In Europe the ban was decided based on feelings and emotions, yet not on facts: this has had serious social and economic consequences.

Greenland goes through several months of dark. Greenland's hunters mainly live of hunting: they cannot simply change profession, and this has effects on their children. In conclusion, the Minister urged the European Parliament to take a decision that all parties can accept.

Henrik Sandgreen, Chairman for Fishermen and Hunters Organisation, Greenland

Few consumers know anything about the so-called Inuit exception (IC). Greenland has observed a 90% decrease of seal exports due to the ban. The number of seal hunters has fallen by 34%. Mr. Sandgreen asked: what would Greenland and its population look like if the government had not introduced subsidies to compensate the hunters?

The EU regulation is discriminatory and harmful. As a result, the Greenlandic society has been negatively affected and the EU has the responsibility to correct its mistakes. Mr. Sandgreen called for the abolition of the ban because of the severe effects on Greenland, and the EU should compensate for this damage.

Mr. Sandgreen called the EU to set aside funds for a comprehensive awareness raising campaign to explain to the public in the EU that this hunt is sustainable and not barbaric. Indeed, the Inuits use everything from the animal: it is an environmentally friendly subsistence method.

In conclusion, Mr. Sandgreen asked the Parliament to consider the fact and understand that Man can live with nature and not against it.

Ambassador Ole Toft, Deputy Permanent Representative of Denmark to the EU

Ambassador Toft argued that Denmark is seriously concerned by the negative effects that the ban had on the Arctic people. He called upon the EU to assess and review the adverse effects of this regulation.

The seal hunt is a legitimate activity that should not be hampered. It is possible to do a sustainable hunt, while taking into account animal welfare concerns.

Greenland is a modern society. Seals and other animals live a free life. Greenland is constantly working to improve the killing methods.

Ambassador Toft argued that sustainability should be the principle guiding the use of natural resources. It should be based on objective criteria and scientific research.

Nordic countries are the most affected by the Regulation and it is understandable that other Member States have strong interests on animal welfare but they must bear part of the responsibility of the misinformation and stigmatisation of the seal

hunt that has been achieved by decades of negative campaigning. However, it is crucial to understand the reality of the Arctic.

Indigenous people have international rights, reconfirmed in New York less than 6 months ago. The EU has a legal obligation towards the Inuit to protect their right.

He concluded by affirming the commitment of Denmark to find a solution acceptable to all.

Jyri Ollila, Counsellor on Fisheries and Natural Resources, Permanent Representation of Finland to the EU

Mr. Ollila mentioned the good cooperation with MEPs and colleagues in other Member States.

The seal issue is not primarily a hunting issue around the Baltic Sea. It is a fisheries issue, a natural resources management issue, and a question of livelihoods of fishermen around the Baltic Sea. Baltic seal population have been growing during the last decade, which was also the case of fish stocks due to the combination of sound management plans.

To achieve this, seal populations need to be managed in order to keep a balance in the waters. Yet, this regulation intends not to prohibit hunting but trade.

There is a serious problem of principle: it is not ecologically or ethically right to hunt and then not use the natural resource. It would create waste as well as sanitary and health hazards.

Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Estonia do not deny the WTO ruling, but believe that trade is possible in accordance with GATT rules.

Regarding the “*protection of public morals*”: catch is an integral part of all hunting. It is important to keep in mind that all hunting in the Baltic Seas is very much disciplined, including the means of hunting. It is also ensured that hunting does not cause excessive pain to the seals.

Finally, it is worth noting that seal populations of the Baltic Sea are at a level of achieving favourable conservation status.

Comments and questions:

MEP Cristian-Silviu Busoi, Rapporteur in IMCO (EPP)

MEP Busoi in his report recognises the legitimate right of the Inuits to hunt seals and use the products in order to make a living. “*They have the right to fulfil their socio-economic development needs*”, he said.

Having said that, the EU has to take into consideration the legal aspect to the WTO ruling.

Unfortunately, there was not too much time given to the EP and the Council to discuss this matter, as a solution must be found by October 2015.

The draft report of MEP Busoi is the result of many discussions and of taking into consideration inputs of regional authorities (Denmark and Greenland). Seal hunting is an integral part of the Inuit culture, making a major contribution to their subsistence and livelihoods.

Mr. Busoi’s amendment concerns the need to ask the Commission to start explaining to the European citizens that seal hunting by Inuit is a legitimate and legal activity, and therefore to lead awareness-raising campaigns.

The trade reduction with the EU is mainly due to misunderstanding and fake impressions of European traders that the ban is total.

MEP Bendt Bendtsen, Rapporteur on the opinion in INTA (S&D)

The Commission thinks that it is only a technical issue, but it is politics.

Indeed, the EU must comply with WTO rules but unfortunately some of the shadow rapporteurs do not understand the issue well.

Fortunately though, most of the political groups agreed on the need for an impact assessment.

MEP Nils Torvalds, Vice-Chair of the Intergroup

MEP Torvalds visited Greenland 25 years ago near Ilulissat. During his visit, hunters in the village where he stayed caught the first seal in 5 years. Now they are everywhere.

“We are urban people, we have no clue of the life outside of highways and we take bad decisions because of that”, he argued.

Hans Stielstra, Acting Head of Unit, Global Sustainability, Trade and Multilateral Agreements

The WTO accepted the overall ban but rejected the MRM exception. It accepted after a lot of discussion with the Commission the IC exception as such but asked the EC to clarify the link with the overall aim of the regulation, which is around animal welfare concerns.

The WTO requested to ensure that there wouldn't be mixing between the result of commercial hunt and the result of Inuit hunt.

The Commission wants to have a limited change to the regulation to ensure compliance with the WTO ruling only. It is not something done out of choice.

Furthermore, the Commission wants to ensure that the exception works. Unfortunately, they are not experts on this issue and have made a proposal based on the best knowledge available to them.

Comments:

- Mr. Stielstra did not understand why the EC proposal would tighten the rules. The EC has done what it can to ensure the continuation of what exists at the moment, while complying with the WTO.
- He did not understand either in what ways the ban has destroyed the market. Looking at the figures, the number of seals put on the market has been steadily going down since 2004 and the ban has been put up in 2009. The numbers have started going up again in 2012, the same year the IC exception was established. Isn't it something else that put the market down, he asked. The figures do not convince that the ban was the only element that destroyed the market.

Normunds Struve, EU Presidency (Latvia)

Mr. Struve asked about the possibility to change the general approach in the future, by for instance using a licensing system. Would this be the way out to avoid supplementary problems and restrictions?

Latvia will focus on helping to find a solution, which meets WTO requirements, and hopes to find a compromise during the discussions.

Discussion:

MEP Ulla Tornaes, Shadow Rapporteur in IMCO (ALDE)

What is the EC's position regarding the proposal to lead an awareness-raising campaign?

Hans Stielstra

The Commission would prefer to focus on the proposal. He doesn't see how this would happen as they would need to find the funds to do something like that.

Amalie Jessen, Head of Department, Ministry of Fisheries, Hunting and Agriculture, Greenland

To answer Mr. Stielstra's previous comment, Mrs. Jessen explained that the drop in exports started in 2006 when the EU started to discuss the possibility to put a ban. This has affected the whole industry. The Government of Greenland had to start subsidising the hunters.

Seal hunting is not only figures but it is a way of life. It is part of their lives, of their tradition and culture.

MEP Nils Torvalds

To rebuild a culture after destroying it is very hard. We need to first understand the situation before taking decisions based on international conventions that can be harmful.

MEP Bendt Bendtsen

The wording of the EC proposal stigmatises the Indigenous people and gives the impression that this type of hunting is immoral.

MEP Schaldemose

She was shadow for the S&D in 2008. The group did support the ban and still does, but stressed that a solution must be found for the indigenous people.

We need to find a balance: we must understand that we need to have a new discussion about hunting methods. There is a clear misunderstanding in the EU about the hunting methods of seal hunters. *"We do not want to see baby seals hunted but what is happening in Greenland is very different, their hunt is sustainable"*, she stressed.

Yet, it is a question for indigenous people all around the world, not just for Greenland's Inuits. The EC has a responsibility in 2 ways:

- It must help getting rid of the misunderstanding among consumers in Europe
- It should be obliged to make an impact assessment on the ban. We need to have this information to decide about how to act towards the WTO ruling.

We need to find a workable exception. It is important to look at the situation in Greenland where it is difficult to find alternative ways to make a living.

Hans Stielstra

The EC has the impression that the IC exception works; they have never heard that it doesn't work.

The EC made a proposal on the basis of the WTO ruling to bring the EU into compliance. It is up to the EP and Council to take the final decision on that. It is up to them to take the decision to have an impact assessment as well.

It was the EP that very vocally asked for a ban in 2006/2007. The debate won't be an easy one.

Jyri Ollila

It is common that policies are made from a very narrow angle (in this case the trade angle) without caring about the consequences in practice. Seals hunt represents a very small part of trade.

Seals eat twice the amount of fish fished by men, and destroy stocks.

Jo Swabe, Humane Society International (HSI)

Finland has never established a recognised body to give certification for seal products, and Finland has never made use of the derogation. So why is it so important to them?

HSI always supported the need for IC exception. However, the WTO ruling said that the EU was favouring Greenlandic products as opposed to Canadian products.

Jyri Ollila

Finland has a stake in this debate because of coastal tourism, the trade in seal skin and sound marine resources management.

MEP Stefan Eck

He is an animal rights' activist. Yet, he understands fully the Inuit position. However, the interests of millions of animal friends also have to be taken into consideration.

A trade ban did not destroy the market; the market was destroyed by its bad reputation.

Animal welfare rights now get a higher value in modern society: there is a new relationship between humans and animals.

Ambassador Ole Toft

Hunting communities in Greenland are in a crisis and are disappearing. The ban is a major part of the problem.

All positions are understandable and must be respected.

He said not understanding that the EC says that it cannot do an impact assessment. Denmark does not support this position.

Conclusions:

MEP Nils Torvalds concluded: *"we need to look at the reality instead of looking at the figures."*