

The following is a small part of Mark's written memories of the Russian seal pup campaign. Photographs show the Russian seal pup farms, Mark and Robert at Downing St., London, as well as with senior MEP's from the European Parliament when they took their campaign to Brussels, Belgium. The netted seal pup photo shows how baby seals were transported from the ice back to seal farms; to be killed at a later date. This is the biggest difference to the Canadian murder – where babies are killed on the ice directly rather than being 'farmed' for a short period before they were killed.

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Harp Seal – sub order: Pinnipedia. Three separate populations within Russia; the Eastern, Central and Western herds. With original numbers probably around the 3 million mark, European nations engaged in taking harp seals in the Spring months to supplement their catch of bow head whales during the rest of the year. As seal stocks gradually became depleted, hunting was controlled by the former USSR, Denmark, Norway and Greenland. In doing this, the White sea herds of the White Sea region recovered gradually to its level of around one half of a million. In 1965, commercial sealing was topped in the former USSR except for the hunting of the seal pups.

Harp seals can live for over 35 years; they feed mainly on herring and polar cold and also crustaceans if possible. In the January / February months of each year, pregnant females eat due to the requirement to put on large amounts of blubber which is then converted to produce milk for offspring. Pregnant females give birth to their young parts once they have come onto the winter ice pack during late February or early March, following a gestation period of around 10 months. The newborn pups are approximately 80 to 90 cm in length and weigh anywhere between five and 11 kg. At first, their coat colouring is yellow rather than a pure white; it is only after approximately 2 to 3 days from birth that the pups fur turns into what we familiarly know as a 'whitecoat'. As the milk on which they feed contains up to 45% fat, as compared to approximately 4% from cows milk, the young pups almost triple their weight in the first 12 days of their lives. They nurse for about 12 days by their mothers, before being abandoned. Weaned pups usually weigh anywhere between 34 and 40 kg at 18 days of age; more than half of this weight is comprised of blubber.

After reaching 18 days, the young pup completely sheds its whitecoat; this is replaced by a short silvery coat which is flecked with dark spots. At this stage in their life the pups are being called 'beaters'. The beater period usually lasts for approximately one year; with full moulting taking place after around four weeks during early April. By the time it has reached its sixth week, a young pup can swim and take on regular food in the form of crustaceans. At the age of approximately one year the harp seal pup becomes known as a 'bedlamer'; and it is over the next four years up until the age of approximately 5, that the bedlamers gradually lose their spots.

In the mid-1990s, the Arkhangelsk region of Russia was located approximately 19,500 out of a total of 30 to 31,000 seal pups. The remainder were allocated to other regions within Russia; however these quotas were sold back to Arkhangelsk, who took the whole quota. Of Russia's 31,000+ quota, approximately 4,500 were taken alive and delivered to what is known as seal farms. The rest would kill directly on the ice as whitecoats. The size of the annual quota is recommended by scientists at the Arkhangelsk branch of the Polar Research Institute of Marine Fisheries and Oceanography. One of the key parameters in setting an annual quota for the seal pup hunt is directly related to fish stocks, which had declined to the pre-mid-90s due to overfishing. The final decision is primarily political, taking in a joint Russian / Norwegian forum style. Any contracts were supposed to be fully enforced by fisheries inspectors with a group of four or five inspectors counting every animal caught. If it was noted that more animals were caught than allowed for under the quota, there were supposedly supposed to be heavy fines. But as the quotas enforcement was undertaken by a local fishery collective, it was often the case that it was very difficult to enforce any of the quotas originally set.



A typical Russian seal pup farm

Of say a typical 30,000 harp seals in a quota, approximately 4500 were delivered alive to seal farms on the White Sea coast. The remaining 26,000+ animals were kill directly on the ice as whitecoats. Hunts normally took place in early March, with reconnaissance being undertaken by scientists who identified the optimum time for the hunt. This was when pregnant females had travelled down into the White Sea area and began breeding en masse on the

ice flows; seizures were delivered to the ice flows by chartered helicopters belonging to national airline. Weather permitting, approximately 7-8 helicopters were used, flying on average around 4 to 6 hours each perday. Whitecoats which were killed from directly on the ice, were killed by a blow across the top of the head or knows made by the blunt end of a gaff. One blow was usually sufficient to kill the animal, but inexperience on the part of some sealers meant that more than one blow to be used. The initial blow to the nose or skull was followed by a 'brain spiking' which was supposed to prevent a return to consciousness. The baby seals were not bled on the ice as there was a fear that this process would spoil the fur; but when a certain number of dead or unconscious pups were collected, these were all loaded into a special net device which was collected by one of the helicopters. On arrival at the collection point, the helicopter would disperse and empty net, whilst at the same time collecting a full net of dead seals to be delivered back to base. Once the full quota of whitecoats had been taken from the ice, the operation was stopped and the attention turned instead to the catching of the moulders who had been taken to the seal farms.

The capturing, transportation, confinement and eventual inhumane killing at the farms meant that pups were inflicted with a great amount of stress and suffering. If angling pups were caught, stresses would have been even greater. Seal farming was started because there is a market for pelts from beater pups; with these pelts being soft and silver grey covered with black spots. Around this time the hero the code becomes thicker and stronger and the quality of the further generally improves. The basic theory of the Sill farming policy isn't young pups are captured shortly after abandonment by their mother when they are being held in fenced enclosures until they are fully moulted; at which time they are killed and pelted.

It is generally agreed that the practice of Sill farming causes more stress and suffering to seal pups rather than the direct killing of them on the ice. In the farms, many pups who was still underage and not fully weaned, would try to suckle from other pups. There was a general concerning the industry that deters the animals would be extremely weak towards the end of their period of confinement, it was unlikely that the pelts would be of any particular value. A certain amount of small whitecoats were often called and transported to the farms regardless. For the capturing of farm animals, groups of sealers were taken to the ice flows by helicopter; individual pups were restrained in individual sac type nets, after which they were emptied into larger metal containers. Around 20 pups could be transported in one metal container, which were taken back to the farms we're the seal pups were unloaded and restrained in a series of pains in each about the size of a tennis court.

During confinement at the farm the pups were not fed; with many succumbing to disease which was generally attributed to both overcrowding and stress of their capture and transportation. On the farms many of the pups would suffer from mouth infections which was considered a typical sign of extreme stress. Congealed blood combined with ice was often seen to be hanging from their mouths; something which is never seen under normal circumstances in the wild. On the farms the seals are under constant 24-hour guard, with tall

watchtowers and guards overlooking each of the penned / court sized areas. When the coats of the pups had reached the correct stage, the pups were killed, normally in batches of about 50 by injection under the flipper using a drug named Dithyllinum. This drug produces death by immobilising the skeletal respiratory muscle; in other words the animal suffocated to death because it is unable to breathe. As a sideline, this is fairly typical of the type of drugs and systems used to kill stray dogs in the Balkans; something which is covered elsewhere in this book. When any animal is given 1 doses of this drug, it only becomes paralysed, and as such it is impossible to see whether the animal is actually dead or alive. America and then there are the medical associations have so many years since recommended that the use of these drugs to produce euthanasia is strongly condemned !



Pups bleeding around the mouth – typical sign of both illness and stress

As animal welfare campaigner, there are one hell of a lot of issues that currently involve animals and absolutely disgust me. Anything and everything to do with the fur industry is just one of those issues; and this was one of the

major factors that influenced me to try and help out Robert with his fight for justice for the young / baby seals of the White Sea region of Russia.

There is nothing hidden in fact that the fur from beater pups is one of the most popular furs used in both peaked caps and some forms of fur coats. A lot is sold within Russia, but beater further is also popular both in Norway and in Denmark, two nations which regularly take part in Russian fur auctions. The Norwegians were alleged to have processed Russian beater pelts and then sold them on after further processing.



Beater pup on farm



Slaughtered beater pups



Beater pelts



The pitiful end product

White coat fur is more popular and is being used in hats there has earflaps etc. There were / are allegations that it whitecoat pelts from Russia were reportedly sold direct to Norway. At the time of my deep involvement in this issue with Robert, many whitecoat pelts from the White Sea region of Russia were being dyed in order to improve and develop wider markets. It was really almost an impossibility for anyone at the time to detect the origin of any such furs, as furs from many different sources are mixed at the auctions; combine this with the fact that whitecoats furs were often dyed brown before sale and you have (as low budget animal welfare groups will tell you) an almost impossible task to get any real proof of what you're after.

At the time in the mid-90s, Norway itself had a ban on the killing of seal pups of the year; i.e. those being under six months of age; and yet it, Norway

purchase furs from Russia. Denmark was bound by the European commission ban on the import of whitecoat furs, and yet at the time really took no action to prevent the purchasing of beater furs which are generalised as causing even more suffering. There was always a question of, unknowingly, the fact that Denmark had purchased whitecoat furs at auctions and imported them into the EU by this method. At the time in the mid-90s, the effectiveness of the EU was up for question, as it was possible that Russian seal pups could be captured and moulted, and then their whitecoat furs be dyed colours such as Brown; only then to be traded within the EU by nations such as Denmark.

Back in Russia, the blubber from this sorted seals was used as feed for poultry farms, with meat being sold on to fur farms where it was rendered down and used as food for other captive fur bearing animals. Investigations found out that some of the meat from Russian seal pups was used to manufacture a product known as 'Backtophoc'; which was a medium used for medical purposes. Little was really known about this as the product was labelled as 'commercial in confidence', and as such, very little was available for further investigation. However, it was known and documented that the drying equipment for the process of 'Backtophoc' production had oddly enough, being provided by Denmark.

It was not uncommon for the capacity of 'normal' Russian fur farms to be able to deal with over 20,000 Arctic foxes and over 120,000 mink. Some Russian experts were open in admitting that the killing of seal pups on both the ice and in seal farms were inhumane, and that the development of ecotourism was viewed as much more viable alternative. Ecotourism also gained widespread local support as an initiative from many sectors of the Russian communities.

And so, having knowledge of this information and the real expertise on the subject from Robert, the view was taken that something further had to be done at EU level.

Cut to late Summer 1996 - I am in the back garden of a friend and fellow campaigner (Clare and her husband David) who runs a cat sanctuary at Kingsdown which is near to Deal on the Kent coast. It is a beautiful Sunday afternoon and a group of us are having tea and biscuits whilst discussing possible routes to be taken for further Russian seal pup actions. Robert is there and very much casually directing us through his thoughts and views on where to go and what to do. After a short while we have basically produced an action plan – firstly, we tackle the UK government at Downing Street to try and get the (then) Prime Minister John Major to bring up the issue of Russian sealing when he either visits Russia, or he uses the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for communications directly with the Russian authorities, or also, when he has Russian diplomats to visit him at Downing Street. Secondly, we take our campaign directly to the heart of Europe; the EU in Brussels, Belgium, with the hope of meeting a Commissioner to discuss trade and the import of pelts (into the EU) from non EU states such as Norway.

Whatever we are to do, we need some publicity; as anything good and decent always does. So, what is it ? – to cut a long story short we end up planning the Downing Street efforts into something for Easter the following year. By planning ahead we can take a few months to produce and obtain signatures for the thousands of individual petition cards which we will personally deliver to PM Major. And as it will be Easter, what shall the cards all be delivered in ? – a very large Easter egg; that should do well with the ever present photographers in ‘the Street’, and obtain a much needed boost to our fight for Russian baby seals. After the London efforts we can then divert our campaign into Europe and hopefully with the support of Members of the European parliament (MEP’s), get a foot in the door towards a meeting with the trade commissioner. It is going to be hard work and the timescale for producing the petition cards, as well as getting them all individually signed is rather a tall order; but we are committed and decide to go for it. Robert gets full backing from all present ‘in the garden’ to move ahead with his plans.

Mr. Watts MEP had volunteered his time to support Robert and us with our presentation of all the cards in Downing Street in an attempt to try and make the subject a little more attractive to all the photographers who wait directly opposite number 10, I decided that I would try and take on the role of a Russian seal pup Hunter. To do this I borrowed a couple of Roberts life-size seal pup models, who had their backs covered in a substitute fake fur (by my mum) which I then covered with fake blood obtained from a local theatrical shop. It looked okay and in our opinion, would have been quite good for gaining attention of the photographers; who once had given you their attention, often followed up with interviews and reports on the issue that you were dealing with.

I had a black beanie hat, and made up a Russian flag which was stuck across the front. Using this theatrical blood once again, I splattered it all over a white T-shirt which was going to be worn over another shirt typical of those which I had seen on photographs taken of the Russian hunters. Black tank trousers, thick black knee length socks and a good sturdy pair of veggie boots completed my outfit. As I had expressed some concerns at the ‘garden meeting’ about being dressed like this and carrying a pick (typical of that which was used to kill the pups) through the streets of London, I decided that a large wooden baseball bat was probably the better thing and kind of just as effective, whilst still getting the message across. So the big day was finalised and number 10 accepted our request to deliver all of the petition cards.

Cut to Charing Cross station sometime around Easter 1997. - I had made the relatively short journey up to London from my home in North Kent, to the place where everybody on the campaign that day had planned to meet, which was just outside the entrance to Downing Street. Once off the train, I shot down into the underground toilets at Charing Cross station, where I changed from my travelling clothes into those of this ‘Russian seal hunter’. I must admit, the walk from the station through Trafalgar Square and up the Mall to Downing Street did get me a few glances from all sorts of people going about their business in the city. The fact that I was carrying two life-size whitecoat seal pups splattered in blood and wrapped in transparent plastic bags sort of



added to my 'interest appeal' I suppose you can call it 'interest or attention grabbing' on that walk. But what the hell, I was there to get attention for the campaign to stop Russian seal pups being butchered, so what did it matter what I personally looked like walking the streets of London ?; After all, there are probably many people who walk around the city dressed in similar kind of garb every day. But who cares ? – I did not.

I got to the entrance of Downing Street where I met up with Robert, Mark Watts MEP and a few of the girls who travelled up on the train with Bob from SE Kent.

We posed in Whitehall for a few photographs with some of the guys from the press, and then made our way up to the gates of Downing Street for the ritual inspection and verification by the Met. police that we had an official invite to present our petition. Once the police saw us coming with the giant Easter egg full of petition cards, things took on a negative approach. After some discussions, the police informed that we were not allowed to take Easter egg into Downing Street; and that instead, all of the petition cards would have to be placed into carrier bags which could then be manually transported up to the door of number 10 for presentation. This was, in our opinion, just a feeble attempt to destroy everything that had been planned and agreed on with the authorities prior to the day. With a giant egg being involved I guess you could say that someone did not want to be left and with yolk on their face, but it could also be argued that in going through the process of having to take all of the postcards out of the egg in order to place them into the bags, the police were in a position where they could verify / certify that a bomb or something in their fantasy dreams was not hidden away at the bottom and would blow the PM to kingdom come – God forbid !!

Regardless of being able to see the complete interior of the egg before we even entered Downing St., the police refused to accept our argument and insisted that the egg be left at the gates. And so, in a rather undignified manner, the postcards forming the Russian seal pup petition, were delivered to the steps of number 10 by several campaigners each carrying as many plastic bags full of petition cards as they could. At the entrance to Downing Street, the police also took me aside and told me that I would not be allowed into Downing Street carrying a large baseball bat such as I had on my person. "You might try and get through the door and bash somebody's brains out with it" was the rather pathetic argument that was put forward by the police on duty. Oh, don't tempt me, how about I start here ?, was the feeling that I had deep down inside; knowing just how much Robert had been ignored and pushed aside by the British government over many years regarding this issue.