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November 4, 2009

Law Amendments Committee
Province House
1726 Hollis Street
Halifax, Nova Scotia
B3J 2Y3

Members of the Committee:

Re: Bill 50 – Wilderness Areas Protection Act (amended)

My name is Bridget Curran, director and spokesperson of the Atlantic Canadian Anti-Sealing Coalition, a collection of individuals, organizations and businesses opposed to the killing of seals both in Canada and abroad.

The focus of my opposition to Bill 50 is Clause 2, giving the Environment Minister authorization to allow a DFO-licensed grey seal hunt on Hay Island, part of the Scaterie Island protected wilderness area.

However, Bill 50 goes beyond the seal hunt issue and threatens to set a dangerous precedent in handing over protected wilderness areas and provincial parks to commercial industry for their own use.

I do not speak only on behalf of seals. I also speak on behalf of Nova Scotians. Nova Scotians who pay their taxes. Nova Scotians who elected the members of this Committee to the Legislative Assembly. Nova Scotians to whom our protected wilderness areas belong.

I'll touch quickly on the possible motivations behind these proposed amendments.

I am having a rather difficult time understanding why exactly these amendments are necessary. But I'm sure I can be forgiven for that, since even Environment/Fisheries Minister Sterling Belliveau himself found it difficult to explain to media during his press conference why the amendments were necessary. In his own words "the previous minister of environment identified that there should be amendments dealing with this particular wilderness area."

What exactly does that mean? It doesn't answer the question. Why, exactly, does the Wilderness Areas Protection Act need to be changed to permit the hunting of grey seals on Hay Island?

Is it to protect fish stocks?

Surely not, since DFO Science has stated repeatedly there is no science to support claims that killing seals will aid in cod stock recovery.

In November 2007, the Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat's Proceedings of the National Workshop on the Impacts of Seals on Fish Populations in Eastern Canada (Part 1), it was remarked that no analysis existed to suggest fewer seals would have a positive effect on fish stock recovery and, indeed, there was evidence that seals feed mostly on other prey species.

As recently as April, 2009 DFO scientists stated that evidence of the impact of grey seal predation on depleted stocks is inconclusive and there is no current information on the extent of gear damage caused by seals.

Further, Peter Labor, the Environment Department's acting manager of protected areas said "This is not about doing it for protecting the biodiversity of the area. This is about providing opportunity for the DFO-licensed seal harvest to occur on Hay Island."

Is it, then, to facilitate the grey seal fishery?

Surely not, considering there are no markets for grey seal products. Seals are prone to diseases such as brucellosis which are transmittable to humans, consequently the meat is unsafe for consumption. Only one sealing boat traveled to Hay Island in 2009 and out of a TAC set for 2,500 last year only 250 pups were killed, as no buyers could be found for the skins.

Is it to control the grey seal population?

Surely not, since the grey seal population has not 'exploded' as those within the fishing community prone to fits of melodrama would like us to believe.

Past over-exploitation, culls and bounties resulted in the near-extinction of grey seals. They survived only because humans then turned their attention to the next easy and plentiful target – the harp seal.

The grey seal population is not "exploding" – it is following a natural recovery path with full capability of regulating itself without interference from humans.

Is it because grey seals are considered a nuisance, interfering and destroying fishing gear and fishing lines?

Surely not, since DFO's own Section Head, Marine Mammals Biology and Conservation, Mike Hammill, has stated quite clearly in internal DFO correspondence:

"I think it is quite evident that there is not a nuisance seal problem in Nova Scotia."

He continues:

"It is also quite troubling to see that Nova Scotia is the only area that does not seem to follow a national policy, and it seems to think it is different, and is issuing licenses as if it is a wild cowboy shoot, but the data show quite clearly that the problem seems almost insignificant."

Is it simply because fishermen need to kill seals?

Nova Scotia fishermen can kill seals anywhere. There are many islands dotted around this province which are home to grey seals. Fishermen have full access to these islands and each year they travel to those islands and kill grey seals. As noted above, DFO's Head of Marine Mammal Research believes that Nova Scotia is issuing licenses as if it is a wild cowboy shoot. Why do they NEED to kill seals on Hay Island? The truth is that they do *not*.

Members of the Committee, there is no logical reason for these amendments. There is no logical reason to authorize the killing of grey seal pups on Hay Island. Given the lack of logic, I can only assume the Nova Scotia government is pandering to the wishes of the fishing industry who stubbornly and illogically believe seals are to blame for everything and their extermination will solve all of our ocean's problems.

In 2008 – the first year Hay Island was opened to sealers – I was present on the island and documented the slaughter of grey seal pups aged just a few weeks. It was one of the most horrific things I have ever witnessed. I will tell you briefly what I saw so you will have some idea of what you will be sanctioning if you pass this Bill. On Hay Island, seals of all ages were herded together by sealers, including newborn whitecoats and nursing mothers. The sealers strode among this sea of terrified seals, bludgeoning the moulted pups with wooden bats and slicing them open with box cutters mere inches from other seals. Some sealers joked as they slaughtered and butchered the pups, calling each other "Batman", referring to the crude wooden bats they used to bludgeon the pups to death. At one point I saw a pup moving as if to push the knife away as the sealer sliced the pup open.

After just a few short days, sealers had killed 1,261 pups, leaving very few still alive on the island. Nearly the entire population of young that year had been decimated in just a few days.

DFO and the provincial government insisted this was a humane and regulated harvest. What I saw was neither "humane" nor "regulated."

Protected Wilderness Areas belong to *all* Nova Scotians, not commercial industry lobbyists. A responsible government respects the wishes of its citizens to keep their protected areas and provincial parks safe from exploitation by industry.

The people of Nova Scotia do not want their protected wilderness areas and provincial parks invaded by commercial industry to pillage and destroy the precious flora and fauna on those lands.

If the fishing industry is allowed access to protected wilderness area Hay Island, I fear it is only a matter of time before lobbyists from other commercial industries clamour for their share of our protected space. Today it's seal hunting on Hay Island; tomorrow it could be clear-cutting on Ship Harbour Long Lake Wilderness Area, or strip-mining in the soon to be designated Five Bridge Lakes Wilderness Area.

This should give us all pause for sober reflection and consideration.

Members of the Committee, I respectfully request that you ponder the motivations behind the proposed amendments to the Wilderness Areas Protection Act and accordingly reject Bill 50.

Thank you.



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[REDACTED]

From: Hammill, Mike
Sent: November 2, 2007 9:31 PM
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: Grey seals stock status report

I think it is quite evident that there is not a nuisance seal problem in nova scotia. It is also quite troubling to see that Nova Scotia is the only area that does not seem to follow a national policy, and it seems to think it is different, and is issuing licences as if it is a wild cowboy shoot, but the data show quite clearly that the problem seems almost insignificant. Newfoundland has 6 million seals in waters around its coast and has issued 2 licences, Nova Scotia may at best have 250k animals around its coast and has issued almost 500 licences. seems odd?
moh

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 30 octobre 2007 12:05
To: Hammill, Mike
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: Grey seals stock status report

Good afternoon Mike et al ...the 481 nuisance seal licences issued in this region are for "grey seals only". This is annotated to the licence as well as this year the requirement to provide monthly kill numbers...at last count it is now 91 seals...including those caught on long line as incidental catches.
I am contemplating the ramifications to the industry and DFO that if licence holders have a nil reports and we only get minimal numbers of kills reported under this licence will or could this be construed that there really isn't a problem with grey seal predation after all.....

From: Hammill, Mike
Sent: October 30, 2007 11:53 AM
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: Grey seals stock status report

Hi-
I am currently putting together the stock status report for grey seals. There is a context section which is where a management context goes.

It is in this section that the number of nuisance seal licences and number of removals will be included.

For the Maritime region I have 481 nuisance seal licenses issued for 2007. I assume that these are for grey seals? Could you clarify [REDACTED]

For qc, nf and gulf, how many nuisance licences have you issued, how many seals have been reported killed and have they been targetted at grey or harbour seals?

Thanks
moh

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Seal hunt approval made easier

Province making changes to wilderness protection act to allow Hay Island harvest

By DAVID JACKSON Provincial Reporter

The Dexter government is making it easier to approve a seal hunt in a protected wilderness area in Cape Breton.

The current law says the environment minister may allow a commercial harvest to manage, preserve or restore a wilderness area's biodiversity.

Environment Minister Sterling Belliveau said proposed changes to the Wilderness Areas Protection Act mean he won't have to consider that question when deciding whether to approve a seal hunt licence for Hay Island, part of the Scaterie Island protected area off the northeast coast of Cape Breton.

The minister had trouble explaining why the change is necessary.

"The previous minister of environment identified that there should be amendments dealing with this particular wilderness area," Mr. Belliveau said.

The federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans licenses the commercial hunt, but the provincial environment minister has to approve hunters going into a wilderness area. Only traditional hunting for individual use is normally allowed in such areas.

Critics said the previous Tory government allowed the commercial seal hunt illegally because there was no harm to the area's integrity. The government's argument that the hunt was necessary to protect fish stocks didn't apply since the water wasn't part of the protected area.

Then-minister Mark Parent said in February 2008 that government lawyers said he was following the law in approving the hunt.

Mr. Belliveau said reviews of the seal hunts in 2008 and early this year found there was no evidence of environmental benefits or harm.

Peter Labor, the department's acting manager of protected areas, said the legislative change will make the minister's approval more straightforward.

"This is not about doing it for protecting the biodiversity of the area," Mr. Labor said. "This is about providing opportunity for the DFO-licensed seal harvest to occur on Hay Island."

Mr. Belliveau said he as minister can still put strict conditions on hunters who receive a licence.

Anti-sealing activist Bridget Curran charged that Mr. Belliveau is in a conflict of interest

because he's also the fisheries minister.

Ms. Curran, spokeswoman for the Atlantic Canadian Anti-Sealing Coalition, also said Nova Scotians, regardless of their opinions on seals, should be concerned about a minister opening up a wilderness area.

"It gives him carte blanche to pander to commercial industries and to allow commercial industries to go onto our land, our protected land that belongs to all Nova Scotians," she said.

Chris Miller, spokesman for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, said he is disappointed the province continues to allow the hunt in a protected area.

Mr. Belliveau said he doesn't know yet if there will be a hunt this winter. The last two have seen far fewer seals killed than the quota permitted. The quota was 2,500 last year and 2,200 this year.

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