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Global warming may spell end of seal cull

BRAD HUNTER IN TORONTO

EVERY spring, the ice floes off Canada's east coast turn red with the blood of baby seals. And every spring, celebrities, environmentalists and governments demand that Canada end the slaughter.

This year, global warming may achieve what the likes of Brigitte Bardot and Sir Paul McCartney could not - and end the seal hunt.

According to Greenpeace, poor ice conditions triggered by climate change are killing the newborn pups and threatening the very survival of the harp seal.

Normally, Canada's fisheries department has established quotas by this time of the year, and the hunt traditionally starts by late March in the southern Gulf of St Lawrence.

But due to the low number of seals in the area, no limit has been set. Government officials yesterday said a decision on whether to cancel this year's hunt was due by the end of next week.

Environmentalists have said that surveillance flights were reporting "not a single harp seal to be found in the southern Gulf of St Lawrence".

Toni Vernelli, of Greenpeace Canada, said: "With last year's sea ice being so bad, we know that the seals had a bad reproductive year. Add high mortality and this year's ice being even worse than last year, and it really is a pattern that shows these animals are going to be the first to suffer under global warming.

"All of the climate experts have confirmed that with global warming, polar bears and seals will suffer because they depend on the sea ice, and we know that sea ice is shrinking."

Seals need to come on to the ice to give birth and the pups require a minimum of three weeks of nursing before they are strong enough to swim on their own. But milder temperatures and stronger winds - both attributed to global warming - have broken up the thin sheets of ice, separating the pups from their mothers causing them to drown.

Fishermen sell the seal pelts mostly for the fashion industry in Norway, Russia and China, as well as blubber for oil, earning about £40 per seal - the slaughter of about 335,000 seals in 2006 brought in about £12.7 million. Canada claims the hunt is necessary to replace lost income for fishermen who once relied on the now diminished cod stocks.

But this year, the Canadian government acknowledges there is a problem - although it has yet to decide whether to cancel the annual hunt.

"We're still gathering information," said Phil Jenkins, of the Canadian fisheries department. "It's the ministers' decision. Quite obviously, if there are very few seals, there won't be much of a hunt.

"If we're seeing a higher than average mortality in the southern gulf, it is a concern for the entire herd, so that's why we're being careful and holding off a bit and seeing what we've really got out there."

However, he added that the seal population in Atlantic Canada had boomed from just under two million in the 1970s to nearly six million today.

Rebecca Aldworth, of the Humane Society of the United States, said the end of the hunt was in sight.

"I think the implications are very serious for the Canadian seal hunt. I think it spells the end of commercial sealing in Canada," she said.

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