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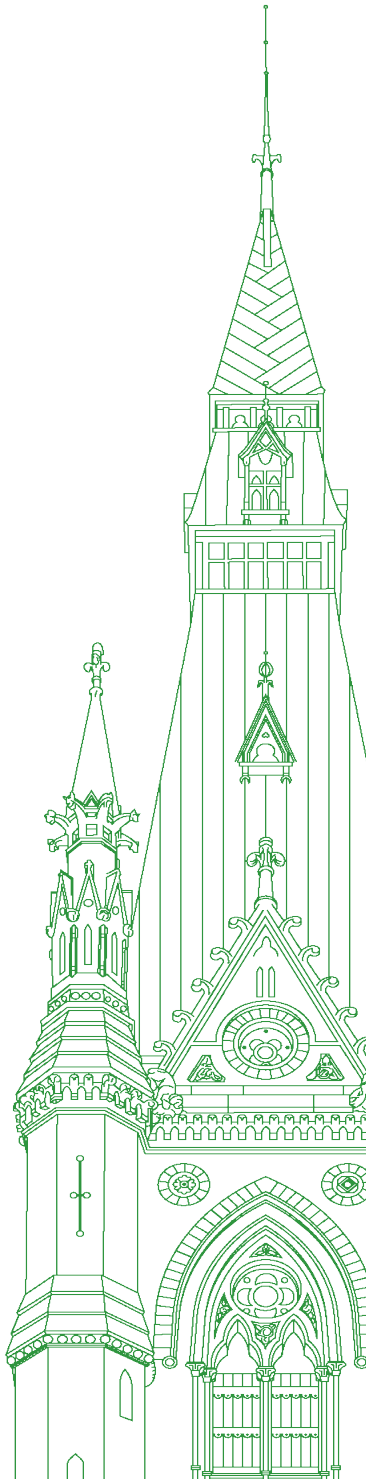

Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Thursday, March 23, 2023

● (1610)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 58 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

This meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022. Before I proceed, I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. Please mute yourself when you are not speaking. Regarding interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, English or French audio.

For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. Please address all comments through the chair. Taking screenshots or photos of your screen is not permitted. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website.

Finally, I remind everyone that the use of a House-approved headset is mandatory for remote participation in parliamentary proceedings. If a virtual participant is not wearing an appropriate headset, interpretation cannot be provided; therefore, that person will not be able to participate.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I am informing the committee that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on January 18, 2022, the committee is resuming its study of the ecosystem impacts and management of pinniped populations.

I'd like to welcome our first panel of guests.

By Zoom, we have Robert Hardy, fisheries consultant. Representing the Atlantic Groundfish Council, we have Kris Vascotto, executive director, by video conference. By video conference, representing the Prince Edward Island Fishermen's Association, we have Kenneth LeClair, vice-president, and Danny Arsenault, chair of the groundfish advisory committee.

Thank you for taking the time to appear today. You will each have up to five minutes for an opening statement,

I invite Mr. Hardy to begin, please, for five minutes or less.

Mr. Robert Hardy (Fisheries Consultant, As an Individual): Good afternoon.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans and other presenters, I appreciate the opportunity to speak today on the truth about capelin and its importance to the ocean ecosystem.

While there is always a push by environmental groups, ocean conservationists and animal rights activists to reduce and cease commercial fishing activity, especially for capelin, there is never any reference to predation by seals. Seals are, in fact, one of the largest predator groups that consume capelin in significant volume, much more than any commercial fishing effort.

In this case, DFO and the international scientific community agree that capelin—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): I raise a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Hold on one second, Mr. Hardy.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: It would seem that other microphones are open in the room. The interpreters are flagging a problem with sound quality.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm not getting it either. Can we have the translation checked that wasn't coming through?

Okay, we're good to go.

Mr. Hardy, please continue.

Mr. Robert Hardy: Okay.

DFO and the international scientific community agree that capelin are a primary prey specie and food for all seals, because capelin are abundantly available over a large geographic area and can be found both inshore and offshore during different seasons. Capelin are also a small fish that can be consumed whole, are rich in oil and have eggs, all of which are a preference of pinnipeds.

DFO estimates that harp seals—one of six seal species in Atlantic Canada—consume upwards of 1,000 metric tons of capelin annually, in comparison to 24,000 metric tons of commercial quota in 2022. This accounts for just 2.5% of the estimated harp seal consumption, and that does not include the other five seal species.

I use DFO-estimated daily consumption for harp seals, which is the lowest of any country, at 3.3 kilos. The average number of pieces of capelin per kilo is 60 pieces, so in one day, when capelin are available, a single harp seal can consume 198 fish. If that were extrapolated over a million seals, it could be 198 million. Keep in mind that the DFO estimate for consumption is less than half of the other numbers.

The limit reference point for capelin has recently been set at 640 kilotons, or 640,000 metric tons. Last year, the capelin biomass index was estimated at 262 kilotons, and it is expected to be at or above that level this year.

A decision to impose a moratorium on the commercial capelin fishery because of mounting pressure from environmentalists that have no commitment to industry or to the coastal communities of Canada or their people is unjustifiable. I suggest that removing 24,000 metric tons of quota, representing 2.5% of harp seal consumption, will do little to increase capelin stocks. Using the quota for last year of 24.7 million kilograms, if we look at the population of harp seals of 7.6 million, it would take less than one day to consume that entire quota.

Our friends in Iceland continue to have prolific, bountiful fishery resources. Iceland closed its capelin fishery in 2018 and caught only 25% of its quota that year, or 40,000 tonnes. In 2019 and 2020, its capelin fishery remained closed. The Icelandic maritime research institute proposed that the capelin catch in 2022-23 would not exceed 275,000 tonnes, which was an increase of 57,000 tonnes from their initial advisory in the fall. This also meant that the Norwegian quota increased from 43,000 tonnes to 48,000 tonnes. Iceland’s limit reference point suggests that 400,000 tonnes of capelin should be left in the water.

What are the differences between Norway’s and Iceland’s fisheries, apart from the significant difference in quotas and that both countries fish much harder than Canada? They do appear to have a more reliable science program and, notably, Iceland has practically no seal predation. It has only 25,000 animals of all species, and Norway has not documented a seal invasion since the mid-1990s. Its predominant harp seal species remains further north and entirely offshore.

In closing, I include a media quote from a senior DFO scientist: “For years, fishermen have been told it’s fishing that drives populations.” The article went on, “He says DFO manages fishermen, not fish, so it’s only natural fishermen might consider seals as a competitive fishery.” He called it “predator envy”.

● (1615)

From my lifetime of experience and perspective, there is no envy in the current state of Canada's fishery or its science program. It's time for real action, not endless debate.

Thank you for your valuable time. I look forward to answering any questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardy.

When you said your remarks would be around capelin and capelin stock, I was reminded that on Canada Day last year, I visited a place up in Witless Bay, and they had a capelin-eating contest. I won first place, because I ate my capelin faster than anyone else, but now I don't think I can keep up with a seal, according to the numbers you just gave.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I held my own that day, though.

I'll go now to Dr. Vascotto for five minutes or less, please.

Dr. Kris Vascotto (Executive Director, Atlantic Groundfish Council): Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this meeting.

Discussions on the impacts of pinniped populations often focus on the direct impacts on commercial species. Images of eviscerated cod at the bottom of coves or stomach contents from harvested animals fill our minds.

We must remind ourselves that pinniped impacts are much broader and extend far beyond direct predation. Seals eat fish. Seals eat crab. Seals eat an awful lot of things, to the tune of 1000 to 2000 kilograms per animal, per year. Every item a pinniped consumes is at the expense of some other component of the marine ecosystem. More pinnipeds mean more impacts.

For instance, last week, DFO Newfoundland announced that capelin populations were at critically low levels, driven by challenges in adult survival. Capelin are a key prey for an array of animals, from the iconic northern cod through to cetaceans and pinnipeds.

However, with eight million harp seals sharing the same marine space, capelin have failed to recover, despite a near absence of fishing. This cascades directly into stalled northern cod recovery and the impaired performance of other groundfish stocks.

Is this because seals are eating all the cod? Likely not. Could the eight million metric tons of prey, including capelin, consumed by harp seals annually be preventing the recovery of capelin stocks, thus impairing cod production? This is far more likely.

We hear of other forage fish stocks, such as mackerel and herring, experiencing prolonged periods of low productivity, with many subject to a moratorium. Again, we have a common thread. These forage species are the preferred prey of pinniped populations at historical highs and are being cropped off before they reach other ecosystem components or even sexual maturity. Food webs have been forced to restructure to new and lower productivity states for many commercially important fish species.

The direct and indirect impacts of pinnipeds are easily observed throughout Atlantic Canada. Most groundfish stocks demonstrate higher natural mortality today than in any previous time period, and diets demonstrate an absence of diet items also preferentially selected by pinnipeds, namely large, mid-trophic level forage species such as herring and mackerel. Their absence is manifested in groundfish populations as lower condition estimates, poorer growth, lowered reproductive output and high levels of natural mortality.

We cannot neglect direct impacts. Pinnipeds have annual distributions that strongly overlap with depleted fish stocks. Satellite tagging has shown clear overlap with seasonal cod aggregations. This evidence is later bolstered by direct diet analysis and modelling work, proving the link between pinniped consumption and a high natural mortality in dwindling cod populations in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, creating a prognosis of extirpation even in an absence of human-induced mortality.

It is not just marine ecosystems that are vulnerable. Entire riverine food webs can be disrupted by the arrival of a seal herd feeding heavily on whatever fish are locally available, including depleted Atlantic salmon smolts and adults. The arrival of a seal herd becomes synonymous with the denuding of local populations of salmon, trout, sucker and whitefish, and local residents see and will speak of this.

Clearly, the impact of a novel and aggressive piscivore will no doubt trickle down through the entire system to some new and unexpected stable state far different from where it began. Our challenge is to translate pinniped populations to ecosystem impacts. Comparing pinniped consumption with other ecosystem components at a landscape level misrepresents the problem, as the greatest impacts are often local, driven by overlap in both time and space.

Disentangling the role of pinnipeds in the ecosystem means a thorough appreciation of diets and distribution across the entire year, and not just within short snapshots. Only then can we speak with certainty about the role they play, how they may impact surrounding trophic levels, and how the system may respond to lower pinniped abundance.

Our current understanding is heavily restricted both spatially and temporally, creating severe biases in interpretation. For instance, how can we speak to pinniped diets, when sampling is heavily spatially biased to represent only a small portion of the pinniped herd itself?

We must acknowledge that if pinniped consumption were reduced from current levels, other ecosystem components would have additional resources, and some would perhaps experience growth. Cod is an example. Determining the strength of this response is predicated on precision around our understanding of pinniped impacts and the greater ecosystem.

Finally, if we are to accept that the role of pinnipeds in the marine ecosystem will continue at current population levels, we must accept that many of our fish stocks will also persist at lower total levels and productivity than historically observed and will be unable to rebuild to historic levels under any conditions.

This period of pinniped overabundance now represents the new normal. Stocks cannot be rebuilt with the current ecosystem structure favouring pinnipeds. This must be incorporated into rational, modern reference points and rebuilding plans commensurate with the current expectations of productivity, as many depleted fish stocks may actually be considered fully rebuilt under the current level of predation and productivity offered by pinniped populations at current levels.

● (1620)

Thank you again for this opportunity, and I look forward to addressing any questions from this esteemed committee.

The Chair: Thank you. You were right on time.

Now we'll go to the Prince Edward Island Fishermen's Association. I don't know if it's one statement, or if both of you are going to have part of the statement each to make up the five minutes.

I see Mr. Arsenault is turning on his mike.

Mr. Danny Arsenault (Chair, Groundfish Advisory Committee, Prince Edward Island Fishermen's Association): Yes. We're going to split it.

The Chair: Okay. Whoever is starting can start off when you like, and you have five minutes between you.

Mr. Danny Arsenault: Good afternoon, and thanks for the opportunity to be here. I'm Danny Arsenault, representing PEIFA, and Kenneth will be taking over for the last part of this.

The overpopulation of seals in Atlantic Canada is a grave concern of ours. It's something that membership and both Ken and I are very passionate about addressing. We have 1,275 independent core fish harvesters who fish a variety of species, namely lobster, crab, pelagic fish and groundfish, on P.E.I.

This will be my 50th year on the water fishing. I bought my fleet when I was 18 years old. At the time, we fished from ice out until we couldn't fish any longer, later in the fall. We didn't stop fishing. We had something to fish, all different stocks.

Today, I'm a lobster fisherman. Everything else is gone; there are no more fisheries for us, not even our bait fishery. We always caught our own bait. Today we buy our bait. In a two-month season this year, it cost me $40,000 to buy bait. I never had to buy bait before; I could always catch my own.

We have some photos—I don't know if they're being distributed—showing you the destruction that seals have caused to our fisheries. Some of these photos were shared in 2012 when I appeared before the Senate committee in Halifax as a representative of the PEIFA.

The fish are directly impacted by the overpopulation of grey and harp seals in the southern Gulf. Back 11 years ago, we thought that we were at the eleventh hour, and everybody around the table said the same: “It has to be now. We have to control this population.” I can't help but wonder what our groundfish, pelagic stocks and stuff would look like right now, had that happened.

Our government has been scared, bullied—whatever you want to call it—to not take any action on seal populations, because of pressure and misinformation from certain NGO groups and the implications of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which could impact exports to the U.S.

I recently read an article that came out of Texas. The American government currently has a bounty on wild hogs. They're causing havoc down there in the agriculture business. What they have been doing is they have a bounty on them to get as many out of the way as they can, and I see that they have also introduced a bait made with warfarin to control them. They are bringing them under control because of what's happening.

It's same scenario as we have with seals. I don't understand how one country can penalize another for doing what they are also doing themselves. This is unjust.

We're here today, showing the impacts of seals through pictures and experiences on the water. We need the story reflected to others in the public and to the groups and countries trying to downplay what is really happening to our fish stocks. In the past, we've been told that it's the fishers' fault. The government can't keep falling back on that response. We haven't had a fishery for 31 years.

We can't keep hiding the seals any longer, and that includes talking about them. We desperately need to bring the seal herd down to a manageable level—this needs to be step one—and then work on a realistic and effective hunt so that we can maintain and control the seal populations as we go forward.

We did not see attacks on halibut, for example, until about 10 years ago. As our other stocks disappeared, they turned to something else, and they were attacking halibut, taking them off our hooks, tearing them off. Some fish are worth up to $1,500, and when you haul it up and it's destroyed, it's not very encouraging. These vacuum cleaners of the sea eat 40 to 50 pounds of fish a day, and there are millions of them. Do the math and see where our stocks are.

What bothers and worries me more about all this is that they're not done yet. We have two stocks left in the Gulf, crab and lobster, and we already have information and proof of what they're starting to do there. You can see lobster claws from big lobsters lying on the shore. They knock the claws off them and eat the lobsters. As for crab, they have as many as 150 in their stomachs. This is happening. While we're talking, this is happening, and, if someone doesn't step up to do something, our coastal communities are gone. They're done. We won't have anything left.

It's very important that something gets done now, before everything is destroyed.

I guess that ends it, and I'll pass it on to Kenneth. If you have more time at the end, I would really love you to be able to go down, just to give you an example of what I've seen happen in the last 50 years.

Thank you.

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you for that, but the five minutes are up. I guess Mr. LeClair will have to try to get his statement out in a question or two along the way.

Mr. Danny Arsenault: I'm sorry about that.

The Chair: That's all right.

We'll now go to questions, of course, by the members.

I will remind members that the clerk has advised me that we can go until 6 p.m. That means we'll have 55 minutes for each hour, so we'll split it down the middle.

We'll go now to Mr. Small, for six minutes or less, please.

● (1630)

Mr. Clifford Small (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being here today and taking time out of their busy schedules to help us out with this very important study.

My first question is for Mr. Hardy.

Just briefly, Mr. Hardy, what's the biggest impediment to carrying out a meaningful pinniped harvest?

Mr. Robert Hardy: The biggest impediment would be the marketability of the products and having access to markets to encourage full utilization. At the current time, there are not adequate markets for the resource or the quota that's available.

Mr. Clifford Small: It has to provide for the full utilization of harvested pinnipeds.

Mr. Robert Hardy: I didn't get your full question there, Mr. Small.

Mr. Clifford Small: Oh, I'm sorry.

What products have been developed to provide for a full utilization of harvested pinnipeds? What products are out there?

Mr. Robert Hardy: Well, if you're going to have full utilization of pinnipeds, no matter the species, you're going to deal with the skin, you're going to deal with the fat, and you're going to deal with the meat and bone component.

Currently, there is a small industry for fur and leather. There is experimentation going on with the meat for a variety of products, and some of them are very exciting. Of course, we're all aware of the omega-3 component, which is the best omega-3 available in the world from any species, for a number of reasons, but there needs to be more investment into the product and within the industry to create full utilization.

Mr. Clifford Small: To your knowledge, has the current government done anything to market these products?

Mr. Robert Hardy: Mr. Small, and committee, I've been in the industry for over 30 years. I worked at the university here for the first nine, and then I went into the industry. I've been involved with four sealing companies throughout my career. I watch what happens within the industry pretty closely, and I haven't seen things change in the past 20 years in terms of market access. I know that industry constantly asks for support from the federal government, because trade is a federal government responsibility, but it has not become any easier to market and to promote products into different countries.

Mr. Clifford Small: My next question, Mr. Chair, for Mr. Hardy is this: Is there any aspect of the pinniped that could be used in foreign aid?

Mr. Robert Hardy: Absolutely. In my opinion, and I speak on it frequently, if we are to take any number of seals, regardless of the species or location in Atlantic Canada or western Canada, then in order to handle the volume, we have to look at food aid—high, nutritionally rich protein powders and meals made from the seal. At the same time, we would recover additional omega-3 oil and we would have other by-products that could be developed. However, in order to access volume, I believe we need to look at a nutritional food-aid program for the nine million people in the world who starve to death every year.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Hardy.

Presently, which countries would we be able to focus on immediately to develop markets for products, so that we can start harvesting the current quota of seals? That would be just in harp seals, would it? I'm not sure, but I think there's a small quota in grey seals, and you might be able to let me know on that. Where could we go right now?

Mr. Robert Hardy: Well, it would be difficult to say where we could go right now, because there is not a whole lot of market out there. There's not a whole lot of accessibility out there. That's something we have to work on, but it needs to be done; it needs to be addressed. Just like when we talk about the predation part, the market and the access need to be dealt with ASAP.

Mr. Clifford Small: We know that we've been banned from the U.S. market since 1972, with the invocation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. How impactful would it be for the marketing of pinniped products if we could somehow get that Marine Mammal Protection Act amended and gain access to the U.S. market? How much potential is there for us, Mr. Hardy?

● (1635)

Mr. Robert Hardy: The Marine Mammal Protection Act was put in place in 1972, I believe, mainly to protect whales. Given the increase in pinnipeds internationally—not only in Canada, although we have by far the largest numbers—the removal or negotiation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act would be critically important to doing new business and developing products and markets for seals.

I believe the President of the United States is visiting Canada today. I know for sure that the Marine Mammal Protection Act is not on the agenda, but it's going to have to be on someone's agenda. I believe our foreign affairs and our various parliamentarians need to negotiate. Believe it or not, the U.S. has a problem with seals, and they don't have millions.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Hardy.

I'll be wearing this tie tomorrow in the House of Commons.

The Chair: Don't pull that too tight, Mr. Small. You'll choke yourself.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you for the reminder, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I don't know of anyone here who wants to give you mouth-to-mouth.

We'll now go to Mr. Morrissey for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I have a question for...is it “Mr.” or “Dr.” Vascotto?

Dr. Kris Vascotto: You can use either one.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: But you are a doctor.

Dr. Kris Vascotto: Yes.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: You're a research scientist.

On March 9 before the committee, Dr. Vigneault from DFO said—it's in my notes here—that the size of the seal herd is having little impact on east coast fisheries. Do you have a comment?

Dr. Kris Vascotto: I would call that a stretch. The reason I would say that is that if you take a look at simply the maritime region, this is where DFO's own scientists have demonstrated this substantive increase in natural mortality in many of our groundfish stocks. They've all been synonymous with the presence of seals. If you go just around the corner, up into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, you find that many of DFO's own stock assessments are saying that for something like yellowtail flounder, American plaice and southern gulf cod, the main source of natural mortality is being derived from seal predation. Those same documents will say there's very little hope of improvement unless we deal with that natural mortality problem.

If you go further north, up into Newfoundland waters, there's not quite the willingness to make that tight link, but I would certainly question the conclusion that was tabled based upon the research provided by DFO.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you.

My next question is for Mr. Arsenault. I'll be candid; I've known him for most of my adult life.

You've been involved in the fishery. As a lifelong fisher and somebody who's been very involved in the industry in a leadership role based on conservation—your work is immanent in preserving the fishery for the future—what is DFO science missing in the relationship between seal eating habits and the size of the Atlantic fish stock? Why is there, in your view, a disconnect? Are they accurately capturing how seals feed in Atlantic Canada waters?

Mr. Danny Arsenault: I don't think so. I think maybe they are more now. If you go back a few years ago, when all of this started taking place, no one could really understand what was happening. We had a moratorium in place. The stocks were going to be rebuilt in a few years and everything would be back to normal.

All of a sudden, it started going the other way. They couldn't figure out what was wrong. When we questioned them at groundfish meetings, we told them, “Well, the seals are eating all the fish. That's why.” They said, “Oh, no, we have proof that they're not.” When we asked what it was, they said they were finding some small fish, and they proved it was cod through the otoliths.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: They were finding some in their stomach contents.

Mr. Danny Arsenault: Yes, in their stomach contents; the otolith bones and their heads—that was how they identified it.

They said they didn't find any large cod. Large cod weren't being eaten. At that time, we spoke up almost simultaneously around the table: “Oh? Well, why are the large cod disappearing off our trawls and our nets? All we're catching is the heads.”

The heads are bigger and heavier on the big cod. They're almost all solid bone and are almost impossible to digest. What they were doing was eating them up as far as the head, and that was it.

● (1640)

Mr. Robert Morrissey: You mean the seal was eating them.

Mr. Danny Arsenault: The seal was.

I remember the head scientist looking at me. He came and talked to me about it after. He asked if I had really seen this. I said that I would bring him some pictures of it.

After that, it seemed the next year that their outlook changed. They realized what they were missing, which was that they were destroying a lot more than just a few small fish. This is where things started to go.

Then we see every stock go the same way and just start to totally disappear. Today we have nothing left. It's terrible.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: I'm not sure who can answer my question. I want to get to Mr. LeClair.

Is the current vessel capability and capacity adequate to effectively harvest seals? We keep talking about expanding markets. Until we actually have an effective harvest of existing quotas and then to effectively grow that, does the fleet have the capacity? Does government have to invest in the infrastructure to effectively and efficiently harvest seals, both from the catching capacity and on the shore?

The comment I make is if the animal is not properly harvested and brought back, nobody can process it into any product.

Am I correct in that assumption, Mr. Arsenault?

Mr. Danny Arsenault: Yes. You are certainly correct.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Mr. LeClair and Mr. Arsenault, what will the face of the east coast fishery be if governments do not enact policy that effectively manages the east coast seal population?

Begin, Kenny, if you want, and then we can finish with Danny.

Mr. Kenneth LeClair (Vice President, Prince Edward Island Fishermen's Association): I like to compare it to the issues of farming. On land, if people drive by a country road and see farmland full of vegetables and the next day they drive by and its full of seals eating all the vegetables, the farmers would be yelling at their MPs to take action to find a solution for how to get rid of all the seals.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: On that note, I will let Danny finish up.

What will the east coast...? As you pointed out, it is almost totally dependent on lobster and crab, which are mono-fisheries, which is dangerous.

Mr. Danny Arsenault: All you have to do is look back to when the moratorium was put on the cod. You saw what happened to the coastal communities in Newfoundland. The exact same thing is going to happen here, because this is what we depend on. These are the last stocks left. There's nothing left besides that.

The Atlantic way of life of coastal communities is going to be gone.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Morrissey. Your time has gone a few seconds over.

We will now go to Monsieur Champoux for six minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank the witnesses for their remarks, which were very informative, very interesting.

My first question is for Mr. Hardy.

You talked about weir fishing. My colleague who usually sits on this committee knows a lot about it. She is from Île-aux-Coudres, as you may know. During last year's fishing season, she took the file very much to heart when there were problems with licensing.

You ended your remarks by saying that this is a time for action and not endless debate. Do you feel that this is the Department of Fisheries and Oceans' current position? Do you have the impression that the department is ready to act, or that it is waiting for something, I don't know what, before taking real action?

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Hardy: I can go only by what I see locally. I cannot say what the mindset in Ottawa is.

Locally, among the scientists who have been involved with the fishing industry and in particular with seals, the mindset is that seals—I can give you press release after press release—have no impact on any fishery in Newfoundland or, I would say, in Atlantic Canada.

There are exceptions, as Mr. Vascotto indicated. There is Doug Swain from DFO, who came out in 2019, I believe it was, and said that the cod fishery would be destroyed by the grey seal, even without commercial fishing. There's a similar report with yellowtail flounder, I believe.

This week in Newfoundland, we have had issues with ice. I watched the evening news last night and I saw a DFO scientist on television, stating that marine mammals were in trouble and that pup seals were dying because of poor ice.

This is simply not factual. If you have millions of pups and you see 10 around Newfoundland that are dead, that's an anomaly. That's not bad ice.

Sir, I tell you I have not seen a change in mindset. I could give you details, privately, of my own conversations with DFO scientists. They are in no way accepting that seals are a problem in our fishery.

● (1645)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Thank you.

I will now turn to Mr. Vascotto, if I may.

I wanted to talk to you about the ongoing moratorium. Earlier, we heard Mr. Arsenault's remarks, which I think conveyed his personal situation. Many fishers in Quebec and several eastern coastal communities in the Maritimes are in the same situation. This is quite common in Quebec, and the moratorium is preventing many of those fishers from earning a living.

Is the moratorium still justified?

If no real solution is implemented for pinnipeds, what impact will they have on biomass, in the short and medium term? How do you see it? Has the alarm not rung loudly enough?

[*English*]

Dr. Kris Vascotto: That is an excellent question, because it forces us to stand, look forward and say that if we have a seal herd that exists at this current population level and we're not going to take any proactive action to try to dial it down, then I don't think it's reasonable for us to expect many of these fish stocks to rebuild to these levels that we might have seen in 1960, 1970 or the early 1980s. It's just downright impossible.

At that point, if there's going to be an acceptance that we are, as a government or as a country, not going to reduce these herds in any way, shape or form, then we should not be calling these stocks depleted. They are as big as they're going to get with so many of them in the ecosystem. It affects the dependent pinniped populations, which are pushing down on them like a thumb.

I hope that answered your question. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Yes, thank you.

I will now turn to Mr. Arsenault.

I think you ran out of time earlier to conclude your remarks. There's about a minute and half left in my turn. I'd like you to take that time to tell us about the situation you experienced over the last 50 years, to tell us just how desperate the current situation has become for fishers, and tell us how we can organize quickly, if that's still possible, to turn the tide.

[*English*]

Mr. Danny Arsenault: What I was getting at was that when, like you said, the moratorium was in place, at first everyone thought that it was going to work. When we saw that it didn't work, and we were trying to figure out what it was, DFO couldn't really come up with an answer. The fishermen saw what we were seeing and the way things were going, and we realized it.

What DFO missed, I think, was that at the time, there was a certain quota set on the fish. Every time they fished, they would do a survey and cut the quota, which was understandable. As they kept cutting that quota, it was cut to the fishermen. They never realized that there were two groups fishing. The fishermen were taken off the water, yet the stock went down. What was wrong? Then they came up to stall more, as I mentioned a while ago, about the large cod. They said that the seals are not eating the large cod. Well, we proved that to them.

One guy mentioned Doug Swain a while ago, a head scientist in Moncton. He is the one who sat down with us. He said “Hey, you guys hit the nail on the head here.” He was working to try to do something to help us.

I think if we don't do it, it's too late if we don't get it done now.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Champoux.

We'll now go to Ms. Barron for six minutes or less, please.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the witnesses who are here.

First I want to thank Mr. Hardy for sending the videos that he did. I enjoyed them while eating my dinner the other night. They were very informative, so thank you for that.

I want to make this clear, and I know members around the table have heard me say this a million times. I just want to reiterate that I am very much in support of a sustainable seal harvest. In my family, we were talking about the cod moratorium. We moved from the east coast to the west after the cod moratorium, because of the impacts on the community there.

I recently visited Nunavut and was speaking with indigenous people in the fishing communities there about the importance of a sustainable seal harvest. We know there's no denying that we need to be taking timely action around this.

I want to see if I can play a bit of a devil's advocate here, Mr. Hardy. I think it's always good when we call out things that we're seeing and get other thoughts on it.

In the media today I was reading that “seal diets vary according to seasons, ages, sexes, and among areas and years.” In context, this was speaking to the complexity of the issue of seal predation and its impacts on cod. I'm wondering if you can speak to that quote and provide some of your thoughts.

● (1650)

Mr. Robert Hardy: Yes, I certainly agree with that statement. Seals will eat anything in the ocean. Depending on seasonality, meaning when certain species are available, they will consume that species. Depending on the numbers of seals, the impact on the particular population can be significant.

If I refer to DFO science and the stomach sampling program they had in Newfoundland and Labrador for at least 25 years, they used the same sealers in the same communities at the same time of year. What makes that interesting is that the stomach sampling was done in the winter months, from inshore vessels. They went up the northeast coast to Newfoundland and places like La Scie, and they collected stomach samples. When they looked in those seal stomachs—harp seals predominately—they didn't find a lot of caplan or cod. Now, why didn't they find a lot of caplan or cod during that time of the year? They simply weren't there.

I will use an analogy that was used with the Atlantic seal science task team, which Mr. Vascotto was part of. If we were to sample a black bear stomach in the spring of the year, after they came out of hibernation, would we find blueberries in their stomach? No. The same is true for the large part of the seal stomach samples that have been done in Newfoundland—there was little caplan or cod.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you for that information.

Based on that, then, I'm trying to understand what the best way forward is. If we know there are seasonal differences, age differences and regional differences, how would this look, moving forward, for us to look at implementing a sustainable seal harvest on the east coast, specifically?

Mr. Robert Hardy: A year or so ago I spoke to some of you parliamentarians with another group. We talked to 50 MPs across Canada, and practically all were 100% supportive of our message, but we have an existing quota, and our quota is, I don't know, 460,000 animals, for harps. This year, the ask is for 25,000 animals— that's the ask, so we have a long way to go before we can go to DFO and ask for more quota. We need to be able to utilize the resource in a sustainable manner, as you're suggesting, and we need to be able to do some good, not only for everyone in Atlantic Canada and western Canada, B.C., but for other people in the world. There is a shortage of food, and seal is very nutritious.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Mr. Hardy. I have time for only one last question. Could you share a bit more about how you feel that the observations of fishers out on the water could be better utilized to provide the information that we need and to complement the information that you were talking about that was being received by DFO, which was lacking? Can you expand on that?

Mr. Robert Hardy: Yes. You have two fishers here today, Mr. LeClair and the other gentleman there, from P.E.I. Any science would value their input. These gentlemen have a lifetime of experience. They're on the water every day, so what they see is important. I think they have been ignored for far too long.

Just to give you an example, there was a caplan meeting yesterday in Gander. I spoke to a fisherman, and he said that meetings were not like they used to be. You can't have a discussion. You're not allowed to go outside the bounds of the particular meeting.

We have to get beyond that. In Newfoundland, time and time again, whether it's caplan, herring, crab or any other species, when fishermen bring up seals, there's a threat to close down the meeting.

Thank you again.

● (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

We'll now go to Mr. Perkins for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Rick Perkins (South Shore—St. Margarets, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, witnesses.

Mr. Hardy, I understand that the Fisheries Resource Conservation Council was established in 1993. It put out a report in 1994, calling for a significant reduction in all seal populations. In response to that report and more work by DFO, in 1995, then DFO minister Brian Tobin—whom some of you may remember—in conclusion, said there was only one major player still fishing cod. He said, “His first name is harp and his second name is seal.”

Then again, in 1999, I believe, the FRCC recommended that DFO reduce seal herds by up to 50%, and those herds, of course, were a lot smaller than they are today. Believe it or not, in 2002 there was a seal forum in Newfoundland. Does that sound familiar? There was a lot of discussion about this issue. The list of studies goes on and on. The 2005 northern cod FOPO study said that even if cod represented only 1% of the seal's diet, “this would...amount to 60,000 tonnes of cod [disappearing] per year”.

You referred earlier to Dr. Swain and that report in 2019. He said, “At the current abundance of grey seals in this ecosystem, recovery of this cod population does not appear to be possible, and its extinction is highly probable.”

We had a seal summit again. It just happened again in the fall in Newfoundland, and I had the honour to be there. There was a big revelation before that. Minister Murray said that “seals eat fish”—apparently that was new. The big headline coming out of that report was that the minister pledged that we need to do more research on seals to figure out what's going on with the fishery.

I'll ask you this, Mr. Hardy. Do we need to do more science to find out what's happening to our fishery, because of seals?

Mr. Robert Hardy: There is a two-letter answer: no.

Mr. Rick Perkins: How about you, Mr. Vascotto? Do you believe the same thing?

Dr. Kris Vascotto: I would say we are in a position where there is a lot of information out there. Whether it's been interpreted or collected and balanced is another question. I would say that we have enough in hand to take some significant actions on the seal populations.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Thank you.

Again, Mr. Vascotto, I'm not sure if it's still up, but there was a PowerPoint slide on the DFO website that showed some seal summit sample results. In their winter sampling of grey seals, they found that 47% of the stomach content was Atlantic mackerel; in the summer, the content, surprisingly, was almost 60% Atlantic herring and Atlantic cod. This is to Mr. Hardy's point about when you hunt them.

At that level, is that not a level far greater than the spawning biomass that exists for those stocks? Is that not the reason they are declining?

Dr. Kris Vascotto: There's a good chance. If you just take something like the grey seal population on the Scotian Shelf and figure out how much fish they would have to eat to survive, and then you look at DFO's own research vessel survey, you'd come out to about 50% of the total fish biomass observed in the survey being potentially consumed by the grey seal herd. If you go up to the Newfoundland region for harp seals, you're at about 25%. It is quite clear that the consumptive potential of those pinnipeds is quite dramatic and can impact those systems quite substantively.

Mr. Rick Perkins: In other words, if we harvest every pelagic fish commercially that exists with the big biomass now, but we don't harvest the one major predator in the ocean, what happens to the system?

Dr. Kris Vascotto: It gets put into a pit, and it can't find a way out of it.

● (1700)

Mr. Rick Perkins: Mr. Hardy, I have one more question. I was reading an old 2020 article from The Guardian, the big newspaper in London, England. The headline is “US allows killing of hundreds of sea lions to save struggling salmon”. It goes on to talk about how the State of Washington and the State of Oregon had approved the killing of hundreds and hundreds of sea lions, to try to let the salmon and trout recover.

I'm wondering if you know anything about that, or whether you could comment and verify that it is going on.

Mr. Robert Hardy: Yes, I know a bit about it. It went through the U.S. legislature and was voted on and passed. Because of the problem that was identified, primarily with sea lions, I believe, they allowed for the killing of sea lions in that area.

This is true of the U.S. east coast as well. There is a lot of information available on the grey seals. Some of the commentary down there is that, well, if you take care of the population, it will only be replaced by Canadian grey seals, which are in the area.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perkins. Your time has gone a little over.

We'll now finish up this first hour with Mr. Cormier for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Hardy, I'll start with you and I'll use English, because what I am going to read to you is in English.

Last week, we had some DFO officials at the committee. One of the officials said this:

> As a resource manager, our objective is to keep the seal population healthy. Our objective is not to reduce the seal population. Just like other fisheries where we try to keep our fish at very high and heavy levels, our objective for seals is to keep—

Blah, blah, blah, and I cut them off.

What do you think of that statement?

Mr. Robert Hardy: I think it's ridiculous.

It's ridiculous. How healthy does the seal population have to be? You're at record levels with grey seals in the maritime provinces. The harp seal population, in the last census, was 7.6 million animals.

The Baltic states released a report this past fall—multiple countries signed on—saying that there is an issue with their fishery because of grey seals. Their population is less than 80,000 animals. I—

Mr. Serge Cormier: I'm sorry. It's just because of the time.

Thank you for clarifying that. I have another question.

You talked about capelin and the impact on capelin, as you said, but what about mackerel? The seals eat mackerel, and in big portions, if I can say that.

Mr. Robert Hardy: Yes, it's my understanding that they do.

Actually, I have some data that was sent to me while I was on vacation last week. Some of the limited stomach sampling that was done in the winter months—I'm assuming that it was done off Nova Scotia—showed that the contents in the grey seals' stomachs were up to 47% Atlantic mackerel.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Okay.

You talked about the market a bit, and look, we all know that what we are going to do with seals can have an impact on our market. You know that we export a lot of crab and lobster to the U.S. and to European countries, but how can we strike a balance in reducing the seal population and at the same time making sure we keep our market alive? I think you know that it will be very devastating if we go ahead with the seal hunt or whatever and other countries just shut down our market. How do we strike that balance?

Mr. Robert Hardy: I think it is an education program, as well as a marketing program.

We need to reach out to the countries that we're currently doing trade with, not only in fish products but in all products, and educate them as to what happened to the great fishery that we had in Atlantic Canada. We were the provider of food for the world, and we're no longer that provider.

We also have to form alliances with all the groups throughout the world that have problems with seals. We need to communicate with them. If I could, if you have time—

Mr. Serge Cormier: Yes, go ahead.

Mr. Robert Hardy: We're just talking about utilizing seals for the good of people and for food. We have a country in the world right now.... I can't even go there....

● (1705)

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Hardy. I understand.

Mr. Robert Hardy: I'm going to say Russia....

I'm going to say Russia: They're killing people every day, and there's no reason why anyone in Canada should be afraid to kill a seal and sell their products to the world—

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Hardy.

Look, I'm the son of a fisherman. I saw my dad fish all his life, and I can see seals in front of my house right now, which I've never seen before, so I think we all know that there's a problem and we have to do something.

Thank you for that.

Very quickly, Mr. Vascotto, you said something earlier.

[*Translation*]

You said earlier that, according to the data you have, seals eat crabs and lobsters. However, during our last meeting, some officials seemed to be saying that this was not the case, that we had little data on it and seal stomachs were not full of these crustaceans.

Do you have data on it that you could send to us? Earlier, in your opening remarks, I think you mentioned that some data was available.

[*English*]

Dr. Kris Vascotto: It really comes down to what species of seal you're talking about. I believe that the bearded seal is very much a heavy-crab-eating seal that you get off the northwest coast of Newfoundland. When it comes to lobster consumption, if you look over at Danny, in the room, he'll be able to tell you that they're seeing examples of that.

Once again, this comes down to what Bob was talking about in terms of making sure your data collection overlaps with the ability to see it, because if you don't get a chance to see it, then everybody talks about it and it never happens. There are a lot of pictures being taken by our seal harvesters and by fish harvesters, and there is evidence appearing on the shores that says this is happening. Once again, it's species-specific, space-specific and time-specific.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cormier. That is the end of your time and of our first hour of testimony.

I want to say a big “thank you” to Dr. Vascotto, Mr. LeClair, Mr. Arsenault and, of course, a constituent of mine, Mr. Bob Hardy, for sharing your knowledge with the committee today. It has been absolutely a pleasure to hear from you.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Mr. Chair, I just want to comment that I think Mr. Arsenault is the snappiest dresser here, with that Leafs shirt.

Mr. Serge Cormier: On division.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We have to let our witnesses go. We're going to chew up time for the second hour.

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Very quickly, Mr. Chair, it was mentioned in the committee that we would notify the witnesses that if they had further information to provide, they could provide it in writing. It would be valuable to us. If we could start doing that again with our witnesses, I would appreciate it.

The Chair: I think the witnesses have heard that now, loud and clear, and if there's anything they want to add for today's meeting in terms of offering information, we'll certainly allow them to send it in writing, please.

We'll suspend for a moment while we transfer out of one group into another.

Again, thank you, everyone.

● (1705)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1710)

The Chair: I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

For interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, English or French audio. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. All comments should be addressed through the chair.

Finally, I will remind you that the use of a House-approved headset is mandatory for all virtual participants in parliamentary proceedings.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Mr. Chair, could I just get in a quick point of order? I am going to speak very quickly, because I don't want to take time from the already limited time that we have.

I wanted to see if you could provide some clarification around the manner in which the time is going to be split in the next round. Unfortunately, the way it was split up the last round, I and the member for the Bloc both lost time, and I wanted to clarify what our time allocations will be in this round.

The Chair: The time allocations will be that we'll start as soon as the witnesses make their opening statements. We have until six o'clock. When we get to six o'clock, we're done.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Can I make a request, Mr. Chair, that we distribute the timing according to the time we have, so that it's fairly distributed?

The Chair: You'd probably have to get that cleared through the individual party whips. They're the ones who came up with how the schedules advance through committee and whether it's the six-minute round and a five-minute round, or more five minutes and then two and a half minutes. That was not incorporated by the committee. That was done by the whips when they looked at the structure of the committees.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

I'm not going to take up too much time, because I don't want to lose my time debating this, of course, but I know that other committees redistribute, so that time is still fairly allocated.

The Chair: You can ask for the unanimous consent of the committee to do that if you want.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Perhaps I can ask for the consensus of the committee to fairly distribute the time, so that all members have access to the time that should be allocated to ask questions.

The Chair: Yes or no? I can divide it out pretty easily.

An hon. member: Yes.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you very much.

The Chair: All right. We'll try to do that as we go through.

I'll see after the statements how much time is left, and if I can allocate five minutes to everybody to get to the end, instead of six minutes, that's what I'll do.

Thank you for that.

As I was getting to it before, I'd now like to welcome the witnesses. As an individual, we have Dr. Trites, professor at the University of British Columbia, by video conference. Representing Exploramer, we have Sandra Gauthier, executive director, by video conference. Representing the Pacific Balance Pinniped Society, here in person, we have Mr. Ken Pearce, president, and Matt Stabler, director.

Thank you for taking the time to appear today. You each have five minutes for opening statements.

I'll start off with Ms. Gauthier first, please, for five minutes or less. Turn on your mike. It's not on. The clerk will try to get that worked out.

I'll go to Dr. Trites first, please, and see how it goes. You have five minutes or less.

● (1715)

Dr. Andrew Trites (Professor, University of British Columbia, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Andrew Trites. I am a professor at the Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries at the University of British Columbia and the director of the marine mammal research unit. I have been studying increasing and decreasing populations of marine mammals for over 40 years and have specialized in studying seals, sea lions and fur seals.

My research encompasses field studies, laboratory work and computer-based studies, many of which were done in collaboration with research scientists in universities and governments in Canada and the United States. I have also served, and continue to serve, on a number of advisory committees, including the marine mammals specialist group for COSEWIC, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. As such, I am acutely aware of the threats and conservation challenges facing pinnipeds in Canada, as well as the challenges pinnipeds pose to fisheries.

Regarding pinniped management and ecosystem impacts, I would like to bring three points of discussion to your attention.

The first concerns the commonly held belief that pinnipeds are out of control, that their numbers are exploding and that there is an overpopulation. Your committee was asked, for example, to “examine the ecosystem impacts of pinniped overpopulation”, rather than simply “examine the ecosystem impacts of pinnipeds”, full stop. To the best of my knowledge, all such statements on overpopulation appear to be based on a baseline of unnaturally low historic population sizes in the 1960s and 1970s, when it was unusual, at least in British Columbia, to ever see a pinniped, because they had been culled and hunted to unprecedented low numbers. In British Columbia, for example, all pinniped populations have recovered or are in the process of recovering from over-exploitation.

There is no overpopulation of pinnipeds. Harbour seals have been stable and at carrying capacity for over 25 years, with about 100,000 animals. The next stable population is for adult male California sea lions, which have numbered about 14,000 since the late 2010s and which originate from breeding colonies in California that stabilized 10 years earlier. Next in line in the stabilization process are the Steller sea lions, which are listed as “of special concern” in Canada and appear to be quickly approaching their carrying capacity of about 45,000 animals.

Adding these three numbers up yields a total of 159,000 pinnipeds, which is a far cry from the 2.5 million people who live in the greater Vancouver regional district. The bottom line is that there is no overpopulation of pinnipeds in B.C. Pinniped populations are balanced and being maintained at natural levels through natural ecosystem processes that do not cost a penny of taxpayers' money.

The second point I would like to briefly reflect on with you is the perception that predation by pinnipeds is bad and harmful to species and ecosystems. This biased view probably reflects the beliefs of many that seals are like humans in their desire to only eat perfect-looking foods, when, in reality, predators such as seals have much better chances of catching slow, diseased and inferior fish, which ultimately makes fish populations healthier.

Similarly, predation by seals also brings indirect benefits to ecosystems. For example, seals that consume predatory fish, such as large hake that eat young herring, can increase the abundance of juvenile herring available for salmon to eat. Finally, there is increasing evidence coming from terrestrial ecology that reintroducing top predators to their former habitats benefits ecosystem stability, productivity and biodiversity. This rewilding phenomenon appears to be naturally occurring in Canada’s marine ecosystems. Our oceans are being rewilded by seals, sea lions, whales and sharks. Thus, the benefits of pinnipeds to ecosystem health appear to outweigh their perceived harm.

The final discussion point I would like to make concerns the confidence different people have in stating the predictions made by mathematical predator-prey models, such as a model that predicts removing half of all pinnipeds in British Columbia will restore west coast salmon. What you may not know is that the chance of the model being right is only 30% to 40%, and it would likely take about 10 to 20 years to determine whether things would actually go according to plan. To some people, 30% to 40% odds are great, because of the amount of money that stands to be made if people can catch more salmon. However, those who put greater value on the life of a seal want more than 80% assurance of models being right before endorsing such predictions. It is therefore important to know, and to ask about, the level of confidence that underlies model predictions.

It is also important to recognize that societal views and values have changed significantly since the 1970s, when pinniped numbers were at their lowest in recorded history.

● (1720)

In conclusion, I don't know of a single case where culling of pinnipeds has had the intended effect.

I would therefore like to encourage you to consider first whether a population of pinnipeds that is stable and at carrying capacity can be deemed to be an overpopulation, and second, whether the benefits that pinnipeds bring to marine ecosystems far outweighs the harm that they are perceived to do. Third, consider whether the low probability that culling pinnipeds would increase the abundance of commercial and sport fish is worth the risk of failure and causing greater harm to ecosystem health and the well-being of other highly valued species such as killer whales and sharks.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak with you today.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Ms. Gauthier, representing Exploramer.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sandra Gauthier (Executive Director, Exploramer): Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you so much for having me.

I am here to talk to you about responsible seal meat marketing.

In 2009, the Exploramer Science Museum, an oceanographic science museum located in Gaspésie, Quebec, implemented a program for the sound management of the marine resources of the St. Lawrence, the Fourchette bleue program.

Since the implementation of this program in 2009, our goal has been to raise awareness of and promote little-known and under-exploited species in the St. Lawrence whose capture does not harm the habitat. To date, we have granted certification to more than 200 large restaurants in Quebec and to the Metro supermarket chain.

Given their biomass, grey and harp seals have been on the Fourchette bleue list of species we wish to put forward since 2009. Since 2009, there has been a steady and increasing growth in demand for seal meat for food purposes in Quebec.

Today, the one and only butcher in Quebec that processes seal meat is located in the Magdalen Islands and is unable to meet the demand. You can imagine that if supermarkets the size of the Metro chain want to put dried seal meat on their shelves, they need a large quantity of meat. However, the one and only seal meat processor in Quebec cannot meet the demand at this time. In addition, transporting this meat to the continent is another problem.

Since there are currently too many seals in our waters and we are seeking to manage the seal populations of the St. Lawrence in a sustainable and responsible manner, we want to pursue the worthwhile marketing and enhancing of this meat. We want to increase the number of commercial licenses in the more northern regions of Quebec, such as the Gaspé and the North Shore. These are areas where harp seals and some grey seals are still found today. We would like to see more commercial licenses issued and the seal hunting season extended so that we can have access to more meat. Right now, the ice is not allowing us to meet the quotas.

Also, we would like to see collaboration with the province of Quebec to open two additional seal meat processing plants. This would allow for easier access and a more interesting democratization of this meat. In Quebec, the demand is there. At the same time, for the past two years, New Brunswick has been coming to seek our expertise to add value to this meat, because it is very interesting.

Every year, the Exploramer science museum organizes training on personal use sealing. Each year we train 30 new hunters in this way. During the training, which lasts two days, we talk about biology and laws and give workshops on how to cut up the meat, butchering and charcuterie. The training ends with a culinary workshop given by a well-known chef from Quebec. For this workshop, we have a waiting list of 300 names. At this time, we can offer the training to 30 people per year. So we're seeing a lot of interest in sustainable sealing.

Currently, sealing is allowed in our waters from November to December, but the seals do not arrive until January and February. Therefore, we would like to see an extension of the personal use sealing season.

We must also allow other Quebeckers to participate in this hunt. Currently, only people who live in coastal areas are allowed to hunt seals. We want to allow all Quebeckers to have access to this hunt, after having taken a training course, of course. This is already the case for deer, moose and other land animals. Given the biomass that we have and what we can do with it from a very ethical standpoint, that's what we want.

● (1725)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to the gentlemen in the room.

Mr. Stabler or Mr. Pearce, you have five minutes. One person has the time, or you can share it.

Mr. Ken Pearce (President, Pacific Balance Pinniped Society): Thank you very much for inviting us here. It's been a long wait to get before people on the east coast who understand our problems. I'm going to give a brief outline of what we've done here, and Matt will follow up.

I'm going to start off with the risk of not dealing with pinnipeds versus what Dr. Trites came on with.

One is the loss of salmon stocks. The collapse of our salmon stocks means the collapse of our coastal ecosystem. Whales, eagles, pinnipeds, sea birds, bears, diving ducks, otters and a host of others depend on salmon for their subsistence. No spawners means a dead river, as the spawned out salmon are vital in providing fertilizer to the system that feeds the aquatic plants, which provide the food that the young fry, trout and steelhead depend on.

Two is the collapse of our $1-billion-plus sports fishing industry.

Three is the collapse of what little remains of our commercial fisheries done by indigenous and non-indigenous fishers.

Four, which I think you're all sensitive to, is a very real threat to section 35.

What is Pacific Balance Pinniped Society? It's a group dedicated to bringing the pinniped populations on our B.C. coast back into historical balance through a controlled, well-managed harvest over time. Our group includes the following: 115 first nations, UFAWU-Unifor, B.C. Wildlife Federation and many of the other local sports fishing clubs. This group represents well over 700,000 supporters.

Also of note, thanks to Clifford Small, Rick Perkins and 152 MPs who voted in support of Bill C-251. I think it would be fair to say that this represents well over 15 million Canadians in support.

I will give bullet points on the science supporting a harvest and will back that up with written support, as requested.

Number one, 40% to 50% of outbound chinook smolts are consumed in the Salish Sea as they emerge from the rivers. Sixty per cent of coho and steelhead smolts suffer the same fate.

B.C. pinnipeds consume 350,000 metric tons of finfish annually. To put that into perspective, that equates to approximately 7,000 fully loaded seine boats.

Of the above consumption, 135,000 metric tons are Pacific herring. That equates to approximately 2,700 fully loaded seine boats. This year's allowable total harvest for the Strait of Georgia for the seines was 2,600 tonnes, equal to approximately 52 loaded seine boats.

At the north end of Vancouver Island, 1,500,000 to 2,000,000 returning adult Fraser River sockeye are consumed by sea lions alone as they school up for their journey down the Johnstone Strait. Economic loss at $10 per fish is $15 million.

Studies on the Columbia River show that sea lions consume three to five returning adult chinook per lion per day. At 10,000 lions, that equates to—

● (1730)

The Chair: Lower your paper, Mr. Pearce; you're blocking the mike.

Mr. Ken Pearce: I'm sorry. I apologize.

That equates to approximately 30,000 chinook per day consumed by sea lions in the Columbia River.

The population of harbour seals in the Strait of Georgia is around 48,000. If they consume one mature salmon per week, that equates to 192,000 per month, times five months, which is 960,000, and that's just over five months.

The U.S.A. rescinded the Marine Mammal Protection Act on the Columbia and, to date, through a trapping system, they have culled over 9,000 sea lions in the last three years. We have the drawings for those traps, if anybody would be interested.

Our 52-page IFMP, our integrated fisheries management program, has been before DFO for five years now.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife commissioned Washington State Academy of Sciences to further study the pinniped problem in Washington state and offer solutions. Their top scientist, who is equated with Dr. Walters, said that the key thing was not just recommending more studies, but instead recognizing that such studies won't prove anything, and that only a large-scale harvesting experiment will provide the needed understanding. This is the first time that a major science group has had the courage to admit that the standard more-studies approach does not work.

Thank you. I will turn to Matt.

The Chair: I'm sorry. Your time has gone over, and by about 50 seconds. You'll have to provide any other testimony in written form. It's unfortunate, but we have to get to the rounds of questioning.

We'll start off our questioning with, of course, Mr. Arnold.

Do you want it divided out equally, into four with seven minutes, or into four with four minutes and four with three minutes?

An hon. member: Two rounds.

The Chair: Two rounds. Okay.

Mr. Arnold, you have four minutes or less, please. I'll be firm on the time.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank you all for being here.

Starting with the Pacific Balance Pinniped Society, have you determined whether there's a market for the product?

Mr. Matt Stabler (Director, Pacific Balance Pinniped Society): Yes. In fact, we've done very serious investigations into that. We have determined that we have markets for hides, we have markets for the meat, and we have markets for the omega-3 fatty acids. The only one that we have left to deal with is the bones. Those markets exist far and beyond, for any harvest size that we propose.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

What is the biggest impediment to developing those markets?

Mr. Matt Stabler: The biggest impediment to those markets is DFO. They have had our IFMP in front of them for five and a half years. They come up with nonsensical roadblocks repeatedly.

It is due to a fear of the public that they are doing this. None of their impediments are based on science.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Could you elaborate a little on the Washington and Oregon actions? I don't think you had a chance to in the opening remarks.

Mr. Matt Stabler: With the chair's permission, if I can have 30 to 40 seconds, I would like to do my presentation. Can I have leave to do that?

The Chair: It's up to Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Matt Stabler: Okay.

My name is Matt Stabler. I'm a retired fisheries biologist with considerable experience, and now a recently forced-out retired commercial salmon troller in B.C. From my direct experience on the ground in both occupations and from published data, it is impossible to have any other determination than one that notes that our west coast salmon are in extremely serious trouble right now. The vast majority of their populations are depressed and growing rapidly more so each and every year.

While a myriad of issues are causing this, such as habitat loss and global warming, there are others. The most pressing at this point in time, and the only one we can act upon immediately, is the depredation by seals and sea lions. Current peer-reviewed and proven studies note that between 40% to 60% of outgoing coho and chinook salmon smolts from the Fraser and the vast majority of B.C.'s coastal freshwater systems are consumed annually by these predators. Furthering the reduction of their numbers is the fact that these pinnipeds also target all salmon species while they are at sea, and upon their return to their natal waters to spawn.

This is entirely unsustainable. If left unchecked, we will soon be bearing witness to the extirpation of salmon species overall in our west coast waters.

The science is in, folks. The science is conclusive. Calling for more studies in this regard, while the salmon populations plummet as they are, is basically a fool's errand. The time to act was yesterday. If we want our future generations to have access to salmon and many other fisheries, such as herring, etc., we must act immediately upon the one bottleneck we can in order to help these resources avoid extinction. That will provide us with the time required to address the other bottlenecks these resources face.

Should we not act today, the responsibility for the demise of these very precious resources is on us.

● (1735)

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Stabler.

The Chair: You have 25 seconds, Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

You've described some of the impacts. What would be the impacts on communities and other individuals like yourselves in the long term if we didn't act now?

Mr. Matt Stabler: What we are bearing witness to today is the collapse of salmon and herring and other industries. You cannot overestimate what that means to coastal communities. My fleet was 400 boats strong when I started. Today we have 30 active commercial trollers. What has that done to the communities they live in? It has destroyed them, sir.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Hardie for four minutes or less, please.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses.

Mr. Stabler, I was on the boats out of Prince Rupert back in the early seventies. The fishing community was pretty strong back then.

Ken, I've enjoyed receiving your emails over time. I don't know if you've cut me off or not. I haven't seen that many lately. Have you gone quiet on us, or...?

Mr. Ken Pearce: You're right back on.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Oh good. Thank you.

Professor Trites, you're swimming against the stream here, it would appear, with your comments. I wanted to ask whether we have a seal problem or we simply have problem seals, because that seems to be where Washington state focused its efforts.

Dr. Andrew Trites: There certainly are problem seals. Where Washington state is focused is at the dams and up in the rivers. While the sea lions there did not create the problems, they are benefiting from having dammed the rivers, and they're preventing salmon from getting up and spawning. Those are very targeted removals.

What's being proposed in British Columbia is not targeted removals of problem animals, but the removal of half of all the population. Doing so will have an immediate consequence on transiting killer whales—

Mr. Ken Hardie: Right. I have to interrupt here—I'm sorry—because I have limited time.

I've heard it said that the positioning of log booms is a problem, especially on the Fraser River.

Dr. Andrew Trites: Log booms are perhaps not the biggest problems on the Fraser River, but log booms have provided artificial habitat and areas where animals can rest, breed and get more access. There are efforts to remove log booms and recover some of the estuaries, but certainly, log booms have been one of the factors that have made it easier for seals to access salmon.

Mr. Ken Hardie: We heard cryptic testimony from Norway that their seal problem just “went away”. Do you know anything more about what happened over there?

Dr. Andrew Trites: I don't know the particulars—

Mr. Ken Hardie: I'm sorry. That was a question for Mr. Pearce.

Mr. Ken Pearce: I'm sorry. I didn't get the question.

Mr. Ken Hardie: We heard very cryptic evidence from Norway that their seal problem just “went away”. That's exactly what he said. Do you know what happened over there?

Mr. Ken Pearce: I'd phrase it a little more politely. I'd say, “They've been properly dealt with.”

Mr. Ken Hardie: Okay. All right.

Yes, Mr. Stabler.

Mr. Matt Stabler: They effectively dealt with them by harvesting them very aggressively. I have a buddy who lives there, and he spearheaded one of the fleets that engaged in that process. I can confirm that that's what went on.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Did Norway suffer trade relations with anybody on account of this?

● (1740)

Mr. Matt Stabler: Absolutely not. I would like to point to the fact that Ken alluded to the U.S. revision, which pulled the teeth out of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, such that they could reduce the number of sea lions in their waters.

Contrary to what Dr. Trites is telling you, they aren't just “problematic” ones when you're talking 9,000-plus animals in a year and a half.

Mr. Ken Hardie: All right. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Now we'll go to Mr. Champoux for four minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, I thank the witnesses for their attendance and their statements.

I will address Ms. Gauthier.

We hear a lot of comments from fishermen. For your part, at the Exploramer Museum, you play a very interesting role in this whole process. You do education and you bring a new perspective on seals. We know that the image of the seal hunt has been really battered over the years; we don't need to go back to that.

Since you opened the Exploramer Museum and have been providing seal hunt education, have you felt a difference in the way people perceive the hunt?

Ms. Sandra Gauthier: Yes, absolutely. The first year our museum offered seal training, we received death threats and the police had to get involved. Today, we promote these courses even more and we don't see that kind of backlash on social media at all. People from all over Quebec are raising their hands to take the training, but unfortunately they don't have access to this training or to hunting licenses.

People in New Brunswick are also starting to take a strong interest in seals. So it's not just in Quebec anymore that people want to hunt seals.

In addition to the personal use hunt, this kind of hunt could become a very interesting lever for the economic development of Quebec's coastal regions, especially during the off-seasons for tourism. We could revalue our regions by offering sealing packages with experienced guides who know how to do things right, where hunters could enjoy the meat that evening.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Earlier, in your opening remarks, you said that the processing plant in the Magdalen Islands was not enough. We still need a fairly substantial production to be able to supply a grocery store chain like Metro in Quebec. Yet, the seal hunt is still subject to quotas and the issue of international acceptability is ongoing.

Do you feel that we are able to do everything regionally in Quebec to curb the problem, or at least that we are doing our share of work before we work abroad?

As you pointed out, we are still missing at least two processing plants. Also, the hunting season should probably be extended. We would also have to get Quebeckers to want to eat seal meat. You are doing this work in order to raise awareness of the different products that come from the seal hunt.

However, do you feel that we can solve part of the problem by acting locally, in Quebec, or that we absolutely must have international relationships for this product?

Ms. Sandra Gauthier: First of all, we are not yet successful in meeting the Quebec demand. So let's start by feeding ourselves. This is a basic principle of food autonomy and sustainable development. Let's start by fully meeting Quebec's demand. Once we have saturated the market, we can turn to foreign markets. At the moment, we are not there. In Quebec, we are not able to meet the demand.

People want to have seal. For our part, since 2009, we have been working to market this meat not as a low-end product, but as a high-end product, healthy, without growth hormones...

Mr. Martin Champoux: I apologize for interrupting, but I only have 10 seconds left and I would like you to tell me which part of the seal you prefer.

Ms. Sandra Gauthier: The flipper, to make duck fat confit flipper.

Mr. Martin Champoux: You have to send me the recipe.

Thank you, Ms. Gauthier.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll now go to Ms. Barron, for four minutes or less, please.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses, in particular the witnesses from beautiful Vancouver Island. Welcome.

First, I want to make clear, and I can only speak for myself, of course, that I'm very much in support of sustainable seal harvesting and did not support Bill C-251. I want to point out that the two don't necessarily go hand in hand.

I'm looking at a proposal here from 2018. It's quite a while ago now, and before I was in this position. Can you share a bit what you are proposing? What happens around a seal harvest on the west coast?

● (1745)

Mr. Ken Pearce: First and foremost, we're starting off with an experimental stage. This isn't a "go out and clean out the stock". Our initial proposition is to take 5,000 seals in the first year, do a full analysis, and do thorough market research with them. It's as simple as that.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: In your opening statement, you talked about the involvement of 115 first nations. Can you speak a bit about what are you hearing from first nations who are involved?

Mr. Ken Pearce: Yes, very definitely.

We've got the three largest groups on the coast, the Fraser Salmon Management Council, with Ken Malloway. We've got Ned Murray with the LFFA, and of course we have the group on the island as well. There are scatter groups that we haven't included, but they are in full support, in writing, of our IFMP.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I want to ask Mr. Stabler a question. Can you speak a bit more around the market implications in the U.S., and how moving forward with a seal harvest may or may not impact our seafood here and our relationship with the U.S.?

Mr. Matt Stabler: That's a really good question, Lisa Marie. I'm happy you asked it.

As I noted previously, the Americans seriously altered their Marine Mammal Protection Act to allow them to cull. I must point out that there is a large difference here. We are looking at harvest, utilizing maximum product from that animal, and they culled 9,000-plus sea lions. They are in no position to sanction any country that does the same and is under a harvest regime, and they will not do it.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: With my final minute, I want to give my colleague, Mr. Arnold, an opportunity to ask a question, because I want to make sure that Mr. Stabler has the opportunity to expand on his opening remarks.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Do you feel that DFO's decision-making process can be trusted when it comes to pinniped management? Yes or no.

Mr. Matt Stabler: You saw my partner's reaction. No.

Mr. Mel Arnold: It's an absolute no. Okay, thank you.

What do fishermen see now on the water, compared to a couple of decades or longer ago?

Mr. Matt Stabler: I alluded to that previously. It's gone from 400 boats to 30.

I am out of the industry now. Why am I retiring? We're going to get three weeks, and that's our season.

What we saw was robust salmon stocks in incredible numbers. Then we saw the wave of Californians move in under blanket "marine mammal protection", and the increase of the local Stellers and local harp seals.

Our quota went to nothing. We catch nothing at this point in time.

Why? They are being eaten on the way out of the river; they're being eaten on the way back to the river.

The resource is in serious trouble. If we don't do anything about it, they're gone.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

We'll now go to Mr. Small for three minutes or less, please.

I understand you were intending to share your time with Mr. Bragdon. I'll leave that up to you.

Mr. Bragdon doesn't want your time now, according to the finger he's waving at you.

You have three minutes or less, please.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To Mr. Pearce or Mr. Stabler, what are the results of actions to reduce sea lions on the Columbia River? Have they seen increases in their salmon populations?

Mr. Ken Pearce: Very specifically, at the Willamette fault, two years ago, when they first started this program, they were watching the winter steelhead population come through. It was 250 pieces that came through. Last year, they had 2,800.

Mr. Clifford Small: Good.

We've heard testimony in previous hearings that if we harvest pinnipeds, the silver hake population is going to skyrocket, and this is going to harm salmon populations. It's going to be devastating.

Is there a commercial fishery for silver hake in B.C. waters?

● (1750)

Mr. Ken Pearce: I had the pleasure of visiting one of the largest processors on Vancouver Island when we were doing market research. One of the boats had just come in from fishing for hake off Cape Lazo. Last May they had a delivery, to that date, of 12 million pounds.

You can adjust that level to anything to offset what Dr. Trites was worrying about. It's easily managed.

Mr. Clifford Small: If we reduce pinnipeds, silver hake population increases, which means more silver hake for harvesters to catch to help replace the salmon.

Mr. Ken Pearce: Yes. It balances it out.

Mr. Clifford Small: Okay.

There's a lot of controversy over net-pen salmon farming in British Columbia.

If we took every net-pen salmon farm out of the water today and left all the pinnipeds in the water, would it make any difference in the recovery of wild salmon stocks?

Mr. Stabler, you're a biologist.

Mr. Matt Stabler: It would make absolutely zero difference.

There are issues with fish farms, but they're a small footprint. A huge supply of pinnipeds is not a small footprint. That's not a localized event. That is coast-wide.

The fish farms are negligible compared to what is going on with depredation.

Mr. Clifford Small: What is the number one thing we have to do to help save wild salmon stocks in British Columbia?

Mr. Matt Stabler: You have to get into a harvest control regime of an exploding population.

I have a great deal of science that backs up the statement. All of them are peer-reviewed; all of them are written. I will provide that as expert testimony to this panel. You folks are going to find that a great deal of the science that I will submit to you will directly counter what Mr. Trites has said here today.

For that reason and many more, I suggest the committee as a whole please review those peer-reviewed papers that I am going to send you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small.

We're now going to go to Mr. Hanley for three minutes or less, please.

Mr. Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.): Thanks to everyone. This has been a really interesting discussion, in view of the short time.

I don't have any predetermined position on this. I really want to know what the best evidence is and how we resolve some conflicting evidence.

My riding is the Yukon territory. We know that salmon have essentially collapsed—chinook in particular have collapsed—so I am very worried about the critical state of our salmon.

There, I think, there's no argument.

We know also that there's potential for growth in the seal market, as was eloquently described by Madame Gauthier, and that with education that can increase.

I guess I have a few questions. First, I'll go quickly to Dr. Trites.

Mr. Stabler's referred now twice to peer-reviewed studies about salmon consumption by predators.

Can you comment on your own view of the magnitude of this issue and why there's some disagreement, perhaps, between your assessment and Mr. Stabler's assessment?

Dr. Andrew Trites: We often see numbers thrown out on the tonnage of fish mammals are eating, or references made to seine boats and whatnot equivalents. The reality is that when we look at what people consume, we find the average American.... When we weigh the food they're consuming, on average, it's about 1.6 tonnes of food per year. That works out to be about 5.6% of body mass. Compare that to pinnipeds. We're talking about 5.3% for seals and 5% for sea lions. Often, it comes down to how the numbers are being used.

The other point I would like to make is that there's a lot of research being done trying to figure out what's wrong with salmon. Not a lot of evidence is finding a connection with the presence of seals, other than their numbers are high compared to fish numbers. There was a recent paper that came out, this past year, on salmon. They looked at survival trends. I can forward this to the committee. There's no connection being demonstrated, there, with the presence of seals.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Dr. Trites, I have to move on, because I think my time is already running out.

I have a question to change the approach.

Mr. Stabler or Mr. Pearce, do we have the equipment and gear to take on seal harvesting in a major way? Also, how would you measure the impact? Is a 5,000-seal harvest enough to see it make a difference, and is it measurable?

Mr. Ken Pearce: You would see a measurable.... Mind you, 5,000 out of 150,000 is a pretty small base. With 5,000, we can get 100% stomach sampling. We can then get out to the market with the pelts and seal oil.

One of our members got shut down, about 15 years ago. He was into rendering the seal for oil. There were two and a half gallons of omega-3 oil in the seal. It's worth $150 a gallon.

● (1755)

Mr. Brendan Hanley: I'd like to speak to the—

The Chair: Thank you for that.

I'm sorry. The time has gone over.

We'll now go to Mr. Champoux for three minutes or less.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Gauthier, I'm coming back to you, because you made my mouth water with the recipe from earlier. We could discuss other culinary ideas, especially since it's getting close to dinner time, but let's save that for a future conversation, if you don't mind.

I want to talk about the status of your museum, Exploramer, and know a little bit about your funding sources. I know this is a little off topic, but I think it's still important. I also sit on the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, so I want to see how we can help you.

What are your funding sources? Do you receive funding from Fisheries and Oceans Canada or Canadian Heritage? How does this work?

Ms. Sandra Gauthier: In Quebec, museums like ours receive funding from the Quebec Ministry of Culture and Communications for their operations. We sometimes receive grants from Canadian Heritage to set up certain projects or produce museum exhibitions. In our case, these are always scientific exhibitions on the marine environment of the St. Lawrence. In the last few years, we have produced exhibitions on the seal populations of the St. Lawrence. We have already had two exhibitions on this subject. Our exhibits have not been funded by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to date, but it would be a very good idea.

Mr. Martin Champoux: So there is no recurrent funding. The funds that come from the federal government are for specific projects, as I understand it.

Ms. Sandra Gauthier: That's right.

Mr. Martin Champoux: The Gaspé has a lot to offer tourists. In the off-season, couldn't we create attractions that would showcase not only seal meat, but also all the products that can be obtained from the seal hunt? Do you have something like that in mind?

Ms. Sandra Gauthier: Absolutely. That's kind of the goal I wanted to mention earlier. Seal hunting outfitters could be established. We know that in the Gaspé, on the North Shore, in the Lower St. Lawrence, and even in the Magdalen Islands, the tourist season runs from June to October. It would be very interesting if tourism activities could continue from November to March, particularly through the seal hunt.

In Quebec and throughout Canada, sport or recreational hunting activities are very lucrative and interesting. It's a very targeted audience and a niche product, and our regions could allow these activities without ever harming our seal herds. Right now, they're there. We could have these events in a very educational way, with good meat and fur management. Hunters could come and participate and be educated about this hunt. At the same time, as tourists, they would be spending their money in areas where there is a lot of unemployment in the winter, so it would help alleviate some of the economic concerns.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Thank you very much for presenting this perspective, Ms. Gauthier. I guarantee we will be taking a trip this summer to visit Exploramer.

Ms. Sandra Gauthier: It will be a pleasure to have you.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll now go to Ms. Barron for three minutes or less to close it out, please.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair. I want to fully utilize these three minutes.

For the first question, I wanted to follow up with Mr. Stabler. When we're talking about a sustainable seal harvest and utilizing the entire seal, do we have the current vessel capacity and equipment to be able to go out and sustainably harvest seals, and not just do a cull?

Mr. Matt Stabler: A cull was never in question. It's a harvest base and a progressive harvest base, starting off at 5,000 and moving incrementally forward.

Given the state of our current fisheries fleet, yes, we have more than enough crew and boats on standby. Our plants are sitting idle. They're empty because of the reduction in our fisheries production. We have the guarantee of several of the ringleaders of these plant foundations that they will work with us. They will process, they will freeze and they will distribute the product. It exists.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Do you agree with the argument that we need further investment in the gear, the equipment and the vessels in order to move forward with a sustainable seal harvest?

Mr. Matt Stabler: We do not need that on the west coast. We are completely self-sufficient. All we need is the green light.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you.

I wanted to ask a quick question of Dr. Trites. When you were speaking about the rewilding phenomenon and about the seals and sea lions entering back into the marine ecosystem, I was thinking about wolves in Yellowstone Park.

I was wondering if you could speak a little further to how that applies to what we're talking about today.

● (1800)

Dr. Andrew Trites: What we're seeing around the world where wolves are being reintroduced—or beavers in Scotland—is the discovery that top-down predation is creating, in terrestrial ecosystems, greater stability and longer-term sustainability, biodiversity and productivity. I believe the same thing is under way in the Salish Sea, for example. We now have a dataset we can look at to examine these questions.

It is something that is occurring around the world. We haven't yet looked at marine ecosystems, but it gets to my side, which is the benefits that top-down predation brings, which I think most people have not given enough thought to.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: This is my last question. When we are looking at a sustainable seal harvest, taking an ecosystem-based approach and considering all the components.... There was a quick mention of the open-net finfish farms. I am wondering if you could speak to some of the harms you've seen of open-net fish farms in our surrounding ecosystems.

Dr. Andrew Trites: I haven't seen any harms—

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I'm sorry, Dr. Trites. I was going to ask that question of Mr. Stabler. I'm sorry for the confusion.

Dr. Andrew Trites: Okay.

Mr. Matt Stabler: There's a myriad of silence around it. Some juries are still out. In my mind, it's not. They have introduced a couple of diseases. That's a recognized, known fact on the west coast. They introduced parasite loading that wipes the smolts out, basically. They load them up with lice to the point that they no longer survive.

On the actual farm footprint, underneath that farm, if you look at the sea floor before the farm goes in and you look at it a year later, you would think a nuclear bomb had hit it. It spreads out from that, but it's only such a limited extent.

Again, going back to the point, will removing all the farms make any significant difference when they're under this level of depredation? In my mind, no.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron. You got it in under the mark.

I want to say a huge thank you to Dr. Trites, Ms. Gauthier, Mr. Stabler and Mr. Pearce for sharing your knowledge with the committee today.

I will remind our witnesses that if there's anything they want to add in any way as part of their testimony, to please mail it in to the committee. We'll make sure to share it with the members.

Mr. Matt Stabler: Can that be emailed?

The Chair: Yes, definitely.

For the benefit of the committee members, I want to report back on the request to travel to Norway. I appeared before the subcommittee. I read in what we wanted to do and answered any questions they had, but when it came time to vote on it, the Conservative member voted against it, so we're on life support right now to do the trip. The unfortunate part of it is that we wanted to do this trip before we did a salmon trip for the pinniped study, to accommodate Mr. Small's study.

If you can do anything with your members, have a chat with them and tell them it's important that we get to do this particular study and travel to Norway.

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: Yes. I hear you're a real charmer.

The meeting is adjourned. Thank you, everyone. Enjoy your weekend.