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Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald



Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (1105)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 63 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans. This meeting, as you can see, is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022.

This is a reminder to all to please address your comments through the chair. Screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted.

The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I'm informing the committee that all witnesses or participants by Zoom have gone through all of the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

Before we proceed, we have one quick matter to attend to regarding our upcoming study of foreign ownership and corporate concentration of fishing licences and quotas. The clerk has prepared and distributed a study budget for your review. If everyone agrees with the proposed budget, we need to adopt the following motion:

That the proposed budget in the amount of \$27,000, for the study of foreign ownership and corporate concentration, be adopted.

(Motion agreed to)

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

I would like to welcome our first panel of witnesses. Representing the Arctic Research Foundation, we have Tom Henheffer, chief operating officer, and Adrian Schimnowski, chief executive officer. Representing Carino Processing Ltd., we have Dion Dakins, chief executive officer.

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

We'll go to the Arctic Research Foundation first.

I don't know if one of you is doing it, or if you're splitting your time for the opening statement, but you have five minutes or less, please, starting now.

Mr. Adrian Schimnowski (Chief Executive Officer, Arctic Research Foundation): Good day, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee. We would like to start by thanking you for this opportunity to speak on the important issue of ecosystem impacts and management of pinniped populations in Canada.

The Arctic Research Foundation is a non-profit charity that enables and catalyzes community-led science and infrastructure projects in Canada. We work with communities to build networks of NGOs, universities, researchers and governments to fund and deliver programming, while providing access to ships, green energy-powered mobile labs and other equipment. ARF is the only organization in Canada with a fleet of six fully equipped research vessels specializing in nearshore and uncharted marine areas. You can find this information on our three large ships in appendix B of our written brief.

Our work is wide ranging, from hydrographic mapping to ecological map monitoring, food security innovation and transporting indigenous community members to harvesting grounds where elders can pass traditional knowledge on to youth. We have a great deal of experience working in the Arctic, Atlantic and Pacific waters, and working with indigenous hunters, trappers and fishers, who are directly impacted by government policies on fisheries and ocean mammals such as pinnipeds.

Throughout this committee's study, several witnesses have noted gaps in data on pinniped populations, their diets and their broader impacts on ecosystems. Representatives from DFO admitted significant knowledge gaps to this committee. This is consistent with what we have heard in our consultations with communities and researchers, and what we have seen on the ground during our operations.

I'd like to quote Jackie Jacobson, an Inuk leader in Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories, who is the MLA for Nunakput and a member of ARF's board. He said, "In Husky Lakes, seals are killing trout, so if we see a seal, we shoot it, but there's a complete lack of resources for scientific studies, and we don't know the population numbers. We just know that the fish aren't biting."

I'd like to now turn it over to Tom Henheffer to continue.

Mr. Tom Henheffer (Chief Operating Officer, Arctic Research Foundation): Thank you.

Jackie's sentiment is similar across the regions where we work. However, there is a much larger problem that needs addressing.

Scientific and environmental knowledge gaps have become endemic in the Arctic. There is a dangerous lack of waterway and flood-plain mapping, a poor understanding of beluga health in the Beaufort Sea, a shortage of studies on ice freeze and breakup in Great Slave Lake, and a broad lack of research into microplastics contamination and invasive fish species, to name just a small fraction of issues facing Arctic marine science. These challenges are compounded by the fact that scientific research is far more expensive in the Arctic than in the south.

However, DFO and the federal government at large continue to underfund this critical work. To give one example, our largest ship is the research vessel *Nahidik II*. It is the only full-sized research vessel dedicated to Great Slave Lake, the Mackenzie River and the Beaufort Sea. This year, for the third year in a row, it will be staying in dry dock due to a lack of federal investment in marine science. This is despite ARF subsidizing its operations with \$1 million of our own core funds and calls from the region's hunters' and trappers' committees for proper federal science funding.

Moving back to pinnipeds, Canada lacks a clear picture on the extent of the damage they cause throughout our waters. What is clear is that the issue is being exacerbated because DFO has not been conducting fulsome fish stock assessments in much of Canada. The department announced it was completely cancelling fall fish stock surveys in certain regions last year, for example, and has consistently failed to properly assess stocks in most of the Arctic. That is a triple shot of a dangerous lack of funding for these studies.

The most recent stock assessments on DFO's website are from 2020. Of the 180 stocks listed, 21 are from the central and Arctic region. Only three species are categorized as healthy, cautious or critical, and the remaining 18 are listed as uncertain. Only three of 18 of these fish species are able to be categorized.

This lack of knowledge is unacceptable and unnecessary.

A core part of assessments in their current form is trawling with large vessels and massive nets. This process is expensive and environmentally damaging. Proven technologies exist that can get the same or better results done at a minimal cost with minimal environmental impact.

For years, Scandinavian countries have been using bioacoustics mapping equipment, similar technology to that found in fish-finders, and the hydrographic equipment used to map seabeds to effectively conduct fish stock assessments. We use this kind of equip-

ment on our ships every day, and the methods for adapting them to stock assessments have been proven effective in other jurisdictions. These surveys could be made even more accurate, while also providing meaningful employment to local fishers, by ground-truthing through small-scale trawling from low-cost local boats.

Our recommendations are that the federal government do the following: Immediately create a pilot project for fish stock assessments using bioacoustics equipment and local trawling, where appropriate. Increase investment in Arctic marine science to match investments in the rest of the country. Add a northern top-up to grants for marine science in the Arctic that reflects the increased expense of operating ships in that region. Meaningfully engage local fishers, hunters and trappers, and indigenous wildlife stewards in wildlife management strategies. Continue to place more power in the hands of northern communities by ensuring that they are able to direct how Arctic science grants are spent.

We have the ships, the technology, the methods and the expertise to solve one major aspect of the pinniped problem by resuming fish stock assessments in an affordable, minimally invasive way. The other issues we've mentioned have similar solutions, although we don't have the time to fully address them in this form. What they do all have in common is the need for action from the federal government.

Thank you.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you.

You went a little bit over, but I wanted to make sure we heard enough of your statement.

We'll now go to Mr. Dakins, who is presenting for Carino Processing Ltd., for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Dion Dakins (Chief Executive Officer, Carino Processing Ltd.): Thank you very much for this opportunity.

Carino has been processing seal meat, oil, hides and other by-products since 1958. We need a stable supply of harp, hooded and grey seals. The health of our business is intimately linked to healthy seal populations, particularly harp seal populations.

If we genuinely care about seals, we must come to grips with an increasingly glaring and alarming truth. Responsible management of this ever-growing seal population is essential to protect our ocean ecosystem and the species that inhabit our waters, and to conserve and protect the seal, itself.

We must dispel the myth that a responsible and humane seal harvest threatens the seal's sustainability. In fact, the seal harvest is an environmental necessity for the long-term health of the seal herd and the species on which it preys. We must treat all species as being equally important. To sacrifice one in order to protect another is both misguided and irresponsible.

DFO's own science makes clear that, at their current numbers, grey seals will cause the extinction of four commercial fish species in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. The ecosystem cannot survive this kind of imbalance, nor can the seals. We must restore the balance.

In 2002, the harp seal fishery was the first in Canada to adopt the precautionary approach to fisheries management. This means that management decisions must err on the side of caution when scientific knowledge is uncertain. It also means not using the absence of adequate scientific information as a reason to postpone action, or fail to take action, to avoid serious harm to fish stocks or their ecosystems. This approach is widely accepted internationally as an essential part of sustainable fisheries management, yet for years we have used that absence of adequate scientific information to deny the devastating impact of historic seal numbers on commercial fish stocks and the marine ecosystem off our coasts.

Existing DFO harp seal science tells us that since the population has risen above 5.4 million, females, on average, are 20 kilograms lighter in February—a critical point in the gestation cycle—and 1.7 centimetres shorter in body length. Females are, on average, two years older before they have their first young, and late-term abortions are up by 200%. Furthermore, ice-dependent seals, such as harp seals, are more susceptible to the effects of climate change when their populations are higher. At current numbers, grey seals will cause the extinction of four commercial fish species in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The 2022 report of the Atlantic seal science task team told us:

...the food, feeding and migration data for the harp and grey seal populations in Atlantic Canada [is] woefully inadequate to accurately determine the role seals play in the Northwest Atlantic Ecosystem...

...the lack of current comprehensive data collection on feeding, diet and migration throughout the seasonal and spatial range of seals, especially the harp seal population, is likely contributing to the lack of credible scientific evidence.

...the high population abundance of grey seals and harp seals, which are at or approaching historic levels, are having a serious impact on the ocean ecosystem in Atlantic Canada. The extent of the impacts cannot be determined with the limited information held by DFO Science.

Based on caloric requirements, Norwegian science estimates that harp seals consume 3.3 metric tons of fish per year. DFO estimates 1.1 metric tons of fish per year. In Canadian waters, the herd con-

sumes somewhere between 8.36 million and 25.08 million metric tons of fish each year. Commercial fisheries on all coasts of Atlantic Canada, including northern waters, yield less than 750,000 metric tons.

Regardless of who is right, such ravenous and continuous predation by seals is threatening fish stocks. There's an urgent need to review the Norwegian and Canadian estimates, including the underpinning science, and reconcile the difference.

Inuit elders have told me, personally, that harp seals are displacing the ringed seal in traditional areas, negatively impacting food security and the health of individuals. At our plant, we are seeing claw marks on young beater harp seals. Our quality control experts believe that the females are trying to wean the pups earlier than historically normal.

Harp seals need sea ice to reproduce—ice that is threatened by climate change. In 2016, scientist Garry Stenson et al. authored the article, “The impact of changing climate and abundance on...Northwest Atlantic harp seal”. It states that “the general decline in pregnancy is associated with increased population size, including the rate of late-term abortions”. As well, it says, “Harp seals appear to respond to relatively small variations in environmental conditions when they are at high population levels.”

• (1115)

It follows that reducing harp seal population numbers will improve their odds of surviving the impacts of global warming and climate change.

Bringing balance to our ecosystem serves the interest of all the various entities dependent on its survival, including the seals, but we must act and now.

Thank you for the opportunity to say some truth on this critically important issue.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dakins.

We'll now go to our first round of questions.

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

Mr. Clifford Small (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, CPC): Thank you to the witnesses for taking the time out of their busy schedules to become part of the study here.

My first question, Mr. Chair, is for Mr. Dakins.

Mr. Dakins, what's the number one factor that prevents us from redeveloping the sealing industry and taking the existing quotas that we have?

Mr. Dion Dakins: From our perspective, it's about the market access link to our products. If we had unfettered access to an adequate number of markets, we believe that we could re-establish the trade. Underpinning that, I think, the necessity here is to understand the magnitude of the situation in terms of the sustainability of fish stocks and the sustainability of the seal herd itself. There are indications that the seals themselves will no longer be able to maintain the population growth and health they presently have if it's allowed to continue to go unchecked.

Mr. Clifford Small: Mr. Dakins, you mentioned the discrepancy between Norwegian science estimates on the amount of fish consumed by harp seals and the estimates by Canadian science. There's a large, unknown mortality in northern cod. Do you think that DFO science is deliberately downplaying the effects of harp seal predation?

Mr. Dion Dakins: I won't make a claim that it's deliberately being done, but I think, as the other testimony indicated, that there are gaps in the science. I think we need to invest more in science to understand the real interactions. We don't know if we're talking about an elephant in the room or a herd of elephants in the room. We have not invested enough to understand the interactions between harp seals and cod stocks in aggregating areas.

• (1120)

Mr. Clifford Small: Mr. Dakins, we know that harp seals are kept in captivity and studied in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, by DFO. They know how much these sedentary seals are fed. If these seals were in the wild foraging for themselves, completing their thousands of kilometres of migration per year, they'd need to consume way more than they're being fed currently.

Do you know how much these adult harp seals consume each year?

Mr. Dion Dakins: I visited the marine science centre in 2008 with Dr. Pierre-Yves Daoust, who is the veterinarian who helped us reshape the marine mammal regulations for the three-step process.

At the time, I asked the caretaker how much each of these adult seals was eating. He was very proud to inform me that he had returned the seals to a healthy body weight from the previous care of the earlier caretaker, who had been feeding them in excess of three metric tons of pelagic species per year. That's whole fish down the throat of the seal. It doesn't account for any belly biting or discard. At that time, the seals had grown to obese proportions where they couldn't even get out of the pool anymore. The new caretaker cut the seals back to 2.2 metric tons of fish per year to achieve a healthy body weight for a seal in captivity.

We presently use one metric ton as the amount that seals eat in Canadian waters, yet we encourage the ASSTT to review that data, and we're not able to access it. There's a real question on my behalf about the sincerity to evaluate the numbers that we presently have at hand. I'm pretty sure everybody here who has a pet knows how much they feed it per week, per month and per year, so I'm pretty

sure we'd know what we feed those harp seals in the swimming pool down in Logy Bay.

Mr. Clifford Small: You mentioned about lower body weights, smaller sizes, miscarriages and things that indicate....

Do you think that's indicating that the seals are underfed in the wild and that it's the beginning of a mass starvation of the herds?

Mr. Dion Dakins: DFO science itself says it's linked to availability of prey and the size of the herd.

All of those facts and figures come from DFO science. The alarming one is that late-term abortions are up 200%. A female harp seal, based on her body condition, can decide at any point through the gestation period to abort. That's what they're doing. Young females are aborting because they're underweight and they're shorter in body length.

The claw marks that we're seeing in the young of the year seals that we harvest are ever increasing. Again, our experts who do the grading in the plant believe it's because the mothers are trying to wean the pup off earlier, perhaps because they don't have enough body weight to wean them through the whole cycle.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you.

To the folks in the Arctic research council, Mr. Henheffer or Mr. Schimnowski, do you think that the ability of DFO to fall back on the precautionary approach is allowing DFO not to work harder to show the predatory effects of pinnipeds?

Mr. Tom Henheffer: I don't think there's any question that DFO is working very hard. We work very closely with DFO scientists in most of the work we do. The problem is a lack of funding. They don't have the funding to do the work which needs to get done, plain and simple. There needs to be more money put into it.

I have emails here, and I won't say from whom, but from a number of different DFO scientists, saying they basically had to scrape and scrimp to do the science that has already been done. There hasn't been federal funding for that. They had to find outside funding sources. There's a real problem with their ability to get the work done, plain and simple.

It's not for lack of trying and not because they're covering it up. These are good, hard-working scientists who want to provide good science, but they just don't have the funding to do it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small.

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

Mr. Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.): I'm going to continue questions with the Arctic Research Foundation witnesses. Thank you very much for appearing today.

My constituency is Yukon, so I do have an interest in Arctic issues, given my region. First, I would like to know a bit more about your organization, its history and its partners in the north, and also about your relationship with DFO. Could you just continue with what you were talking about?

• (1125)

Mr. Adrian Schimnowski: The Arctic Research Foundation is deeply rooted in working with communities in the north. We have six research vessels that are stationed throughout the Arctic. We rely closely on the communities in developing research programs, whether it's supporting DFO researchers in the region or universities. We look at it as layers of many organizations.

We approach our research vessels almost like Mars rovers. If we are working in an area, we're going to cover as much ground as possible, whether it's hydrographic research, SEARCH research, fisheries research or oceanographic research. We layer everything, so we get as much information as possible, because it's expensive to operate in that region.

Mr. Tom Henheffer: What we do differently is nearshore work and work in uncharted waters. You might have heard of us because we were the organization that helped find the Franklin expedition.

You need that kind of small Mars-rover type of ship. The big icebreakers can't get into these areas. They can't get into the ecologically sensitive areas where lake water or river water meets the ocean, where Inuit and northern indigenous people actually hunt and fish and are going after seals. That can only be done with shallow draft vessels that are specialized to operate in riskier areas.

As far as we know, we're the only organization that provides these ships, yet we don't get a penny of federal government funding at the moment. One of our main ships is not running this year in Great Slave Lake, Mackenzie River and the Beaufort Sea, which means that science work that needs to be done there.... Two very important marine protected areas are in the Beaufort Sea and the local hunter-trapper organizations in the communities desperately want work done there. They want bathymetry and they want stock assessments because they're worried that, when the quotas revert, it's going to devastate their fishing industry.

Those are some of the areas where we work and some of the really pressing issues we've seen.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: It sounds like there's a lack of funding both to DFO for its work in the north and to potential partner organizations like yours.

Do you see this as a lack of focus on the north versus the other coasts, or is it part of a more general overall lack of funding?

Mr. Tom Henheffer: Absolutely, it's a lack of focus on the Arctic.

Great Slave Lake is ecologically one of the most important places in this country. It's the canary in the coal mine, and it's extremely productive in terms of animals. That's where you go to find

out how fresh water is flowing into the Arctic. You look at Lake Winnipeg or Lake Ontario and they've been studied to death, but Great Slave Lake is barely mapped at all.

Our most recent research vessel that we just deployed is in Great Bear Lake. It's the first research vessel in Great Bear Lake—period. There have been no studies done there. This is just on inland lakes. This isn't even getting into the ocean.

We have studied lots of the traffic ways through the Northwest Passage. Those are well charted with the big icebreakers doing that work, but that's not where people are out fishing and hunting. That's not where you have the mixing of the sediment from the different regions. It's critically understudied.

Part of the reason we've been successful is that our work is in five-year to 20-year cycles. It's long term—not just going in for a year or two or three and seeing what happens. You need to have that long-term stable research in order to really get useful information. That's really challenging under the current funding models.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Thank you.

Recognizing that time is going fast, what can you tell the committee about the relationship between pinnipeds and fish stocks in the north? I know you have a lack of data, but is there anything you can tell based on either stories or research that you do have?

• (1130)

Mr. Adrian Schimnowski: We are not research scientists, but we work closely with the communities and we listen to the hunters and trappers. Often what we see is that you are what you eat. Hunters are seeing different types of fish being replaced by shrimp and the size of the seals is different. They are sinking when they are supposed to be floating when they are hunted.

Connecting with the community and listening to the people who are on the ocean, in the rivers and on the land.... They see the sudden, abrupt changes. They see the changes with climate change. They see the changes in migrations.

We really need to layer that traditional knowledge and that knowledge on the ground equally with research opportunities and infrastructure. It can't be just snapshot research. It has to be a total-ecosystem way of managing. Snapshots are a way of the past. That just doesn't work, so we have to look at that ecosystem as a whole.

The people who live in the north—the communities—are an important part of that ecosystem, just like we all are now. With the seals and the fish, there's balance. We don't see the balance changes, but the people in the north do. Involving true, meaningful programs will create that different focus in research.

Mr. Tom Henheffer: If I could add on to that very quickly—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hanley. We've run out of time. We're a bit over.

We'll now go to Madam Desbiens for six minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens (Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today. Their testimony is obviously truly fascinating. They have shared their perspective with us on the situation in Canada's far north.

Last weekend, I met with a friend of my father's. He was with a filmmaker, more specifically a documentary filmmaker, who is doing research into realities in the St. Lawrence. For example, he's shining a light on the fact that the Beluga whale population is declining in the St. Lawrence, that there are no more cod in the river and that various species, such as striped bass, are feeding on the small fish that used to be part of our fisheries.

All of this is a big challenge back home in Quebec. I'm realizing that, relatively speaking, they have the same observations in the far north. We're hearing the same thing, that they are not necessarily being listened to. In fact, Fisheries and Oceans Canada doesn't seem to be taking your immediate needs seriously, or your wish to improve your observations and your relationships with people on the ground. It seems to me that they have knowledge of what's happening in real time. In my opinion, that's what we've been missing for the past 25 years.

Twenty-five years ago, my father said that if they banned the seal hunt, there would be no more cod in the river. He was right. People on the ground have that kind of knowledge.

How long have you felt that you don't have the resources to do the research? You have greater needs, but fewer financial resources. Approximately how long have you felt this way?

[*English*]

Mr. Tom Henheffer: Thank you for the question.

It's always been a serious problem. We've very rarely had any federal government funding. That's why we work together to create networks of universities, territorial governments, provincial governments and federal departments when we can. It's to create good research programs.

Every year, it's a scramble to stack enough programs together so that we don't lose too much money, which would jeopardize the foundation. We're a non-profit charity. We lose funds in the delivery of our work. That's fine. We're not here to make a profit.

The biggest issue is not so much “how long?” as it is “what's happening right now?” The federal government has made a lot of

big funding announcements for science funding going out in the Arctic, which is excellent.

We were very hopeful, as a result of that, that our ships were going to be fully booked this season, but when we went to the community members on the ground—because the fund flows through the communities, as it should a lot of the time—they wanted, for instance, to do hydrography in the marine protected area near Paulatuk and Tuktoyaktuk. Despite there being enough money in what was announced to do that kind of work, the money that was flowing isn't available yet and might not be available for several years.

It's expensive to run ships in the north. To do marine science, you need ships. Most of the science that needs to be done is in nearshore regions. We're the only organization that can provide those ships, yet we're constantly struggling to build the programs together through whatever different pockets are available in order to do it. It's a constant problem that we're hoping is going to get better, but it requires serious, increased long-term investment and, as Adrian said, a whole-of-ecosystem approach.

Very briefly, part of the other issue is that we're successful because we work under the cogeneration of knowledge framework. The communities lead and we follow, and we take a whole-of-ecosystem approach in our work. That's really hard to fund when you're going to ISED, DFO, Agriculture Canada or whomever else, looking for funding. Everything is very specific in terms of what the research is going to be and what's going to come out of it. That doesn't work well in a northern framework, when we need to learn more about the ecosystems more broadly.

Even though our model works, it's very hard to get it funded under the current federal funding regime.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: What you're saying is quite interesting, Mr. Henheffer.

Mr. Dakins, you painted a very compelling picture in your presentation to the committee, which seemed well fleshed out.

Does your organization report regularly to the department or its scientists? Does Fisheries and Oceans Canada listen to your recommendations?

[*English*]

Mr. Dion Dakins: I serve on the Atlantic seal advisory committee, ASAC, which is chaired by the DFO.

What I will say is that, for the better part of two decades, industry has been sending strong signals to the DFO about the precautionary approach and the overall management regime. What is our mandate, as Canada, with respect to pinnipeds, whether on the west coast or on the east coast? We have scientific proof that the grey seal is going to extinct four species, and we're sitting here, not accepting the responsibility to implement measures to rectify that.

This is a shared problem with the Americans. The Americans have been talking to us. I've spoken to numerous people down in Nantucket and through Maine. They are frustrated with the Canadian seals' coming down and eating the American fish. The only level of engagement that we have is a request to find out if we can use seal in bait under—and potential fallout from—the MMPA.

I think we have to take the responsibility now for future generations. We have to definitely tie in with the local observations of the people who are out in the environment, whether it's in the north or on the east coast. They see what's happening. They saw the cod collapse coming long before the DFO saw it. We need to incorporate that first-hand experience into the management model. We need to take the responsibility to rectify the imbalance that's been created in our ecosystem.

This is not unheard of in other jurisdictions or areas. You could look to Australia and what it's done with the kangaroo in the case of desertification and loss of land. The rangelands were going to be destroyed.

It's an education approach to letting the rest of the world know that if you stand for banning the use of this sustainable resource, you're actually against the environment. You are against the world. They are putting people in marginal positions where they're destroying tradition and culture. They're impacting the food security of the local people. They're not respecting the rules around the Convention on Biological Diversity.

There are a number of buttons that could be pressed, levers that could be pulled and dials that could be turned in order to help rectify and restore the balance in the ecosystem. We now have an ecosystem problem. This is not about commercial seal fisheries. This is about restoring balance, saving the planet and saving the northwest Atlantic ecosystem.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Desbiens.

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

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today. I have so many questions. I was having a hard time deciding which ones would be most important for today, to be honest.

I'd like to ask a few more of you, Mr. Dakins.

One of the biggest things that we're talking about is the lack of the information that we need so that we can ensure that we're all talking about the same things, so that we have the education so that misinformation can be countered. I'm just trying to get clarification.

This is, I think, our fifth meeting around pinnipeds, and I'm starting to notice some information that's not jibing. I just want to get

some clarification around the diet of seals. I keep hearing about the amount of food that's being eaten by seals in Norway. I'm using that as a comparison with the inaccuracies of what we are seeing around what seals are eating along Canadian coasts. I'm also learning that there are differences in the environments that would result in those different eating habits. Can you speak to that a little so that we can understand?

If we're saying that we need to reconcile the differences.... Perhaps I'm wrong, but there seems to be an assumption that our numbers for what seals are eating along the coast of Newfoundland, for example, would be the same as for what's being eaten along the coast of Norway. Some of the information I'm getting now is showing that those are not necessarily two comparable numbers to be looking at. Perhaps you could clarify for me the information that you were talking about specifically around that, please.

• (1140)

Mr. Dion Dakins: I think it's about reconciling the difference, because being out by a kilo a day is an astronomical amount of biomass removed from the environment. The Norwegian number is based on the caloric requirements for harp seal in the wild, which do swim some 15,000 kilometres each per year. We have that data from DFO. We've seen that they go up to the eastern coast of Greenland and back. We know that harp seals now are showing up in rivers and eating char in places where they never were before.

Like any problem we have in our lifetime, the first thing you need to do is define it, and we haven't defined the problem. We have pockets of science here, and I think one thing we could all agree on is that immediately a gap analysis be conducted of what we do know, what the strength of that data is and what we do not know.

Invite dialogue with other countries that are challenged with the same problem that we are. An abundance of pinnipeds and impacts on fisheries is not solely a Canadian problem. This has been experienced through everywhere pinnipeds exist, and I think until we desensitize the topic, we won't get to even being able to scrape at the question that you're asking because what people in the environment are seeing.... Certainly I don't spend the majority of my time out there, but I talk to people every day who are out there. They're seeing a lot of crab being eaten and a lot of shrimp being eaten, which doesn't really provide a lot of benefit to harp seals in its consumption. Dr. George Rose would have said it's the equivalent of eating popcorn. Why are they eating so much shrimp?

Again, I'd like to come back to the situation in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, where we know the grey seal is going to extinct four species and we are not responding. This is my fourth committee now that I've sat through and we have seen recommendations that have not been implemented.

Mr. Gil Thériault: Thank you, Mr. Dakins. It's helpful information. I'm just trying to make sure that at the end of this we have the most sound recommendations possible for us to be able to put forward to the government, for us to move forward with, because I think one of the biggest challenges we have, which is coming up over and over again, is the gaps in data and information. I'm wanting to make sure that the information that we're receiving is clear in time for the recommendations coming forward.

I'm playing a bit of devil's advocate here. In the information that's coming my way, another thing that's coming up is around the fact that, if we look at an ecosystem-based approach, when we're looking at pinniped harvesting—I agree with so much of what's being said, to be clear—there's the importance of our looking at not only what pinnipeds are eating but the part that pinnipeds play when looking at it more holistically.

Perhaps this could be a question to our witnesses from the Arctic Research Foundation.

I know you work closely with Inuit and so on. Do you have any thoughts around the importance of a sustainable ecosystem-based approach in the decisions that we make on how to best move forward?

• (1145)

Mr. Adrian Schimnowski: I think it's certainly important to remove that snapshot-type science. Traditionally when there's open water you're doing research, but the ice in between the seasons is so critical and probably more productive than just open water.

If you involve programs that involve communities, research teams, commercial groups, where you have year-round, and not just one month a year, you get a better picture of what's really happening. Studying the ecosystem, you need to understand migration patterns and how far the animals are going, but not just the migration patterns specifically of the seal. What about the food they're eating? What are the fish doing? Where are they migrating? Where are the breeding grounds for shrimps? Opportunistically the seal are going to be looking for where the food is easiest to get to.

In some areas it might be all shrimp. In other areas it may have a more commercial influence, but if you have a snapshot, you're never really going to know. If you have that throughout the year, it also creates an industry, an opportunity for communities where capacity can be built to support that type of research.

Then you have true traditional knowledge, co-production design programs that have meaning for many: for industry, for researchers, but mainly for the communities in the north. Therefore, a balance is required, and I see that's the only way of doing it to understand that balance in the ecosystem.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Barron, we ran a bit over time.

I have to go now to Mr. Perkins for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Rick Perkins (South Shore—St. Margarets, CPC): I'm looking to get six minutes, since the last one went six minutes.

Mr. Schimnowski, I'm fascinated by something you said, and perhaps you could explain to the committee why it's happening. You said that when seals are being hunted in the north, they're sinking.

Can you explain that to the committee?

Mr. Adrian Schimnowski: We are what we eat. For some reason, the seals are not as big, as fat, as what they used to be. In some areas the seals are mainly focusing on shrimp. It's like eating popcorn. The shrimp are not as nutritious and not as fatty, so the seals

don't have that energy. Literally, when the hunters are hunting them, the seals are sinking.

Mr. Rick Perkins: For years, DFO scientists would say they were not finding the bones of cod when they did the stomach contents of seals on the east coast, because, of course, what keeps them fat is they go after the organs. They go after the liver and the organs. In the absence of that kind of fatty diet, they're eating whatever else they can find. Is that right?

Mr. Adrian Schimnowski: That would be a safe assumption, yes.

Mr. Rick Perkins: What effect is that having on the other stocks?

Mr. Adrian Schimnowski: That's a good question.

I don't think we have enough research to understand what that is. That's when you have to look at the ecosystem totally, and look at fish migration, food sources and changes in water temperature. Global warming and rising water temperatures, we know these are happening faster in the Arctic. You can talk to the people in the local communities. They can say over and over again what the changes are, and how quick they are. We don't know.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Thank you.

Mr. Dakins, in 2021, DFO's lead assessment biologist, Dr. Dwyer, who you may be familiar with, said that seals are not having any discernible impact in the predation of pelagic fish. Then, a year later, the minister came out and said that "seals eat fish", and that obviously there needs to be more study.

Is the reason the minister thinks there needs to be more study because Dr. Dwyer said that they aren't having an impact, or is it something else?

Mr. Dion Dakins: I think that the minister's announcement came on the heels of the Atlantic seal science task team report, which I have given three quotes from. We know our scientific data is woefully inadequate to determine what role, negative or positive, harp seals are having in the local environment.

Our recommendation would be that we immediately strike a task team, a task force, an action group or a group of people who are going to sit down to pore through this and come up with ways to collect more data, analyze the data and respond with urgency to what I believe is potentially the collapse of the northwest Atlantic because of overpredation.

• (1150)

Mr. Rick Perkins: I understand that, in the north, there probably hasn't been a lot of science, but on the east coast, there's been a lot of science. There was a royal commission on seals in 1986. There was the fisheries resource conservation council established in 1993 that did extensive studies on seals and called, in 1999, for the seal population to be half of what it was then. Of course, it's almost doubled in size since then.

There have been, as you say, numerous committee reports here that have studied it—four or five, at least. There is science that came out on grey seals last year from DFO scientists saying exactly what you said, that we're going to see the loss of species in the gulf. I have 122 pages of the DFO seal stomach samples that I got through an access to information request or an Order Paper request.

DFO, at the Atlantic mackerel advisory committee, put out a slide that showed that 50% of what grey seals eat in the winter is mackerel, of all things, which weren't supposed to be here in the winter, and 80% is cod and herring in the summer.

Isn't there enough science to determine that we need fewer seals?

Mr. Dion Dakins: Mr. Perkins, you are perhaps one of the most knowledgeable people on this issue now in Canada. You're in the top 2%, for sure. You've taken the time to read the studies.

What Canada needs to do is synthesize this into a package that we can use to promote the severity of the problem. Yes, we have a lot of data. We need to follow the recommendations of the ASSTT, which was struck by this government. It says it's inadequate to fully understand, so this is a go-forward. I don't think we have time to waste.

There was a recommendation to cull 70,000 grey seals in 2012. We haven't taken—

Mr. Rick Perkins: Anything.

Mr. Dion Dakins: We haven't taken 10,000 out of the environment in that period of time of 11 years.

Mr. Rick Perkins: If I could just get one more question, you mentioned—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perkins. Your five minutes are up. I know that you commented on somebody's having six minutes in the first round. That's the length of time questioners get in the first round.

The second round is five minutes starting off, and we'll now go to Mr. Kelloway for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's great to have this panel together. This study has been quite illuminating, and a lot of common themes have come up. There are some interesting contrasts and comparisons that I'll get to in a few seconds.

Dion, I want to go to you. You mentioned market access as an issue. We've seen over the last 20 years different governments trying different things. The Harper government tried to strengthen trade ties to China. That didn't necessarily work out too well. Recently our government announced the Indo-Pacific strategy to diversify Canada's trade across the Indo-Pacific.

I'm going to drill down a little bit here on market access. What would further trade opportunities across the Indo-Pacific mean for the seal industry? That's number one, and I want to go back to science for a second. We've had a lot of folks here at committee talk about science, with some folks saying that we have enough science, so I want to drill down a little bit with you on this.

What I'm hearing you say is that we need to do a gap analysis on science. I want to tie the science into market access. How can science help with market access?

Mr. Dion Dakins: Throughout Asia, even recently, we've tried to advance trade and open up new customers. We are presently in the world's most opportune time for selling omega-3s. The collapse of the fisheries in South America and the Chilean and Peruvian fisheries have created a global shortage. We've been inundated with requests about seal oil omega-3 going back to March.

The problem is that, in a lot of these countries, the decision-makers believe that harp seals are endangered. That's a real message that animal rights groups and other detractors have pushed forward. We need to be able to counter that. The only way we can counter it is with science. Do the gap analysis.

I don't understand. DFO could undertake that immediately. Talk to the Norwegians. Reconcile the differences in our understanding. That will provide the basis with which we will understand the problem. Then we'll understand the urgency to address that problem.

If the rest of the world wants to buy Canadian seafood, they're going to have to come to a reality that we have to do something with this apex predator, not only the harp seal but the grey seal in eastern, western and northern waters.

• (1155)

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Thanks. I want to stay with you on this if I can.

I'm not sure if it was in your testimony or in your last series of answers to questions. You spoke of an action team. When you look at this particular issue on seals, you see there are lots of themes that come up—the lack of access to market and the MMPA in the States. We are also hearing that there are other fishers in parts of the United States who are struggling with the same issues as our fishers are. This leads me to wish that we could travel and meet with some of these folks on the ground and on the water, to get their thoughts.

I want to go back to the action team. From a governmental perspective and working with NGOs, fishers, fishing associations and businesses like yours, if you're looking at an action team, who would be on that team?

It would seem to me that, obviously, DFO, Global Affairs, trade.... Who else would be on this action committee, and what are the two or three things that are low-hanging fruit? Maybe it's the gap analysis that we can look at, not in six years, not in one year, but in the next six months.

Mr. Dion Dakins: I think access to Global Affairs Canada is a critical step in all this. We need trade minds to look at the present constructs that exist. The Inuit and indigenous exemptions that exist have failed miserably. We should also have Environment Canada involved. We have Sable Island classified as a national park, and we have grey seals overrunning it.

We put together this strategy and submitted it to the federal government repeatedly over the last decade. I'll be happy to follow up with this committee following here. We've requested that we formulate a strategy, because we've been doing the same thing for 40 years. We've been talking about the seal hunt being sustainable. We've been talking about it being important to culture and tradition, and we've said that the products and the end uses are pragmatic. We have not gone so far as to position this as an ecosystem necessity. I believe that's where we presently are, Mr. Kelloway.

I really embrace an opportunity to sit down with some trade minds and let them know what happens in our business every day, where we see opportunity and why we can't access that opportunity. Let me make it very clear. It's not that there aren't enough people in this world who want seal products. It's our access to them that's the problem. We've had requests just recently for omega-3 seal oil for America. We get requests constantly from the EU, and we can't service them, because people don't understand the reality of the size of the problem we're dealing with.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Kelloway, you've gone over the time.

We will now go to Madam Desbiens for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: That's very interesting.

I'm going to go back to forming an emergency action team, which would be a very good idea, in my opinion. Do you feel it would be feasible for animal advocacy groups to be part of the emergency team?

Hasn't there been any effort to re-establish contact with the extremist groups? When I say extremists, I'm not being negative; I'm talking about people who basically believe that humans are the bad guys destroying the planet. That's true, but we may be misunderstanding the pinniped situation.

Earlier you stated that the ecosystem was in danger. Animal rights groups and environmentalists generally defend ecosystems. Including them in a team like this could be a way to bring them back into decision-making. Do you feel that's feasible? I, for one, would love to see that happen.

[*English*]

Mr. Dion Dakins: I firmly believe that extremist groups that don't prescribe to the sustainable use of the planet's natural resources should not be included. They're a noise at the table. I believe that legitimate environmental groups have concern for this and want to see people being able to utilize their local natural resources, whether in Pangnirtung or in Twillingate, Newfoundland.

I think we need to come to the table together to solve a very large problem, one that has tramped on culture and tradition, one that has harmed the environment and one that is harming the seals themselves.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Clearly what the organizations represented by Mr. Schimnowski and Mr. Henheffer bring is relevant to the overall operation. I imagine that those kinds of organizations would also carry a lot of weight around this table.

What do you think?

[*English*]

Mr. Tom Henheffer: I didn't quite get the translation, but I'm assuming you're asking us to elaborate on the same question. In that case, the people who need to be at the table are the indigenous people and the Inuit who have traditionally hunted in this land as well. They actually understand a whole-of-ecosystem approach to managing those ecosystems and doing so effectively. There's a huge benefit to that. I consider myself an environmentalist, but I certainly believe that the seals and the lack of a seal hunt are destroying the ecosystem in this region.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Desbiens.

I want to give Ms. Barron a chance to ask some other questions before we close out the first hour.

Mr. Gil Thériault: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you again to our witnesses.

I wanted to provide an opportunity for our witnesses from the Arctic Research Foundation, who wanted to provide some information, to fill in some of those gaps. If you could, elaborate more on what the number one step is that you think the government needs to take—the first step—moving forward.

As a side note, I visited Pangnirtung, which is an amazing community up in Nunavut, just last summer. I got to see first-hand the cultural importance of seal hunting for Nunavummiut. It was just incredible.

Share anything you can around that to fill in information. Thank you.

Mr. Tom Henheffer: The number one thing, generally, is that there needs to be more funding for northern science. There needs to be more money going out the door and flowing through communities where they can direct it. It doesn't have to come to organizations like ours, but it needs to go to the communities so they can decide what to do with it.

In terms of seals, conduct meaningful stock assessments in the regions, especially in the Arctic, where we don't know what the health of 18 of the 21 species is like. That needs to be done.

The third thing is to take this ecosystems approach. To give you a quick example, science is expensive, but it could be done much more cheaply if you weren't doing it from a huge icebreaker. You could actually access these uncharted nearshore regions where the work really needs to be done and where it has been neglected for decades.

On a single project on our ship, there could be hydrography—mapping for infrastructure and for navigation—while doing a bioacoustic stock assessment and trawling nets to find out about microplastics contamination, which is another serious issue. We could stop to do permafrost core samples and ongoing water nutrient analysis. At the same time, we could be training crew from local communities in Transport Canada certifications to get their bridge watch rating so they can then get good marine jobs. We could also host youth camps to engage youth from the communities in local science.

This is the model we do. This is what we scrape together funding to do. There's no reason the federal government can't do that. It does cross a bunch of programs and a bunch of departments, which is unusual, but that's what needs to happen for science funding in the north.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

That concludes our first hour of business.

I certainly want to thank our witnesses, Mr. Henheffer, Mr. Schimnowski and Mr. Dakins, for coming today and sharing their most valuable knowledge with the committee on this particular topic. We were delighted to hear the testimony today. It was actually very informative.

We'll suspend for a moment to switch out to our second hour.

Again, thank you very much for participating.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: I would like to welcome our witnesses for the second panel of our committee meeting today.

Representing the Fish, Food and Allied Workers union, we have Dr. Erin Carruthers, fisheries scientist, by video conference. Representing the Intra-Quebec Sealers Association, we have Gil Thériault, director, by video conference. Representing the Sport Fishing Institute of British Columbia, we have, in person, Mr. Owen Bird, executive director, and Martin Paish, director, sustainable fisheries.

Thank you for taking the time to appear today. Each group will have up to five minutes for an opening statement.

We'll start with Dr. Carruthers, please.

Dr. Erin Carruthers (Fisheries Scientist, Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union): Thank you, Chair.

On behalf of the 13,000 Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union members in Newfoundland and Labrador, thank you for the opportunity for our union to address the members today with respect to your study on ecosystem impacts and management of pinniped populations.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the FFAW, the FFAW represents fish harvesters all around the island of Newfoundland and in southern Labrador. Our membership encompasses approximately 3,000 owner-operator enterprises and their more than 7,000 crew members. Our membership also includes thousands of workers in fish processing plants, marine transportation, metal fabrication, hospitality and more sectors across the province.

As the union representing fish harvesters and processing workers, FFAW is an advocate for economic and social growth and the sustainability of coastal communities throughout the province. Those coastal communities, vibrant coastal communities, depend on sustainable and healthy fisheries and fish stocks. That's what I will talk about a bit today.

That's an overview of the union broadly, but I also want to talk about our science department. Some folks may not know that the FFAW has a science department. Our science department began with our cod sentinel program in 1994. One of the goals of the sentinel program, and it's been one of our main goals since then, has been to bring harvesters and their observations and knowledge to the assessment and management table so that they are part of the management of fished ecosystems and fisheries. We have programs on every commercially fished stock in Newfoundland and Labrador, plus many other programs. In all of the programs we do, harvesters bring their observations, knowledge and fishing expertise to the table and to the projects.

Before I get into my comments—this relates to my comments on seals—documenting harvesters' observations and knowledge remains an important priority for FFAW. I note here that, as part of your study, this committee has heard from harvesters and sealers in Newfoundland and Labrador and other regions. Included in that are some long-time harvesters I know well, Mr. Trevor Jones and Mr. Eldred Woodford, who reported on their observations and knowledge of changes in their fish environments. Specifically, I expect that they would have talked about changes in the abundance, distribution and impacts of seal populations in Newfoundland and Labrador.

As you've probably heard, because we certainly have, FFAW has repeatedly highlighted harvesters' frustration regarding the lack of commitment to understanding the impact of seal predation on important species like capelin, Atlantic cod, mackerel, herring, crab and the list goes on. In addition to logged reports of massive seal herds, harvesters have also presented, often directly to DFO, photos and videos of seal depredation. For years our membership has been calling for DFO to collect information on the current distribution and abundance of populations around Newfoundland and Labrador that are impacting our fishery species.

I think it's more than just calling on DFO to document. It's also calling on DFO to prioritize collaborative research on seal impacts, research that builds on the observations and knowledge of people on the water. As I'm sure you know by this point in your study, there has been a huge gap between harvesters' observations and DFO's assessments of ecosystem impacts from seals. I'm going to walk you through one specific example that I was a part of and just use it to illustrate some of the points I wanted to talk about. This example comes from a 3Ps cod assessment and rebuilding plan processes. Then I'll recommend potential ways to bridge that huge gap that we have between harvesters' and DFO scientists' assessments of impacts.

First, 3Ps cod is one of three cod stocks in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is the stock that is located on the south coast of the island of Newfoundland. It goes from Placentia Bay in the east to Burgeo in the west. Currently, 3Ps cod is assessed as being in the critical zone, which means that we must put a rebuilding plan in place. Like cod stocks in the southern gulf, the assessment for 3Ps cod shows that fishing levels are not driving the trajectory of the stock. In fact, model outputs show that natural mortality is estimated to be 10 times that of fishing mortality—10 times.

• (1210)

The most recent stock assessment that is available online states, “Only a very small proportion of the Grey Seal...population...utilizes Subdiv. 3Ps”. It then cites a tagging review that was published five years ago. However, that review, and, importantly, the satellite tagging data the review is based on, is at least 13 to 15 years old.

We're making a statement about what's happening on our south coast right now, and we're trying to build a plan for how to rebuild a really important cod stock, and we're using data that's 15 years old. We're saying there is a very small population on the south coast. This is why people are frustrated. This is an example of why people are frustrated, and how big that gap can be.

To be fair, I brought this up at the rebuilding plan working group, which is a small task group of DFO scientists and managers, industry and indigenous groups. When I highlighted the problem of using historical data to infer current status, because you cannot infer current status and current impacts from data that is 15 years old—

The Chair: Dr. Carruthers, we're going to have to cut it off there because we've gone over the five-minute mark. Anything you didn't get to say will hopefully come out in the questions.

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

• (1215)

[Translation]

Mr. Gil Thériault (Director, Intra-Quebec Sealers Association): Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you for inviting me to take part in your work.

My name is Gil Thériault and I am director of the Intra-Quebec Sealers Association. I first became involved in this in 1992, which gives me some hindsight and a long-term view of the seal issue. I didn't prepare a big speech. I listened to the presentations made earlier, and several things caught my attention. I'll try to name a few of them in the few minutes of speaking time I have left.

First, it's important to know that we don't have a seal industry in Canada, we have seal industries. Certainly the Indigenous peoples have theirs, as do Quebec, the Maritimes and Newfoundland and Labrador. We have at least four zones with their own realities and challenges. So it's very important that we take that into account when discussing this issue.

One of the big problems is that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans won't admit that we may have too many seals. I don't know how many times I've been in meetings with scientists from the department. They said it wasn't true, that we didn't have too many seals, much like we didn't have too many lobsters. Those scientists use a species-by-species approach. The important thing for them is that we have more and more. However, it is possible to have too many geese, too many foxes, too many moose and too many deer, for example, in any given ecosystem. Earlier, we were wondering if the department was possibly minimizing this issue. In my opinion, it definitely is. The species-by-species approach to the precautionary principle is a thing of the past. It's as backward-looking as the anthropocentric approach. Today, we absolutely must get behind the ecosystem approach, and there seems to be quite a bit of resistance to that in the department.

Right now, with respect to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, I've heard that four species of fish were endangered, which is absolutely not true. That was the case several years ago, but many more than that are endangered now. Atlantic cod, American plaice, witch flounder, yellowtail, white hake, winter skate, mackerel and herring. In a few years, even more will be endangered species.

The magnitude of the problem, as far as the grey seal here in the Gulf of St. Lawrence goes, is enormous. We're already in the middle of a crisis, and we've already waited far too long. I can talk to you later about the issue of seal bait, for example. The situation there reflects the department's total lack of will to address this issue.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll now go to Mr. Bird or Mr. Paish. I don't know if you're sharing your time, or if one of you is making an opening statement.

You have five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Owen Bird (Executive Director, Sport Fishing Institute of British Columbia): Thank you. I will do that.

I just note that I was targeting six minutes. I understand that the statement has been distributed ahead of time. I'll do my very best, but I'm aware of the time.

The Sport Fishing Institute of B.C. is an advocacy organization, established in 1980, representing the interests of recreational anglers, the businesses that support sport fishing and related activities, and the communities that depend upon it. Salmonids are a keystone species for our fishery. Based on studies and findings in B.C., Washington and Oregon, as well as shared experience and knowledge of coastal anglers and residents, there is no doubt that the future of salmon and steelhead production, and therefore salmon and steelhead fisheries, is threatened by the current levels of pinniped predation.

Pinniped predation on salmon and steelhead in B.C. has been a serious issue for decades. Now pinniped predation is known to have a greater impact on salmon and steelhead production than all other fisheries and harvest combined. From a study published in the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences regarding marine mammal predator consumption of chinook in Washington state inland waters, the following demonstrates the significance of the issues in waters adjacent to B.C.:

Between 1970 and 2015, we estimate that the annual biomass of Chinook salmon consumed by pinnipeds had increased from 68 to 625 metric tons. Converting juvenile Chinook salmon into adult equivalents, we found that by 2015, pinnipeds consumed double that of resident killer whales and six times greater than the combined commercial and recreational catches.

While pinniped populations appear to have stabilized, the current numbers are 10 times what they were. The range and habits of the inflated population have oriented to areas and times that are frequented by juvenile and adult salmon. The relationship between the pinniped population and decreasing salmonid abundance is increasingly documented and obvious. The future for salmon is bleak unless something is done soon to reverse the trend.

Ecosystem-based management that neglects to include pinnipeds in the approach does not lead to rewilding of the B.C. coast or marine mammals but has systematically created and exacerbated an imbalance in the marine environment. In its natural state, during the millennia prior to European contact, one of the most significant sources of predation of pinnipeds in B.C. was humans, particularly in those same areas where pinnipeds congregate to consume salmon. Indigenous peoples considered seal meat an important part of their diet and made careful use of body parts for clothing and tools. One need look only as far as the UBC Museum of Anthropology to see ancient potlatch bowls the size of canoes intended for sharing this source of rich protein with others.

The perception of marine mammals as competition for the commercial fishery undoubtedly led to the actions that have upset the balance between people, pinnipeds and salmonids. The 1970s total ban on harvest or hunting of pinnipeds in B.C. was a reaction that, once implemented, modified the ecosystem management approach drastically. The pendulum swung too far, too quickly, effectively removing pinnipeds from ecosystem management, which has led to the present dire circumstances.

As many have noted, we are at a crisis level with regard to the impacts of pinnipeds on salmonid production in B.C. Combined with additional challenges due to climate change and habitat loss, many stocks of salmon and steelhead are in threatened or endangered COSEWIC status level. It is our fear and concern that if action is not taken, iconic species such as interior Fraser steelhead,

for which a Province of B.C. study listed pinniped predation as a key source of juvenile mortality, may soon disappear.

The significant investment in salmon recovery in 2020 through the Pacific salmon strategy initiative, PSSI, is taking steps to address salmon recovery in an integrated manner based on the pillars of habitat restoration, enhancement, harvest transformation and communication. Efforts regarding harvest transformation have ensured that targeted fishing related mortality is no longer a limiting factor in the productivity of salmon, but absent from the other pillars and PSSI consultation sessions and working groups is meaningful action or even discussion regarding pinnipeds. In what should be an objective, science-driven process that must include all elements of the issue at hand, pinniped discussion is conspicuously absent. While meaningful inclusion of this sensitive and political subject is understandably challenging, ignoring or avoiding it is unacceptable and has the potential to render all other actions ineffective and insufficient.

• (1220)

We are encouraged to know that work is under way to restore indigenous harvest, and we congratulate and support those efforts to the fullest. However, we are concerned that the pace of these efforts will not be enough to address the scale of the problem in a timely manner. Fortunately, and with similarities to the SRKW, we can look south at methods and tactics successfully implemented to address the issues and to help restore the historical role humans have played in maintaining a balance between pinnipeds and salmonids.

We are hopeful that the objective—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bird. We're going to have to end it there to give time for questioning.

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

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll thank all of the witnesses for being here today.

I'm going to focus most of my questions on the west coast. We've had a lot of testimony regarding the east coast, so it's great to have some west coast representatives here.

I know you were in the room earlier today. Do you see a similarity between the east coast and west coast with pinniped populations and impacts on fish stocks?

Mr. Martin Paish (Director, Sustainable Fisheries, Sport Fishing Institute of British Columbia): Thank you very much, MP Arnold.

It was most interesting to listen to the testimony this morning and at the same time distressing to see situations unfolding in British Columbia that are absolutely similar to those that have been unfolding and well documented on the east coast for what appears to be decades. We're dealing with similar situations.

In some cases, I've heard of four stocks of commercial fish that were facing extinction as a result of pinniped predation. The similarity with interior Fraser steelhead, which is an iconic species in British Columbia, is there. I know that you are very well aware of that situation, MP Arnold.

Yes, there are definite similarities. I think what's challenging to me as a west coast representative is to see the length of time that this issue has been discussed and the little action that's unfolded. It's fairly new in British Columbia, yet it seems to be that we're facing a dire future.

• (1225)

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

I would be remiss if I didn't also mention that we're now hearing of similar issues on the north coast. All three of Canada's coasts are facing issues regarding ecosystem management, basically because of the disregard for pinniped management in the process.

Can you both describe the observations that you've had over time? I think you both have been involved in the fishing sector on the west coast for a number of years. What have you seen change over time?

Try to keep it as short as you can, but I would like to hear that.

Mr. Owen Bird: Yes, it's a short answer to a long time. I agree.

Right from early childhood, I've spent my time fishing on the coast in and around some of the very same environments that are now observing this tremendous.... They are basically being overwhelmed by pinnipeds.

This is something that has occurred through the 1990s, and particularly into the 2000s, to where we find ourselves now, so much so that there are examples that I can refer to.

In Campbell River, for example, there are angler groups that have been involved in chinook net-pen rearing activities. They've done that for many years. Recently they have encountered problems with pinnipeds coming into the river area where those net pens are. Basically, the Quinsam hatchery, which funds and supports that activity, said that it won't do it any longer because pinnipeds are interfering with the ability to do that.

There are many very small and large examples all over the coast where those kinds of things are happening as a direct result of populations of pinnipeds moving into areas and just expanding in such large numbers.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

You talked about pinniped predation on steelhead. We've also heard previously about impacts and that pinnipeds will become selective in what species they will take.

I know you're working on trying to get a mark-selective fishery happening in a very limited and very conservative way.

Can pinnipeds tell the difference between a marked fish and an unmarked fish, the way harvesters can?

Mr. Martin Paish: Thank you, MP Arnold. I'm happy to address that question. I can do it very quickly.

Just like people, just like southern resident killer whales and just like other salmon, it's pretty apparent based on my experience and having depredation events occur when I spend my time on the water that pinnipeds cannot tell the difference between hatchery fish or wild fish in any way, shape or form.

Again, that's similar to other species out there.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Have you observed where they may target a male fish versus a female fish or vice versa in the returning fish? Is there any evidence of that?

Mr. Martin Paish: I don't know if there's evidence of targeting as much as there's evidence of being selective about what's consumed. Seals and sea lions tend to rip the bellies out of fish and like to consume the roe.

We do see species-specific targeting. My experience is in Cowichan Bay. It occurs elsewhere, but in Cowichan Bay specifically sea lions and seals will swim through a school of chum salmon in order to target a coho or a chinook. That's been observed many times.

Mr. Mel Arnold: That's very interesting.

For how much of the year are these seals and sea lions actually there eating fish? Are they only seasonal or it is year-round?

Mr. Owen Bird: They are opportunistic animals and so part of the problem is that there is now enough of a population that they're in places where they might ordinarily have appeared seasonally when they know that the smolts are coming out or the adults are coming in. Now they are there all year round and then, of course, they are there in greater numbers at those times and places where they understand that there will be salmon there for them to consume.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold. That's right on the mark.

We'll now go to Mr. Cormier for six minutes or less.

Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

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

My questions are for Mr. Thériault first.

Mr. Thériault, I believe your reputation is well established in the field. You are well known. You recently attended the Seal Summit in Newfoundland and Labrador. You said that the summit was off the mark. I have some of the same concerns, and I feel that we've had more than enough meetings and summits like that in the past few years.

Why do you say that it was off the mark? What did they do wrong? Could they have identified the root of the problem and fixed the seal overpopulation issue once and for all?

Mr. Gil Thériault: Thank you for the question, Mr. Cormier.

To me, it all comes down to really wanting to take action. I went to the summit in Newfoundland and Labrador, and I thought some of it was interesting. We need science, okay, but I totally agree with the person on the last panel who said that we've had enough science. We know that the seal is at the top of the food chain, that it eats what's at the bottom and that it's opportunistic. They are going to eat whatever is there. We could argue about this for another 20 years to get more scientific details, but we're going to come to the same conclusion: We have too many seals and that's causing a problem in the ecosystem.

In addition, the international markets are very attractive to Newfoundland and Labrador. They are much less so for the Maritimes, the Inuit and Quebec. The problem in Quebec is that we can't meet the demand for the existing market. This year, we would have liked to hunt 3,000 to 4,000 seals just for the meat, but we hunted 800. I feel we need to recognize that we have more than one problem. We have a number of problems, and the challenges vary from region to region.

We also addressed a third topic, but I don't really remember. I must say we often talk about informing people about the seal issue and convincing them we have a problem. I have a university degree in communications and I'm telling you, I've been seeing this since 1992 and there is no solution. The people who don't believe we have a problem will never believe it. You'd have more luck convincing a Muslim that there's no Allah or a Catholic that there's no God. It's never going to happen. It's high time we got on with it.

Mr. Serge Cormier: I just thought of another question. You talked about science, and I also believe we have a tremendous amount of data about seals.

You recently took part in a scientific hunt, which ended a short time ago. What was the purpose of this hunt? Why gather more data if we already have enough? Why did you take part in that hunt?

Mr. Gil Thériault: It's hard to refuse to take part in scientific hunts because we always need more data. It's always interesting to have data. However, data is not the problem. The problem is the government has to actually be willing to take action.

Mr. Serge Cormier: You talked about markets, including the seal market and the fact that Quebec can't meet the demand. Other markets, like those in the Magdalen Islands, are very significant.

I'm thinking of the lobster and crab markets. You know that we will leave ourselves open to threats if we don't do things properly in terms of hunting and slaughtering seals.

In your opinion, are we prepared to risk everything for our other markets that are so important to our economy, like the crab and lobster markets? How will people react if we decide to slaughter seals in large numbers? We know it will have an impact on other species' ecosystems.

It feels like we've been going in circles for several years. It's the number one excuse. How do we solve this?

Mr. Gil Thériault: Here's the problem: If we don't do something about the seals, we will no longer have any markets to defend. We won't have any crabs. We won't have any lobster. We'll have nothing left.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Okay.

Mr. Gil Thériault: In my opinion, putting off action because we're being intimidated—I think we can call it that—by the United States is going to lead us straight to a dead end, and before you know it the fishing industry in the Maritimes will be gone forever.

• (1235)

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you very much, Mr. Thériault.

[*English*]

Ms. Carruthers, on the same topic, you said that you represent 13,000 FFAW members, fishers and fish plant workers.

Again, if we do it wrong, we risk having difficulties with our markets for crab, lobster and other species when it comes to our exportation.

One of the previous witnesses—I'm not sure if you were listening—said that the U.S. is getting mad right now because of the overpopulation of seal, and some of those seals are getting to the U.S. That's what he was saying, and that the U.S. was telling us to do something about it.

Do you think that discussions should happen at the higher level, whether it's from the Prime Minister's Office with a visit with the U.S. President, or maybe a minister from trade or DFO going to the U.S. and saying, "Look, there's a problem here. We want to solve it. We have to do something about it, and here's what we want to do"?

Do you think that we're at a time now when this is what we need to do? We have enough science. We have had enough meetings. Don't you think this is what we have to do now?

Dr. Erin Carruthers: I'm sorry. Was that question directed at me? I didn't hear the start.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Yes.

Dr. Erin Carruthers: Okay. Thank you.

Yes, I think so. I also think that to prepare for that meeting, if you had a concentrated group of people—building off some of the ideas that Dion Dakins said—working together to identify action items and short three-year timelines, you could also strengthen that argument considerably, but yes, it needs to be elevated.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

We'll now go to Madam Desbiens for six minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Thériault, I'm glad to see you here before this committee. I'm sure everyone sitting at this table can appreciate the breadth of knowledge you've acquired since 1992. You're almost my father's age. We saw each other in the Magdalen Islands not long ago, and I got to see then just how much the seal hunt is an integral part of Magdalen society.

I wonder why we can't keep up with the demand. In Quebec, restaurants want to put seal on their menu, and grocers want to sell seal meat.

Is it a lack of training or opportunities, or is it about money? Are other factors involved?

What are your thoughts on this?

Mr. Gil Thériault: Many factors come into play, but one of the biggest ones is the fact that the seal industry was founded on the harp seal hunt. It's a completely different hunt than the grey seal hunt, which is fairly recent. It began a decade or so ago, and we've been quietly, gradually learning how to hunt grey seals ever since.

The grey seal lives in small colonies that scatter everywhere. It tends to sit on the shore, unlike harp seals, which still need the ice, especially to give birth. In about 10 years, the grey seal has adapted to the banks and the absence of ice. Obviously, if you shoot once at a colony of 2,000 seals, there won't be many left on the beach when you take your second shot. We're still in the very early days of that hunt.

It's very complicated to hunt grey seal in large numbers. Of course, there is a significant lack of training on how to harvest seal meat to preserve its quality. People have become accustomed to hunting harp seals for their pelts. Since we don't eat the pelts, getting it wrong is only relatively serious. The same goes for the blubber. The products must be of the finest quality.

We have a long way to go. I, for one, think it's unfortunately too late for the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The grey seal population, which used to range from 5,000 to 10,000, is now half a million and growing. In addition, we need to think about all the regulations in place. You can't hunt at certain times, in certain places or with certain boats. Then we have the age issue. We have so many obstacles in our way that an already complex hunt becomes virtually impossible.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Could more flexible methods, hunting tools, education or an interpretive centre help improve the situation? Could recreational hunting be a tool to bring in more hunters and develop more techniques?

To be honest, I find that Magdalen Islanders have an approach quite similar to that of Indigenous people in terms of humans and seals co-existing in harmony, and they realize what that means culturally. I believe that will give them strength internationally in terms of communications.

Do you feel we could do more to highlight this approach?

● (1240)

Mr. Gil Thériault: I absolutely agree with that. I believe we need to get rid of a lot of red flags. We need a simpler approach.

Right now, we have trouble getting sealers, much less professional sealers. We also have many enthusiasts or hunters who do it for their personal needs. You have to understand that restrictions are in place. For example, you can't change zones, or hunt in a certain section at a certain time of year with a certain type of firearm, and so on.

We know that even if you took away as many regulations as possible, it would still be complicated to hunt seals. We need to keep some regulations to get things done properly, but some are completely unnecessary. I feel we really need to clean up all the regulations around the seal hunt.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: In that case, do you believe that knowledge in the field would be an invaluable tool for changing regulations of this kind?

Mr. Gil Thériault: I absolutely believe that, because hunters who go out in the field realize that we have a lot of problems. They see that many regulations can be removed, they're totally artificial. That would allow for sound management of the grey seal in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. We're not at five minutes to midnight. It's more like 30 seconds to midnight.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you, Mr. Thériault.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Desbiens.

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

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

My questions, I think, predominantly for this round will be to my fellow British Columbians here today—thank you—from the Sport Fishing Institute of British Columbia.

My first question is to either of you, whoever feels best suited to answer. I'm wondering if you could expand a little around how human activity has exacerbated the problem of pinniped predation.

Mr. Martin Paish: There are several ways we can look at it.

First off, the complete closure of the hunting of seals in the 1970s is what initially created the problem, but we also have other activities taking place.

I think, perhaps, one of the most significant ones that we notice would be the use of log booms. Log booms in the estuaries and bays around systems that produce salmon have created safe haulouts for seals and sea lions that haven't existed in the past and have enabled them to successfully avoid predators of their own, such as transient killer whales and things like that.

One only needs to travel down, for example, the mouth of the Fraser River to see the abundance of log booms and the abundance of seals and sea lions on them that can do this. Those are the two examples that I would provide in a short answer.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you very much.

You mentioned in your opening statement, Mr. Bird, what's happening down south. I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit further around the methods and tactics you were discussing that were successfully implemented to address the issues. Perhaps you could expand on that a little bit further.

• (1245)

Mr. Owen Bird: I'd say, as a general comment, that Washington state, particularly, and Oregon as well, have observed, as I noted in one of the remarks.... They have noted the problem with quite a bit of care, and they've taken on tackling the issue already.

There are examples, particularly in the Columbia River, where they went to either trapping or just removing. I'm not sure about the exact details of the removals. However, the evidence has already indicated a significant increase in steelhead recovery and passage by those natural "pinch points", so called. They've also taken on different ways and means to consider how to work around the mammal act in the U.S., which is similar to the one that is in place for Canada. As I say, they initially took on a project to talk about discouraging the animals, and that didn't work. Then they moved on to the next level. Now they're at trapping and removal.

There are a number of examples, as I've mentioned, but they've taken on some tactics that seem to show quite a bit of success in addressing the issue.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you very much.

In your opening statement you also talked about your "fear and concern that if action is not taken, iconic species such as interior Fraser steelhead, a Province of B.C. study listed pinniped predation as a key source of juvenile mortality, may soon disappear." Can you expand on that a little more and on what that study told us?

Mr. Martin Paish: Thank you for the question.

There are two times in a salmonid's life when they face pinniped predation, both times when they're concentrated. Salmon and steelhead are anadromous species, unlike more pelagic stock. They are forced, by their lifestyle, to migrate through pinch points.

One time is as an adult, when they're returning as adults. That's the more obvious source of predation, where we see seals and sea lions tossing salmon all over the place. It's quite a horrendous spectacle to see, actually, in some cases, or spectacular, depending on your point of view.

The other time, and where they are more concentrated, is as out-bound juveniles. They have to leave the system in order to hit the ocean. Steelhead are interesting in that they're a stream-type salmonid. That means they actually spend one or two years in fresh water before they migrate out to the ocean. There are common themes in particularly the endangered and threatened Fraser stocks that the bulk of them are stream-type salmonids. That means that when they hit the ocean, they are typically in the range of 200 grams to 600 grams. The way it's been described to me is that it's the difference between a Smartie and an Oh Henry! in terms of chocolate bars.

For seals and sea lions, they will expend the least amount of energy to get the most amount of protein out of the deal. They will target these stream-type salmonids. Many people have looked at it. There have been studies on it. The theme with regard to stream-type salmonids being the threatened and endangered species, steelhead being the best example because of their incredibly endangered status, is that it's pointing toward pinniped predation as being the source of that problem.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you very much. I'll try to get my last question in quickly. I have only 45 seconds left to go.

You talked about how ecosystem-based management that neglects to include pinnipeds in the approach does not lead to a rewilding of the B.C. coast or marine mammals. Of course, we had Dr. Trites at a former meeting speaking to the rewilding process of pinnipeds.

I'm wondering if you can expand on that and give your perspective on that.

Mr. Owen Bird: I'd be glad to do that.

Yes, I think the issue at hand here is that, in the 1970s, we took pinnipeds away from the ecosystem management approach. We're suffering the consequences of that now. To then look at this situation as we find it right now and explain that this is returning things to a wild environment seems to be sort of ignoring what occurred in the 1970s and that population.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

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

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

Thank you to the witnesses for taking part today.

My first question is for you, Mr. Thériault. How do the high deductibles on sealing vessel insurance impact participation in the sealing industry by your harvesters?

Mr. Gil Thériault: I'm sorry. Can you rephrase "deductible"?

Mr. Clifford Small: Deductible is the amount that the harvester would have to pay, the base amount, on damage to their vessel if they had damage.

Mr. Gil Thériault: This is a good question. One of the damages from all the anti-sealing campaigns is that it's actually very hard for sealers to get insurance. The rate of insurance went really high. I know that in Newfoundland they mostly would hunt harp seals on the ice. That's tougher. It's a tougher hunt for those people. It's tough on all the material as well.

Here, with climate change and all, we barely have ice anymore in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Most of the time, the guys are going on the open sea. We have fewer problems, but the problem we have is finding companies who want to insure sealing activities. As we know, the big insurance companies are from either the States or the United Kingdom. It's getting to be really a big problem.

• (1250)

Mr. Clifford Small: Mr. Thériault, how could the federal government step in here and help to solve this problem?

Mr. Gil Thériault: Definitely, if we could have support from the Government of Canada regarding insurance to make it affordable and possible for the vessels to go out to sea, then that would already be a huge step.

That's one of many steps the Government of Canada needs to take. That's certainly an important one.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you.

My question is for Ms. Carruthers.

In the recent mackerel advisory meetings in Halifax, data was provided that grey seals are consuming mackerel. These samples were taken in the wintertime. Their diet was 47% mackerel. We know that mackerel is under a moratorium. We know that, in the wintertime, mackerel is supposed to be in the Hudson basin east of New York.

What does that tell us, Ms. Carruthers?

Dr. Erin Carruthers: It tells us a couple of things. It tells us that we need updated data on mackerel, which is a separate issue entirely. It tells us that we need up-to-date data on where these species are. With mackerel in particular, we are hearing that—we're getting a lot of reports—there's a shift in distribution and abundance. That means that it's really important to have up-to-date data on where these species are.

The other one is that it is a very large removal of mackerel. Right now, the commercial fishery has been shut down. I wasn't at the AMAC meeting in Halifax, but I suspect, if it's that high of a proportion, then it's going to be more than the removal of a...even if a commercial fishery was open.

Mr. Clifford Small: Again, Mr. Chair, this question is to Ms. Carruthers.

DFO understands that grey seals are having a significant predatory effect on the recovery of gulf cod. How do soon do we need to act, Ms. Carruthers, to save these populations of fish?

Dr. Erin Carruthers: Honestly, it's probably 10 to 15 years ago.

I know Newfoundland better than the southern gulf. When you look at the science reports and stock assessments, what you see is about a five- to 10- year delay. Throughout the stock assessments, you see the same language coming up when you're talking about the south coast, or 4R3Pn. That's Newfoundland west coast cod. You see the same types of reports coming from DFO that were in southern gulf cod 10 to 15 years ago. We're seeing the same thing happen again—or what looks to be somewhat close to the same thing happening again—on the south and west coasts.

Mr. Clifford Small: DFO has been holding seals in captivity in St. John's in Newfoundland and Labrador. Have you had any access to the dietary information that's coming out of those studies there with those harp seals?

Dr. Erin Carruthers: I think you're talking about the harp seals that are at the Ocean Sciences Centre there.

The Chair: Dr. Carruthers, I would ask if you could submit an answer to that in writing. That would be great.

Dr. Erin Carruthers: Sure.

The Chair: Mr. Small has gone slightly over, and now we have to get through another couple of people before we finish off. Thank you.

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

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to touch on a few points. If anyone is compelled to provide more information, then, by all means, do send it in.

Ms. Carruthers, is there a chance that we could work with your brothers and sisters in the United States, who are also fishing and basically facing these same difficulties, to try to get a change in attitude in the U.S. government?

Dr. Erin Carruthers: I think that, when fish harvester groups work together, they often come up with some excellent solutions because they are the folks who have on-the-water solutions to a given problem. I'm familiar with collaborations that have done things like solve the bycatch of turtles and stuff like that. We've been able to build off of solutions in the States and likewise here, so I don't see why we wouldn't be able to do that.

• (1255)

Mr. Ken Hardie: That sounds like a recommendation in the making.

Mr. Thériault, on the U.S. position, particularly the Marine Mammal Protection Act, is this just market protection, or is it their response to all of the advocacy pressures that they're getting?

Mr. Gil Thériault: It's definitely activist pressure. I'm glad you're asking that question, because when you look at the bait file.... Recently, we have proven that using seals as bait would be great in all aspects. We could have better management of seals. We could use them, instead of using fish that are depleting our lobster fishing and crab fishing. It would work wonders. We would keep Canadian money in Canada. We could use local resources.

The whole thing makes sense, but the U.S. is still putting pressure on Canada to say, "No, you cannot do that."

It really shows how we're going off the scale, but there's nothing rational about it. There's nothing scientific about it. It's all dogma-driven. I think it's high time for Canada to step up and say the MMPA doesn't make sense. Maybe it does in your land. You do whatever you want, but here in Canada, it just doesn't make sense, so stop putting that MMPA in our face for the dogmatic reason that the seals are too cute.

It doesn't make sense.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you for that, sir.

Mr. Bird, you talked about trapping and removing seals in the Columbia. Is that literally relocating a live animal someplace else?

Mr. Owen Bird: I know they have tried a number of things. Like you say, they have had—

Mr. Ken Hardie: I just need a yes or a no on this one.

Mr. Owen Bird: Yes. They tried that and then they got to eliminating them.

Mr. Ken Hardie: All right.

I need you to trade minds with the activists. What motivates them? Where do they get their information from? What do they perceive and who leads them? What do you know about these people?

Mr. Paish can answer as well if he has something to add.

Mr. Owen Bird: Do you mean as it relates to pushing back against addressing this issue we all share, or we all seem to be landing in the same place—

Mr. Ken Hardie: That's exactly what I mean.

Mr. Owen Bird: I can't know, because I'm certainly not in that camp. I feel like I'm reasonably familiar with the issue. However, it appears that the information used by some groups is appealing to urban populations that are not familiar with the circumstances. They see a picture of an animal with big brown eyes and are compelled in that way.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Can indigenous people be better partners in an effort to change minds?

Mr. Owen Bird: I think that's an excellent avenue, and it's a very compelling argument for first nations to help share this information and have it be adopted more readily than other groups could.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Mr. Chair, we will let Ms. Desbiens and Ms. Barron take a bit of time.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Hardie.

We have about two minutes each for Ms. Desbiens and Ms. Barron, so they can split that time. I would ask them to be precise in their question. Hopefully, the answer doesn't go on for too long.

We'll go to Madam Desbiens for two minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I had actually freed up some seconds in my last round. I play fair.

Mr. Thériault, again, we're very pleased to have you with us.

In closing, could you tell us what priority action you'd like to recommend to the committee that it could include in its report?

Mr. Gil Thériault: Like I said earlier, it's high time that Canada challenged the MMPA, and it should do it with science. The first step is to make the seal hunt much more accessible than it is right now, keeping the regulations needed to do it properly but making it much easier for hunters. Initiatives like seal bait and shellfish harvesting should be greatly encouraged. We need to take steps very quickly if we want to preserve the fisheries in the Maritimes.

● (1300)

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: I strongly believe that we already have successful approaches, like the one in the Magdalen Islands, where all they're trying to do is meet the demand on the Quebec market fairly.

In your opinion, shouldn't the Magdalen Islands be seen as a positive example of the restored seal hunt? Could it be used as a major promotional tool for the international market?

Mr. Gil Thériault: I've actually been observing a unique reality for several years. If we want to convince the international market to buy seal products, we need to use them ourselves. So we need quality products here at home, be it meat, blubber, pelts or the rest of the seal, which we can even use for bait.

I went to China in the nineties. They asked us what we were doing with seal. We said that we ate some from time to time. They offered us 25 cents a pound. Today, we're returning to China and offering them seal from a local butcher, and the packaging says it costs \$80 a kilo. We're having a completely different conversation.

So I feel we must use the product to its fullest in Canada before we offer it abroad.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Desbiens.

We'll now go to Ms. Barron to finish it off.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

I have some quick questions. You had spoken about the work being taken to restore indigenous harvests of pinnipeds.

Can you expand on that a bit—on what you are seeing and the movement that's happening around that?

Mr. Martin Paish: We are seeing some investment by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in providing tools and management plans, along with education, to assist local first nations in dealing with responsible harvest close to their communities. We'd like to see that work expand; however, as pointed out, the fear is that it's not going to happen quickly enough to address some of the circumstances we're seeing related to endangered salmon populations.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: What would you identify as the number one difference between the coasts as we look at pinniped management? I know we talked about similarities, but what about the differences?

Mr. Martin Paish: I would suggest the east coast is a little further ahead. I would suggest that on the west coast.... I noted an Atlantic seal action committee, or something like that, which involves stakeholders. We don't have anything like that in British Columbia. Also—and I look forward to talking to one of the witnesses after the committee here—the idea of developing markets for B.C. seals and whatnot doesn't seem to be as far along.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I'm going to try to get one last question in because I forgot to set my timer.

The Chair: Actually, we're all out of time unfortunately, Ms. Barron. Time goes fast when it's so interesting. I realize that.

I must say a big thank you to our four witnesses for the second hour: Dr. Carruthers, Mr. Thériault, Mr. Bird and Mr. Paish. Thank you for sharing your information with the committee today as we look forward to, hopefully, putting a report together at the end of this and passing it on to government for action.

This is just a reminder that on Thursday we will continue our study on pinnipeds. I hope to be there in person and see everybody at that time, safe and sound.

Enjoy the rest of your day. The meeting is adjourned.

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