HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

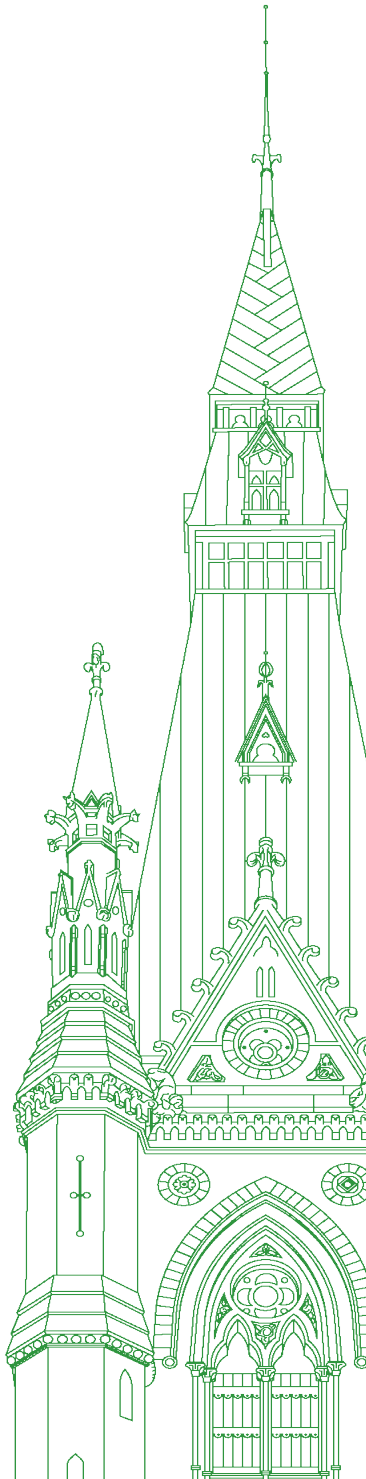
44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 064

Thursday, April 27, 2023



Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Thursday, April 27, 2023

● (1535)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 64 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans. This meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022.

As a reminder to all, 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 am informing the committee that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

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

I would like to welcome our first panel of witnesses. As an individual, we have Mr. Glenn Blackwood, retired vice-president of Memorial University of Newfoundland, by video conference. Representing the B.C. Commercial Fishing Caucus is Jim McIsaac, managing director, also by video conference. Representing the David Suzuki Foundation, we have Kilian Stehfest, marine conservation specialist, by video conference as well.

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

We will start the statements with Mr. Blackwood for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Glenn Blackwood (Vice-President, Memorial University of Newfoundland (Retired), As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

That's my official job title, I just retired, but over the past two years I took on the challenge—a bit reluctantly at first—of looking at a seal science review through a process that created the Atlantic seal science task team.

We were seven people who participated in that, and I've sent a package that will be translated and passed to you later. Unfortunately, during COVID we couldn't have public meetings and we actually never met as a committee, but we had great representation from Nova Scotia, P.E.I., and Newfoundland and Labrador, and a representative from the Magdalen Islands, who unfortunately, due to work commitments, wasn't able to complete the process and left us after a few months. I should mention that we had representation from New Brunswick as well from the Atlantic Salmon Federation.

What I'm going to talk to you about today is basically a short summary of that report and how it changed some of my views with respect to seal populations, and some of the challenges we faced in looking at lots of science. This was science in which, in some cases, there's enough evidence, if you will, that seals are having a major impact, like on 4T cod, and in other cases, the samples taken by industry are completely different from the samples taken by DFO science in terms of geographic area, time of year and stomach contents. I'll talk about that a bit later on as well.

I grew up on the northeast coast. I've chaired the Canadian Centre for Fisheries Innovation. I was an ADM of fisheries, and my family has a long history of making a living from the sea. I'm no stranger to seals, but I had been away from it for a while. I find it a very polarizing issue, and one that people take sides and dig in on. A friend of mine once said the fishery is dog eat dog and vice versa, and seals can be just as polarizing and just as controversial.

In chairing the committee, I had to balance the very passionate pleas from the industry that something be done right away.... Also, what we were doing wasn't making recommendations on the size of seal population or what they feed upon. What we were doing was identifying why DFO science at the time got different results from what the industry got.

Over two years—unfortunately it took a bit longer than we thought, largely because of the COVID restrictions—we did come to agreement as a group, and we did nine recommendations to hopefully close that gap. I understand that DFO is working on those recommendations, but they will take a while to implement.

As I said, in other areas like grey seals, we have a lot of evidence already, and where the industry is and where DFO is on this is not that far apart.

I think that's close to five minutes, Mr. Chair.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blackwood.

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

Mr. Jim McIsaac (Managing Director, B.C. Commercial Fishing Caucus): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks for the invitation to speak to you today.

I'm truly privileged to have grown up on this coast and fished on this coast all my life. It paid my way through university, and when I graduated, I was offered a teaching and research position—but I kept on fishing. My heritage is Scottish on my father's side, from a fishing community in the Orkney Islands, and Irish on my mother's side, from a farming community in County Meath. I'm George Patrick and Anne's son, James. I come from food production naturally.

I'm going to talk about four things: some of the impacts of the 1970 Fisheries Act pinniped protection measures on salmon, eulachon and shrimp; ecosystem-based management at Parks Canada; EBM at DFO; and the need for EBM to shift at DFO.

I'm going to follow the slides, which I believe were distributed to the committee members.

I took this picture last November in Cowichan Bay. This wharf was put in by fishermen eight years ago, and sea lions took over almost immediately. Between 300 to 400 sea lions spend September through November each eating 10 to 16 kilograms of returning salmon per day. Mariners cannot safely use that wharf.

DFO enacted Fisheries Act regulatory changes in 1970 to fully protect seals and sea lions. Prior to this, there was a five-dollar bounty on seal and sea lion noses in British Columbia. This graphic shows exponential growth then levelling out of the harbour seal population in the Strait of Georgia. The sport fishery is also graphed on this, and it shows an inverse relationship. Some sectors are licensed to protect their livelihoods from pinnipeds—not fishermen.

Sea lion population growth over the last 50 years continues to rise, as seen in this graphic here. They now consume more fish than the entire wild fishery—almost double. The decline in salmon catch started in the early 1970s. The fishery had a $1.2 billion restructuring in 1995-98. The most recent modelling data shows that the seal and sea lion biomass is still going up.

Along with salmon, the number of commercial harvesters has declined from 21,000 in 1990 to 5,000 just a couple of years ago—again, an inverse relationship to pinniped growth. Now we are reducing the salmon fishery even further, closing another 60% of the fishery. Seals and sea lions have a very diverse diet, and more than salmon are impacted. They eat over 54 different species.

I was at Knight Inlet this time last year. This is one of the most remote places on our coast. The eulachon run this time of year. Various species follow the eulachon in—seals, sea lions, porpoises. This photo shows a pod of porpoises herding eulachon, then having a feeding frenzy. First nations set up weirs in the river to harvest eulachons and produce grease—gold in these parts. Sea lions make their way up the river and harvest eulachon. Last year they found their way into the weir and feasted overnight. Like salmon, the eulachon population has been declining since the early 1990s. Sea lion and seal consumption of eulachon is estimated at 60% to 70% of the returning run size on our coast.

In the middle of the 1990s, the B.C. shrimp fishery was one of our most valuable fisheries—10 million per year just in Queen Charlotte Sound. The shrimp fishery has a bycatch of eulachon. In 1998 DFO blamed the shrimp fishery for eulachon decline. Seals and sea lions consume over 250 times the current shrimp-eulachon bycatch limits. DFO has kept the $10 million Queen Charlotte fishery closed for the last 25 years. Today, our shrimp fishery is worth less than a million dollars, meanwhile, our neighbours, Washington and Oregon, have a $300 million-plus shrimp fishery.

Parks Canada takes their role of ecosystem management seriously. They manage all species, including human activity. They have eradication and cull programs that keep ecosystems in balance. DFO endorses ecosystem-based management along our coast, but their main focus is managing harvesters. Their risk-adverse approach is to close fisheries first. Ecosystem-based management needs to be more than this.

If we want to eat fish from our ecosystem, DFO needs to manage more than just people. They need to be more like Parks Canada and do true ecosystem-based management.

Thank you very much.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you for that.

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

Mr. Kilian Stehfest (Marine Conservation Specialist, David Suzuki Foundation): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm a registered professional biologist in British Columbia, and currently employed as the marine conservation specialist for the David Suzuki Foundation. Prior to joining the David Suzuki Foundation, I spent 10 years as a research scientist studying temperate marine and coastal ecosystems.

I'm here today to provide a science-based perspective on two issues which I believe are fundamental to the committee's study of the ecosystem impacts and management of pinniped populations.

Firstly, I would like to address the belief that there is an overpopulation of pinnipeds on our coasts as the motion for this study asserts. This belief is generally based on the steep growth experienced by many pinniped populations in the second half of the 20th century. However, to fully understand the current status of pinniped populations, we must look beyond the narrow snapshot of steep growth often presented by proponents of pinniped culls.

In the middle of the last century, many pinniped populations were severely depleted as a result of decades of commercial harvesting and predator control programs. In the Pacific, for example, harbour seals have been reduced to 10% of their historical abundance. The steep growth seen after the species received protection is therefore not the sign a population explosion but rather a population recovering from over-exploitation. Since their successful recovery, most pinniped populations have been stable at or near historical levels with very little change in the last few decades.

Populations that have been stable for decades at or near historical levels are clearly not exhibiting signs of overpopulation. It is worth noting that the numbers of pinnipeds we are seeing today have coexisted with healthy and abundant fish stocks in the past.

The second issue I would like to speak to is the notion that simply because pinnipeds consume a certain volume of the fish stock, reducing the number of pinnipeds would benefit that stock. Marine food webs are far too complex for such a simplistic approach to work. On the west coast, for example, a pinniped cull is being proposed to restore Pacific salmon populations. However, the most recent diet data from the Salish Sea shows that harbour seals prey on 57 different species. Each of these 57 species represents a pathway for the unintended consequences from a pinniped cull to ripple through the food web with potentially devastating impacts on the ecosystem and the very fish stocks we are trying to restore.

One of those possible unintended consequences is an increase in the Pacific hake population. Pacific hake are the most common prey item for harbour seals in the Salish Sea, making up 24% of their diet on average, compared to 3.5% for chinook and 2.2% for sockeye. We know that Pacific hake prey on juvenile salmon, which means that a pinniped cull could actually lead to an increase and not a reduction in the mortality of Pacific salmon.

While my examples focus on the west coast, the underlying drivers, which are the inherent complexity of temperate marine food webs and the generalist feeding habits of pinnipeds, apply elsewhere. This is why comprehensive reviews of culling programs from ecosystems across the world have found that unintended consequences for the target species and the wider ecosystem are commonly observed.

A cull of pinnipeds to benefit commercially valuable fish stocks is therefore a gamble with the health of coastal ecosystems of epic proportions, and with questionable prospects of achieving the desired outcome. The unpredictability and riskiness of this gamble is compounded by the significant and rapid changes we are already seeing in coastal ecosystems as a result of climate change. These changes are not only affecting the survival and recovery of commercial fish stocks, like salmon or cod, but are also having an impact on pinniped populations from the reduction of sea ice, intensification of disease outbreaks and decreases in prey availability.

Pinnipeds aren't only impacted by climate change. They also play an important role in climate change mitigation. A study published just last month in a leading scientific journal showed that protecting and restoring wild animal populations, including pinnipeds, can significantly enhance the natural carbon capture and storage capacity of ecosystems.

The best way to safeguard Canada's fishery for future generations in the face of climate change is therefore to maintain healthy, diverse and resilient ecosystems. The culling of pinnipeds with unpredictable outcomes would be counterproductive to this goal.

Thank you very much for your time, and I look forward to answering any questions.

I am happy to provide you with any of the source materials I have cited in my opening statement.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you for that.

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

We'll begin with Mr. Small for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Clifford Small (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Mr. Stehfest.

If the pinniped population increased drastically, what would they eat?

Mr. Kilian Stehfest: Thank you for the question.

As I mentioned, they eat a huge variety of prey, which is what makes it so hard to predict what a reduction—

Mr. Clifford Small: I'm sorry. If the population of pinnipeds doubled, what would be the impact on the species they prey on?

Mr. Kilian Stehfest: There would be an increase in the consumption of prey, but as I—

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you.

The other thing is, if the population of seals decreased, wouldn't you think that, inversely, the effects on the fish they prey on would be reduced?

Mr. Kilian Stehfest: Not necessarily.

As an example from the west coast, Pacific herring make up 22% of harbour seals' diet, yet there's a positive relationship between seal abundance and herring recruitment, because the seals keep a predator for herring in check.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, my next question is for Mr. Blackwood.

Of the nine recommendations in the task team's report, which is the most important, in your opinion?

Mr. Glenn Blackwood: The most important, I guess, is the seal diet sampling and stomach sampling that would need to take place in the offshore area throughout the range and the full migration route of harp seals. We have a seal that covers a range of about 1,500 or 1600 miles, and we're sampling near shore in the winter when there is no cod and capelin, primarily.

The recommendations were good and I think they were designed to close the gap between where DFO science says there is no impact on that part of the ecosystem, and fishermen and other stakeholders who truly believe that there is.

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

In the U.S., and more specifically in Washington and Oregon, a lobby was formed to have the Marine Mammal Protection Act amended to allow the euthanizing of seals on the Columbia River.

Again, Mr. Blackwood, the question is for you. What can the Canadian government do to lobby the U.S. to make a similar amendment to the MMPA that would help markets open up for pinniped products from Canada?

● (1550)

Mr. Glenn Blackwood: That's sort of outside of my range. You're on the marketing side, but obviously the Magnuson act in the U.S. and the acts in Europe that closed borders to seal products shut down the fishery that we had for several hundred years, basically. Right now there's not much of a fishery at all.

Meanwhile, seal populations have grown in the time since the 1970s from a couple of million animals to 7.6 million animals at the moment. That distribution of population change has caused seals to show up in places we haven't seen them, like in rivers. We are not capturing their change in distribution and their change in feeding with the historical sampling program on the near shore.

Mr. Clifford Small: Again, for Mr. Blackwood, the U.S. has been euthanizing pinnipeds in the Columbia River, yet two years ago our government banned the euthanizing of nuisance seals here in Canada. The reason for so doing was that we were told there were threats of trade sanctions against our seafood.

If the Americans are euthanizing nuisance seals, when they amended their own Marine Mammal Protection Act to let them do it, does it makes sense that our government banned that same practice? Is it a real threat?

Mr. Glenn Blackwood: I don't know the numbers that were being euthanized previously. I think it was primarily in the aquaculture industry and other areas.

At the current population levels of grey seals and harp seals, nuisance seals or rogue seals—the individual animal—are having a bigger impact on an existing operation than the total population. There's no conservation issue with respect to seal populations in Atlantic Canada that I'm aware of. Most populations are at or near the highest level ever observed. Some of these populations are the largest of that species in the world. For an individual animal, I don't see it as a conservation issue. I think the Magnuson act is largely a political issue.

Mr. Clifford Small: Mr. Blackwood, given that several countries hunt pinnipeds and whales, and they don't fear sanctions in the U.S., is the threat of sanctions against Canadian seafood products in the U.S. based on something that's real, or is it just something to try to influence politicians and lawmakers?

Mr. Glenn Blackwood: I'm not an expert in that area at all, but I will say that there's a real concern in industry and governments that there would be an impact. As you say, Norway and Iceland harvest seals and whales, and most of the NAMMCO member countries continue to harvest those marine mammals in a sustainable way—not a cull but in a harvest. I don't see a problem with that.

I would like to see an industry develop around the product, because it has been a resource for many years. It's a shame if it's just wasted.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small.

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

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

Thank you to everybody who's joined us today.

Mr. Stehfest, I'm going to probably dwell mostly with you in this round of questioning, because your organization and its namesake, along with a lot of celebrity activists, have definitely had a major influence on general public opinion. I would point out your use in your comments of the word “cull”. This is something we very specifically tried not to reference. In fact, we've been talking about “harvest” where there is a use for the animals once they are harvested.

I want to present some empirical evidence and to get your comment on it. Norway found a way to make their pinnipeds go away. They're very coy about how that happened, but we have heard that their cod stocks have been rebuilding quite nicely.

In Atlantic Canada, pinniped populations continue to grow to the highest levels ever seen, according to some we've heard from. Our cod stocks, after all these years—30 or 40 years—still haven't gotten to the point where we could say they're stable. Can you comment on that empirical evidence and what it says to you?

● (1555)

Mr. Kilian Stehfest: I have to admit that I'm not very familiar with the Norwegian data you've referenced. What I will say is that humans have been culling or conducting predator control of pinnipeds for at least a hundred years, yet there's not a single scientific study or any evidence that it has ever benefited fish stocks. If you have one, I would like to see it. However, from my review of the scientific literature, I have not come across that. I think that says something.

Even studies, for example, on the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence cod, where they said a 65% reduction could prevent the local stock from going extinct, clearly specified that there is the potential for unintended consequences. It did not address that. That's just a very common feature of the discussion about significant reductions in pinniped populations to benefit a fish stock. We simply cannot predict the outcomes of those actions.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Getting back to evidence from people who are on the water and are trying to make a living from the fishery, what has the Suzuki Foundation heard from indigenous organizations or commercial fisherman like Jim McIsaac for that matter? Do you talk to them, and do you factor what they observe into the position that the foundation is taking?

Mr. Kilian Stehfest: I'm aware of the indigenous-proposed cull of pinnipeds on the west coast, and I would say that there are very divergent opinions on the issue in first nations. They're not a monolith.

I think science probably has a bit of an advantage over the more on-the-ground and on-the-water information in that the pinniped diet is so varied. They prey on so many different species. It varies by location, season, age and sex. Having comprehensive diet-sampling studies, for me, is more relevant than someone observing a seal feeding on a certain thing.

The other thing is that pinnipeds are very in-your-face kinds of predators. We don't see other predatory fish feeding on salmon, cod or herring, but we can see seals. I think that's why they often end up as a scapegoat for the natural mortality of fish.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Evidence that we heard previously suggests that the seal population on the east coast is suffering. The animals are smaller. The natural abortion rate among females is higher. They're eating shrimp instead of other species because those other species are no longer greatly available.

We heard the suggestion that a harvest—and I'll use that word instead of the word you're using—might in fact be beneficial to the overall health of the population. Can you comment on that?

Mr. Kilian Stehfest: Would you mind if I quickly go into the distinction between a cull and a harvest, because it seems like an issue that keeps coming up.

Mr. Ken Hardie: You keep using the word “cull” and that has a very charged and emotive meaning to people, especially the general public. With regard to a “harvest”, the animal isn't just killed gratuitously to get it out of the way, but there's a market and a use for the products, such as vitamins and other things from seals that the world needs.

There is a difference in those two words, sir, and the use of the word “cull” is now a pejorative in fact in this discussion.

Mr. Kilian Stehfest: I think you can have a different perspective on what the distinction is. I understand that for a harvester, for example, the end use of the seal—

Mr. Ken Hardie: I don't want to go there. I want you to comment on what we heard from the east coast—that the population in fact is suffering because it's running out of food and eating things that are not giving it nutrition, and doing something about the population could improve the well-being of seals and sea lions right across the board.

I think I'm out of time, but maybe you can work something like that into other answers to questions. Thank you very much.

● (1600)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

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 thank the witnesses for being with us because it is always informative.

I am happy that we have someone here with us who is a little more skeptical about pinniped management and about the way we are thinking at the table, so that we can make good recommendations for the government. It is important to hear what may sometimes be polarizing opinions so that we can question and challenges ourselves on how to move forward in a fair and wise way.

I will direct my questions to you, Mr. Stehfest. I am very familiar with the David Suzuki Foundation.

I don't think anyone at this table wants a cull, vicious or otherwise, of pinnipeds or any other animal population just for the sake of killing animals. Very few people who care about the ecosystem balance of our rivers and oceans want that. I am a strong supporter of respecting animals and especially nature.

With that in mind, I would like to hear your thoughts on the balance between prey and predator, a subject that I have often raised at this table. There is a natural balance between prey and predators on the planet. Historically, humans have been a part of that. Of course, as with everything, there have been abuses. We will not talk about the abuse of other animals that are raised in industrial operations and that are hung, still alive, from hooks for transport because it costs less. There are all sorts of terrible things happening out there in the world.

However, if we look at what indigenous people do as part of their rituals and what is done by the people of the Magdalen Islands, whose survival can be attributed to seal hunting, then did we not throw the important ecological balance between prey and predator out of whack when we banned seal hunting?

[*English*]

Mr. Kilian Stehfest: I just want to clarify that I agree that humans are part of nature and the ecosystem. I'm not here to in any way speak out against a sustainably managed seal harvest. However, my distinction between a cull and a harvest, I think, is different from some of the committee members'. I can understand why the end use of the seal is important for a harvester or a societal value discussion, but for the ecosystem, what happens to the seal after it's been killed doesn't matter.

For me, from an ecosystem perspective, a more meaningful distinction is how we set our management objectives for the harvest. Generally, in conventional fisheries management, our objective is to ensure a healthy population and healthy ecosystem function, but if you want to kill seals to benefit fish stocks, it's the opposite of that. You're trying to depress the population and actively alter how the ecosystem functions.

What's linked to that is how you set your harvest rate. A harvest rate based on sustainable and healthy populations is very different from saying that we want to benefit a certain fish stock, because the literature is very clear that to have any chance at all of the pinniped cull benefiting fish populations, you will have to have a reduction of at least 50%. That would completely fall outside of the bounds of a sustainably managed harvest.

For me, that is a more meaningful distinction, from an ecosystem perspective, between a cull and a harvest.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: I want to tell you a story about my family. My father was a cod fisherman. He observed the ocean his whole life, and he was very familiar with seals and their interactions with fish stocks in the Saint Lawrence River. That was his science, as it is still today the science of other people that we know well, some of whom testified before the committee.

I was out fishing with my father one day when the whole controversy that led to the end of the seal hunt was going on. He made an offhand remark about how we should be taking advantage of the fact that we could still eat cod because now that there was going to be no more seal hunt the cod stocks would start to drop and there would be no more cod in about 10 years' time.

A few years later, I was dating a scuba diver. When he was doing some diving in Les Escoumins, he noticed that there were a lot of eviscerated cod on the seabed whose viscera had disappeared. He also saw seals attacking cod in the ocean, so for me, this all makes sense.

What do you think about that? I think that we agree on certain things, namely the fact that we need to manage the pinniped population in a fair and balanced way and that managing it does not mean a massive slaughter. What is your opinion on the data that has been collected on the ground? Is your foundation collecting data on the ground from people who live along the river?

● (1605)

[*English*]

Mr. Kilian Stehfest: The foundation is involved in all kinds of forums on fisheries management on the west coast. I have to admit I'm not as familiar with the issue on the east coast, because my work is really focused on the Pacific. However, I absolutely think we are listening to the commercial fishing sector on a whole host of issues.

I also understand the examples you gave. They create a very visceral and emotional response from someone who depends on the cod fishery, for example. I can absolutely, on a personal level, understand that, but I think when we're trying to make management decisions, they can't be based on those kinds of emotional responses. They need to be based on the best available data and what we know about the ecosystem.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

My first question is for Mr. McIsaac. Thank you for being here, Mr. McIsaac.

We've had others from the west coast here at our committee. I'm wondering if you can share with us the first logical step on how to best move forward. There was a suggestion that we have an experimental seal harvest. I think 5,000 was the number given by Mr. Stabler, who was here before.

What are your thoughts around the next best steps on the west coast?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: Thank you very much for that question. It's a good question.

It's difficult, because we have these polarized views about any kind of harvest going forward or a reduction in population to benefit fisheries and questioning whether that's good for the ecosystem or not.

For our fisheries here, if you watch the video footage for the herring fishery over the last two months, you would have seen herring sets that are full of sea lions and seals going into nets and eating and disrupting the fishery. If you set a lone gillnet for a herring fishery, you were cleaned out. You had to set multiple nets in order to have one that is able to fish.

You have a population that is out of control from a fisheries point of view—maybe not from an ecosystem point of view, but from a fisheries point of view—so you need to do some kind of management here. If the aquaculture sector is licensed to kill when their livelihood is at stake, I think we need to be looking at something like that to allow harvesters to protect their livelihood. If they're not going to allow a harvest of a population of seals and sea lions, then at least allow us to protect our livelihoods.

Thank you.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Mr. McIsaac.

I have a follow-up question around that. I was speaking with somebody in Newfoundland recently. I was asking about the infrastructure that is in place—particularly the vessels—to be able to do a sustainable seal harvest to utilize the entire seal. He was pointing out that it's often quite cold in Newfoundland when the seal harvests are happening, and therefore the refrigeration happens naturally within that process.

I'm wondering if you can share any thoughts around what we have in place currently for infrastructure on the west coast if we were to look at sustainably harvesting seals, and what would be required to move forward to do that.

Mr. Jim McIsaac: I would say that we're losing our infrastructure for fisheries in general on the west coast, so I would say there's very little. It would have to be developed.

● (1610)

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you.

My next question is for Mr. Stehfest.

My question for you is around the Columbia River. We've heard it come up a few times in this committee. I'm wondering if you can share your thoughts and perspectives around what occurred along the Columbia River around the pinniped population. Can you share any thoughts around that, please?

Mr. Kilian Stehfest: Sure, and thank you for that question.

For the Columbia River, I think what's important to understand is that this is a very spatially restricted solution to a problem of excessive consumption of salmon by sea lions caused by man-made infrastructure, mostly dams and fish ladders.

I think what's important, really, are the numbers. The total annual allowable removal of sea lions there is around 900. It's 10% of what a sustainable harvest rate for that population would look like. That is completely different from a 50% reduction. The motivation behind the removal rate in the Columbia River is specifically not to harm the population or change the viability of the population. It's a very different proposal from a large-scale reduction in seal populations.

There are lessons for us for British Columbia. I think a priority, if we're concerned about salmon consumption by seals, would be to look at whether there are situations of excessive consumption that are created by human infrastructure where we could actually alter or return it to a more natural state to have a restoration that would both benefit the salmon, in terms of better habitat, and remove that problem of excessive pinniped predation?

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you very much.

I'm going to go back to Mr. McIsaac for what I believe will be my final question.

Mr. McIsaac, you talked about an ecosystem-based management approach similar to what we see in Parks Canada, and you talked about how they do a better job at managing ecosystems than is seen within DFO. I'm wondering if you can expand on that and provide some examples of what you were referencing.

The Chair: Give a very short answer, please.

Mr. Jim McIsaac: They're not just managing people. They're managing all the species in an ecosystem. They're looking at species that are expanding at too rapid a rate or impacting other species. DFO is not doing that. They're only managing people in the ecosystem. That needs to change if we're going to do ecosystem-based management.

The goal is to be doing ecosystem-based management. We are part of the ecosystem, and what we eat matters in the ecosystem. I don't agree that what happens after the harvest doesn't matter in the ecosystem. It certainly does, because if we have to get our food somewhere else, we're going to make impacts somewhere else. Everything we do in the ecosystem matters. We need to be thinking a bit more broadly than we are right now.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

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

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

I thank the witnesses for being here.

I want to start off with Mr. McIsaac.

It seems you have fairly extensive industry experience, and you've talked with other people in the industry. Have you witnessed any human safety concerns over the number of seals and sea lions approaching docks or fishing operations?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: The number one graphic from Cowichan Bay is an example of that. The infrastructure put in there to protect the vessels in the harbour is now taken over by sea lions through three months. You can't go onto that dock safely. That's a huge concern. In our fisheries, the number of seals and sea lions inside nets is a danger. We have a huge population of sea lions along the outer coast of our Gulf Islands. Going along there in a kayak is threatening to people now, because there are so many of them. There are instances of sea lions coming up to wharfs and yanking children off the wharfs, and doing the same in boats.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you for that.

We're hoping to get witness testimony from our U.S. counterparts in Washington and Oregon, but I don't know whether we're going to be able to get that.

Would this committee benefit from hearing about what has been taking place in the U.S., in your experience?

● (1615)

Mr. Jim McIsaac: I think it would be a very good idea to hear how they're doing. I bet there's a much broader approach to ecosystem-based management there.

Mr. Mel Arnold: What have you been hearing about what's taking place down there, as far as results in increases of returns or any changes in that way to fish stocks?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: I haven't been following it as closely as I should be. My understanding is that it is going in the right direction.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

If we fail to restore our fish stocks—and particularly salmon stocks—on the west coast, how will local communities and first nations feed their people?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: The last 30 years is an example of what's going on. The graphic I showed of the decreasing salmon population is pretty dramatic. You can put that against...and it's an inverse relationship to what's going on with the population of seals and sea lions on our coast. They're eating them and a whole bunch of other species. They're having a major impact.

I don't think it bodes well for fisheries in the future, if we're not going to manage them somehow.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

It appears the management system in place is all for managing human harvest or human impact, but it fails to manage the other apex predators that might be in the system. Would you agree? Would you say anything further about that?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: I totally agree. That's exactly what we're doing. We're only managing people. We're not managing the other apex predators. What we did in 1970 is that we changed the complete dynamic of our coast and fisheries.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

I want to switch to Mr. Blackwood now, if I could.

Mr. Blackwood, you were questioned earlier about other departments that might have input for this issue, as far as markets, approval and issues around the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act.

In your opinion, should this issue be referred to other federal departments, such as International Trade, Foreign Affairs, Crown-Indigenous Relations or Indigenous Services? Would it be beneficial for those departments or ministries to be aware of what has taken place here?

Mr. Glenn Blackwood: I think so. As I said, there's not a conservation issue with respect to them. These aren't endangered species in the case of harp seals or grey seals. They're actually species that have reached historic population levels.

Earlier Mr. Stehfest talked about the range of diet and the items found. I think he said 57. It's very comparable to harp seals and grey seals. The difference is that we may be reaching a carrying capacity with respect to both of our species. Somebody talked earlier about how they're shifting diets and shifting range. Grey seals are expanding from traditionally Sable Island and are now populating the Northumberland Strait, the islands and down to southwest Nova, with colonies established in Newfoundland and Labrador, we were told, and also in the Cape Breton area. These new rookeries start up with a few animals, but they quickly grow to several thousand.

The numbers are the biggest difference. When we look at Norway or we look at somewhere else, with 7.6 million harp seals, whatever the impact is, 7.6 million multiplied by anything is fairly large. There's evidence of opportunistic feeding. Cod and capelin are our two key species. Capelin is the base of the food chain. Cod is an iconic historical harvest. Those two species are probably in what I call a “predator pit”—that's what Carl Walters would call it—where the populations may not have been knocked down by seals, but seals, I believe, are....

I tell you, I've worked on whales—you can see my pin here—and on whale bycatch and dolphin bycatch with the World Wildlife Fund in Mexico. I'm not going to go out and say let's go kill seals or kill whales and blame them for it, but at our population levels, I truly believe that our traditional fisheries are at risk and that these ecosystems are in the predator pit. Everything that comes up in terms of growth or new recruitment gets cropped off.

● (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold. That was a little bit over, but I wanted to allow the answer to get put in as testimony.

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

Mr. Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.): My greetings to everyone.

To the witnesses, thank you for your presentations and your thoughts.

Mr. Blackwood, I think I'd like to continue with you for now. With regard to the recommendations from the Atlantic seal science task team, I'm wondering if you could comment on the third one. I think you reflected a little bit in your opening remarks on how, somehow, after 30 or 40 years of grappling with this problem, we still don't seem to know enough.

Recommendation three is about “better understanding the relationship between seals and the dynamics of important fish stocks and the marine ecosystem as a whole”. I'm wondering if you could flesh that out a little bit.

Mr. Glenn Blackwood: The first three recommendations were about understanding better what the impacts are, but at the same time we documented impacts, I think that.... It's very difficult to go cause and effect. There's a great correlation between drownings in Canada and popsicle sales. The two aren't related, even though they're strongly correlated.

The thing that I found most interesting was the gap between DFO science that said.... About 50 other scientists looked at the data and verified that it was correct, but the data they were looking at was from stomach samples taken in late fall and early winter on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, in places like La Scie and St. Anthony and Wild Cove. If you sample seal stomachs there....

George Rose is a groundfish scientist and cod expert. I asked George to look at where the sampling was done and the time of year. Most of the seal population is 80 miles to 100 miles offshore from there. All the cod and capelin are 80 miles to 100 miles away from there in winter. Because of the Labrador current, they can't survive near shore, so you have a situation where seals, as was mentioned, are almost like.... They're not man-made structures, but there are areas of cod spawning, and the seals know those areas over evolutionary time. They show up at those areas. They may not feed on cod for six months of the year, but they may feed intensely during the spawning period, when the cod are vulnerable, the same way they'd be vulnerable if they were trapped by a fishway on the Columbia River.

The number of seals is what is striking on the east coast of Canada as compared with elsewhere in the world. There's a huge controversy in Australia over 100,000 animals. Every time we talk about 7.6 million, and the scientists from Norway talk about the impact on their coastal fisheries when the seals invade....

I apologize if I'm going on, but with the sheer number of grey seals, the size of the animals and their geographic expansion, and with the sheer population size of the harp seals, ideally it would be a harvest that would bring some balance to the ecosystem. It seems to be out of balance now. I do think there's a predator pit, as I mentioned earlier.

I'm sorry for running on.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Thank you. That is very helpful.

There are two themes you mentioned that I want to pick up in my remaining time.

I'm from a public health background, so association versus causation is very important. Seals are abundant. Fish are scarce. Seals eat fish. It's association, whereas the causation.... Picking up on what you said about the uniqueness of the east coast, is that the reason we have some differing points of view, even in this hearing today? Are there differences between the dynamics on the west coast and the east coast?

One thing I think Mr. Stehfest mentioned is that the seal population on the west coast is stable, but that's not what I'm hearing on the east coast.

Are the solutions potentially different on the different coasts because of very different ecosystem dynamics?

Mr. Glenn Blackwood: I think in the ecosystem—if you look at how these work and the ecosystem on the east coast—there's a certain amount of productivity. There's phytoplankton, which turns into zooplankton, which turns into capelin or sand lance, and it finds its way somewhere into the ecosystem.

What we're seeing is that there's no extra food or extra growth in the system, so we probably have a question of balance with very large marine mammal populations at a time when it's probably due to overfishing. I'm not blaming seals for the decline, but I think they're preventing a recovery.

I've been around fisheries as a marine biologist, and I've set up scientific organizations for the past 45 years. I don't say that very lightly, because I don't have a lot of scientific evidence, but seals are impacting cod and capelin. In the two years I spent studying the science and identifying where the gap was, and in the 45 years I've spent watching this fishery collapse, rebuild and collapse, I believe there is an impact.

Our recommendation was that DFO science focus on the offshore areas, throughout the range of harp seals and grey seals and throughout the season. It's that important. If it is having an impact, it needs to be identified, and the current sampling won't identify it.

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hanley. You're a bit over.

We'll now go to Madam Desbiens for two minutes or less, please. I'll do the same for Ms. Barron.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Stehfest, earlier you said that we need to set objectives. If the committee were to recommend to Fisheries and Oceans Canada that it should work on establishing a sustainable and ethical hunt and on providing training to bring back an ethical and sustainable hunt in the context of a balanced ecosystem, what would your objectives be? What does setting objectives mean to you?

[*English*]

Mr. Kilian Stehfest: For me, the objective would be how DFO approaches seal harvest management right now, which is to ensure that the populations remain healthy and that the ecosystem maintains its function. That in itself is counter to the idea of engineering the ecosystem by removing large proportions of one species, for example.

We also have very specific policy tools. For example, on the west coast, there's a proposal for a seal harvest, but we don't have one, so I don't see why we shouldn't follow the new emerging fisheries policy, which we've had since 1996. The concern I have is that by promising these unproven benefits to fish stocks, we're hoping to circumvent or undermine some of those sustainable management tools that are in place and that should be followed.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

There's only about 20 seconds left, Madam Desbiens. You won't get in a question and an answer.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: That's okay.

The Chair: You'll be punishing Ms. Barron if you do.

Ms. Barron, you have two minutes or less, please.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Nobody wants that.

My question is for Mr. McIsaac.

We've heard quite a bit about fishers out on the water and their observations of what's happening being different from what DFO is reporting. I'm wondering how you feel or think, or what you're hearing around how those two can be reconciled.

How do we better provide the observations of those out on the water and ensure that they're being used alongside information being compiled by DFO?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: That's a big question, and it's not just to do with seals and sea lions. There are many different observations happening on the water that are not reflected in policy and management.

There needs to be a better way to work with the department and harvesters. What we're facing on the water right now is rapid change in our ecosystems. We're facing rapid change in our social systems on land and interactions with other nations. We need a management system that is able to be more nimble as our ecosystem changes to be able, when a harvest is possible, to allow that and to curtail that when something goes down the other way.

We're not there. There's the example of bocaccio on our coast. We've known for six years that the population was going right through the roof. It took management five years of harvesters yelling and saying, “We need to deal with this,” to actually look at the stock assessment and then change it. We need a way to manage in the face of rapid change.

● (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron. We're a couple of seconds over.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for our first hour, Mr. Blackwood, Mr. Stehfest, Mr. McIsaac, for sharing their knowledge with the committee today.

We're going to move on to our second hour of testimony, but you're more than welcome to stay online if you want to hear the proceedings from the second hour, or you can sign off, whichever you choose.

We're going to suspend for a few minutes. We have some testing to do for the video conference, and then we'll start up again.

● (1630)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1630)

The Chair: I would now like to welcome our witnesses for the second panel.

As an individual, we have Jen Shears, owner of Natural Boutique, in person. By video conference, from the B.C. Wildlife Federation, we have Jesse Zeman, executive director, and from the Lower Fraser Fisheries Alliance, we have Murray Ned-Kwilosintun, executive director.

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

We will start with Ms. Shears for five minutes or less.

● (1635)

Ms. Jen Shears (Owner, Natural Boutique, As an Individual): Hello. *Bonjour*. *Kwe*. Thank you for the invitation to present to you today.

My name is Jen Shears, and I'm from Newfoundland. I'm here with the title of owner of Natural Boutique, but I have a lot of other hats that I wear as well. Natural Boutique is a business that specializes in seal fur products, but I also own several tourism businesses. I'm an activist and writer. I'm a professional fish harvester and seal harvester. I'm an outdoorswoman. I'm a mother. I'm a target of animal rights activists. I'm a conservationist. I'm an indigenous woman of the Mi'kmaq Qalipu First Nation.

I grew up on the land with great reverence for creatures, lands and seas. My post-secondary background is in environmental biology, and I care deeply about animal welfare and about our role as stewards. Some of these roles might seem contradictory, but all of them land me in the same place when it comes to seals. I support seal management because I care about the environment, conservation and animal welfare—not despite it.

We have a major predicament with the seal population. As you heard from Professor Rose in a previous committee meeting, their biomass is greater than that of lower trophic levels, and that's indicative of a very unhealthy ecosystem. We need to lower the seal population for the sake of other marine species and for the seals themselves.

We have two options to do that. First, the government spends money on a cull. They pay people to reduce the population, and there will be no other economic generation or spinoff. The government would need to spend money on carcass disposal. Second, we could enable and empower people to take care of the issue and to make a living for themselves, generate tax revenues and not waste the resource in the process. In my opinion, government money would be better used on the latter, but that can only work if the government is educated and our markets reopen.

My recommendations vary widely in scope and intent.

First of all, I think every MP should watch *My Ancestors were Rogues and Murderers* by Anne Troake and *Angry Inuk* by Alethea Arnaquq-Baril. These documentaries are poignant and highlight the injustices brought on by ill-conceived, racist and deceitful animal rights campaigns.

Second, I believe that every MP should take the humane seal harvesting course that all sealers need to take. It covers the three steps that sealers must follow to ensure that they're dispatching a seal in a humane way. The main issue we have with the sealing industry is that it's perceived as being inhumane, but taking that training is really eye-opening, because you see that what we do to ensure that it's humane looks to be the opposite. It would help clear up that misperception.

Third, I firmly believe that there should be a bipartisan statement from the highest level of government condemning those who campaign against the highly regulated, monitored, humane and culturally important seal harvest on all Canadian coasts. Doing this would ensure that this important ecological and economic activity would not be used as a political ploy between parties.

Fourth, we're using the precautionary approach for seals, but what about the rest of the ecosystem? Why can't we apply it to the idea that seals are devastating fish stocks? There's no ecological risk to lowering the seal population—we've seen lower levels before—but there's everything to gain, potentially, for other marine species. I've heard people say that they're afraid other countries will cut our market access, but if we don't do something about the seals, there will be nothing to fish. We will have nothing to market. Let's worry about the resource first, and let's put the horse before the cart.

Fifth, we must begin challenging as a country other countries that are contravening international conventions by banning Canadian seal products, including hypocritical countries that actively manage their own pinniped populations as they see fit. I guess it's always great to turn the spotlight away from yourself.

Shane Mahoney of Conservation Visions in Newfoundland is an invaluable, internationally renowned expert on this topic, and if he hasn't been an expert witness, he should be at the top of your list. He talks about how Canada, the EU and the U.S. are all signatories to the conventions on biodiversity and migratory species, and that commits us to the principles of these conventions. One of the three pillars of the convention on biodiversity is the sustainable use of living resources for the maximum benefit of people. Challenge these countries on why they are in violation of international conventions to which they are signatories.

There's also the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. More and more, that includes local people. It's about justice and making sure someone from afar does not impose unjust practices on people, which is happening with the seal products ban. The Government of Canada and others are already committed to principles that should apply to the management and markets of seals. Somehow, that's been missed.

● (1640)

The United States Marine Mammal Protection Act is a well-intentioned piece of legislation that is grossly misapplied to harp seals in particular. We need to work with the United States to get a seal exemption for the sake of the seals themselves. Reducing the population is protecting this marine mammal.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Shears.

We've gone over the allotted time now, so hopefully anything you didn't get out will come out in questioning.

We'll move on now to Mr. Zeman for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Jesse Zeman (Executive Director, B.C. Wildlife Federation): Thank you, Chair. Thanks for the opportunity to be a witness.

The B.C. Wildlife Federation is British Columbia's leading conservation organization. We are the largest and oldest conservation organization, with over 41,000 members in 100 clubs across the province.

As it relates to watersheds, wetlands, salmon, steelhead and sturgeon, our clubs and members spend hundreds of thousands of volunteer dollars and hours conducting habitat restoration across the province, operating hatcheries that were defunded by DFO and advocating for legislative, regulatory and policy changes to support a future that includes abundant salmon and steelhead. As it relates to water, wetlands and fish, the BCWF invests millions of dollars annually in projects working with first nations and other partner groups.

Considering most B.C. presenters will be discussing salmon and pinnipeds today, I will stick to steelhead.

I'd like to remind the committee that steelhead are slightly different from other salmon species in the sense that they survive after spawning. These fish are called kelts. Kelts are capable of returning to the ocean and coming back to spawn a second time as older, bigger fish. Bigger fish means more eggs, which means more offspring.

In the past I've spoken to you regarding the peer-reviewed process through the Canadian science advisory secretariat, which is supposed to be a formal, transparent process for providing peer-reviewed science advice to DFO and the public. This process is integral to Canada's Species at Risk Act, and as it relates to endangered interior Fraser steelhead, this process was completely undermined.

In that process, pinniped predation on smolts and adult steelhead, competition with other salmon in the ocean, interception through fishing, ocean conditions and freshwater conditions were all identified as factors that could support recovery. Out of all those factors, pinniped predation was identified as the single largest driver, but in the report all factors were lumped together without identifying the relative importance of each, which will likely keep DFO off the hook for doing something meaningful to recover these endangered fish.

In the Puget Sound, south of the border, steelhead populations have declined to less than 5% of their historical levels. South of the border, they invest orders of magnitude more into monitoring, research and generally into science and management. The indicators that explain the most variance in steelhead smolt survival included harbour seal abundance, hatchery chinook, salinity of marine waters and river discharge. Seal abundance was the strongest predictor.

As it relates to pinnipeds and steelhead in B.C., the Salish Sea Marine Survival Project has shown extensive predation of steelhead smolts and adults by harbour seals. In the past we have discussed the crash of interior Fraser steelhead, mainly the Thompson River and Chilcotin River fish, which respectively outnumbered 3,000 fish each in 1985 but saw just an estimated 19 and 104 fish in 2022.

These are not the only steelhead populations that are rapidly being managed to zero. On Vancouver Island the story is much the same, but in some watersheds the outcome is even worse. The Gold River on Vancouver Island's west coast was once famous for its steelhead fishing. Winter steelhead snorkel counts were as high as 909 fish in 1999. Since 2019, the annual snorkel count was four, zero, two and zero fish, respectively. The current steelhead population in the Gold River is less than 10% of the watershed's carrying capacity.

Over the past decade, monitoring on the Gold River by provincial biologists and the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation has identified consistent use of the river and estuary by harbour seals, when the only notable prey available would have been steelhead, despite being nearly extirpated. Even when there are thousands of tonnes of herring spawning in front of the Gold River, seals have been observed hunting in the river for the few steelhead that remain.

In rivers, steelhead were historically found using runs and pools in the river, and they are now found hiding in rocks in extremely shallow parts of the river to avoid predation. This has recently been noted by anglers and biologists on rivers across Vancouver Island. The Gold River fish are headed for extirpation and will not recover without intervention.

At home with the B.C. Wildlife Federation, after years of webinars and presentations from academics and researchers on salmon regarding the trends around steelhead as well, last week the B.C. Wildlife Federation passed a resolution at its convention and annual general meeting in Nanaimo to support a sustainable and managed harvest of pinnipeds. Our organization and member clubs—which again spend millions of dollars restoring habitat, operating hatcheries and advocating for policies that support a future for salmon, steelhead and sturgeon—now officially supports the management of pinnipeds.

As it relates to steelhead and a number of salmon populations, we are in a crisis. We need to use all of the tools in the tool box in employing adaptive management and, as a country, we need to be laser-focused on outcomes, not process.

● (1645)

I'll end to say that steelhead are endangered; pinnipeds are not.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you. That was right on the mark for timing.

We'll now go to Mr. Ned-Kwilosintun for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Murray Ned-Kwilosintun (Executive Director, Lower Fraser Fisheries Alliance): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon to all, and thanks for the invitation.

My name is Murray Ned. I am the executive director of the Lower Fraser Fisheries Alliance, and I have been with the organization since its inception in 2010.

We currently have a small program staff of four, and 10 biologists and technicians who oversee work that includes habitat restoration, resource management, stewardship and science activities. The Lower Fraser Fisheries Alliance provides coordination, communications, advisory and technical support to 30 of the Lower Fraser first nations.

Today I am speaking to you from Sumas First Nation, British Columbia, to offer a Lower Fraser first nation's perspective on the impacts of pinniped populations. The Lower Fraser region spans 200 kilometres, from the mouth of the Fraser River to Yale, British Columbia, and includes five watersheds with hundreds of tributaries, of course.

Seals and sea lions have always been part of the Fraser River ecosystem, and their relationship with salmon has existed since time immemorial. Unlike salmon, pinnipeds have been able to sustain a consistent and healthy population since the nineties, and perhaps even before that.

We have seen them regularly at the mouth of the Fraser River, right up to the Yale canyon, but now their presence is observed in many of our shallow tributaries, just several kilometres from the Fraser main stem. The assumption is that they are feeding on juvenile and adult salmon and other resident species, but that is yet to be determined.

We all know that Fraser salmon have been in a crisis for the last few decades across many stocks and species, and face an overwhelming number of impacts, including habitat degradation, climate change, pollution, disease and most recently the 2021 atmospheric rivers that wreaked havoc during spawning migration in all of the tributaries and in the Fraser, to some extent.

We also know that pinniped predation has an impact on salmon and that this was identified as a limiting factor during the recent species at risk assessment process for Fraser chinook, Fraser sockeye, interior Fraser coho and interior Fraser steelhead. What we don't know is the extent of pinniped impacts, as there has been limited government interest in investing in this important work.

Any proposed pinniped management strategy should prioritize the collection of baseline data in order to be able to produce accurate population estimates and determine what their predation impacts are on Lower Fraser salmon and passing stocks to the Upper Fraser and Middle Fraser.

The strategy must also consider and respect inherent rights of Lower Fraser first nations, which have the capacity and expertise to lead this work, if properly resourced. A study and methodology framework has been developed by the Lower Fraser Fisheries Alliance to conduct this study. There is strong support from the Lower Fraser collaborative table, which complements the area E commercial sector—seven recreational agencies and 23 first nations.

With the enactment of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we see a great opportunity for the federal government and others to partner with the Lower Fraser Fisheries Alliance to conduct this work within the territories of the nations. Further, we see this as a form of guardianship and much needed technical work that would further develop the capacity of nations and their members, and produce valuable data and conclusive research in the best interests of all British Columbians, and of course the salmon.

Fraser salmon have been in a crisis for far too long, and it's imperative that we determine if pinniped predation is contributing to their decline. Time is of the essence. We must act now.

Thank you, again, for the time, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll now go to our round of questions.

We'll start off with Mr. Arnold for six minutes or less, please.

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

Thank you to the witnesses.

I'll start off with Mr. Zeman, if I could.

Mr. Zeman, you mentioned what I believe you said was a series of evidence and science information. I believe that fed into a CSAS process on the assessment of the probability of recovery for the Thompson and Chilcotin steelhead. We've also heard in this committee previously about what went into that process versus what came out of it.

Could you elaborate a little further on what you may know about that process on the recovery chances of steelhead?

● (1650)

Mr. Jesse Zeman: Yes, certainly, and we have talked to the committee about this a number of times.

The reality is that it is supposed to give us all—you folks in Ottawa and all the rest of us in Canada— the best available science. We know what happened behind the scenes was that the peer-reviewed document had been altered. It has only recently been released after years and years of ATIPs and media attention.

As I said in this presentation today, when we look at the covariants that were examined, we see that seal and sea lion adult predation and seal smolt predation come up as two of the most significant factors.

Mr. Mel Arnold: The most significant factors for steelhead recovery.... Is that correct?

Mr. Jesse Zeman: Yes, driving the declines.... They came in at number one and number two. It looks like number three was salmon competition in the Pacific. A lot of that revolves around international regulations and other countries dumping millions of pink and chum salmon into the Pacific.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Would that be what is referred to as “salmon ranching”?

Mr. Jesse Zeman: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Can you confirm that so that we have it in the testimony?

Mr. Jesse Zeman: Yes, that is what is referred to as “salmon ranching”.

Mr. Mel Arnold: The limiting factors on steelhead recovery.... Would it correlate that those same limiting factors would apply to other salmonids we are seeing struggling? I believe Mr. Ned mentioned chinook and other species.

Mr. Jesse Zeman: Yes. There has been a ton of work. You have all heard from the experts. My colleague Mr. Ned mentioned the chinook review as well. Pinniped predation is coming up regularly for most species being evaluated.

Once we get into the land of CSAS and the Species at Risk Act, we are jumping into a very large pool with a very small bit of water left in it. Once we get into this time, when we're looking at endangered fish, we are probably a few decades behind. The message there is that it costs orders of magnitude more to bring those fish back from the brink than it does to manage them sustainably and get ahead of the curve.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

I'll switch to Mr. Ned, if I can.

Mr. Ned, your first nations have been witnessing and seeing pinnipeds in the main stream of the Fraser for millennia, basically. How far up the Fraser, and how extensive are the observations in the tributaries now?

Mr. Murray Ned-Kwilosintun: It's pretty vast. On the Fraser main stem, when I fish, it doesn't take long before they accompany me to my net. Then, they're harvesting on their own. Whenever we get opportunities, they are front and centre. They are very smart animals. They know the sound of boats and they know what you're doing, so it doesn't take long for them to be attracted to both the sound and the fishery.

In terms of tributaries, from my territory, where I am in the Sumas-Vedder-Chilliwack region.... The Vedder-Chilliwack system has plenty of pinnipeds, but also the Sumas River and Marshall Creek. Marshall Creek is a small creek that is only about a foot and a half deep—maybe two feet at the best of times—and maybe six feet wide. I've witnessed pinnipeds in that system.

They are anywhere and everywhere there is a food source.

Mr. Mel Arnold: That would not be typical pinniped habitat. What would drive them into that habitat? Would it be lack of food elsewhere, or is there something more attractive there?

Mr. Murray Ned-Kwilosintun: That's the kind of work we would love to be able to do on behalf of Canada, B.C. and our nations to determine why they are there, number one. My assumption is that they are following food, just like us. If we find a food source, we're going to follow it. I think that is what they're doing.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Shears, if you can, could you briefly describe a little further how you have been victimized by the anti-seal harvest associations?

Ms. Jen Shears: Thanks for the question.

It's sometimes pretty intense, the onslaught. My daughter and I—she was 18 months at the time—were threatened to be dissolved in acid. We get threats that they are going to come and track us down at our house and things like that.

It's very unfortunate, because we're just living sustainably off the land. As a human species, if we stop doing that.... If we stop relying on renewable resources that are abundant and yield biodegradable, healthy and sustainable products, what else do we have? If we stop doing that, what else do we have as a planet?

It's very short-sighted and pretty vicious at times, I will say.

● (1655)

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

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

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In listening and reading all of the testimony, certain things start to triangulate.

There was a particularly interesting piece out of Washington state that I'd like some reaction to. In Puget Sound, they did a little bit of work on, basically, their allowance to enact what they call “specific lethal management strategies”. Under the MMPA, states can request this.

They played off something we heard in earlier testimony here. Sometimes it's man-made infrastructure like fish ladders, log booms or other things that provide a nice spot for the seals to hang out so that they can feed on the fish that are concentrated in that area. Somebody just recently said that pinnipeds are very clever; they're very smart.

This sentence from the Washington state report maybe leads us somewhere. It says:

> The removal of individual California sea lions with specific knowledge of sites at Willamette Falls also reported successful reduction in the use of the sites by sea lions and in the recruitment of new individuals. These outcomes suggest it may be feasible to disrupt socially transmitted predation behaviours among pinnipeds by removing individual specialists.

That sort of says something about, again, how clever these animals are. It also perhaps suggests that we don't need to go down the route that the representative from the David Suzuki Foundation was concerned about, that we would go out and willy-nilly cull seals with a massive reduction. It's to do something that we've heard referenced before, and that is to go after the problem animals.

I'm wondering, Mr. Zeman, if you could comment on that and the potential for something that would allow for a reasonably sized harvest, given current market conditions. It's a useful outcome for what we harvest, and it would avoid doing the sort of things that would clearly get activists on the case, as Ms. Shears has experienced.

Mr. Jesse Zeman: Certainly. I can share that I've also received more than my fair share of death threats relating to endangered caribou recovery. I live in that world. Quite frankly, I don't think there's room for that in our society. There needs to be a broader discussion about what's okay and what's not.

As it relates to what's going on down south, when I refer to the Gold River—Mr. Hardie, you probably know where that is—that is not a system that has a whole bunch of “man-made” or anthropogenic change on it. In essence, what you're saying is that those seals are specializing. We experience this with mountain caribou and cougars at times, too.

We can take it a step farther. There's the in-river piece and log booms. I'm sure that's all contributing. With our steelhead, we've put transmitters on about 35 kelts before they go out to the ocean. Not one of those has come back and made it back to the river. Half of those are not making it from the inshore environment. Within a kilometre, essentially, of the coast, half of them are dying.

I'll defer to Dr. Carl Walters. I'll defer to Murray on that.

We had first nations attend our AGM on the weekend. From their perspective, they've always harvested seals, and they've always managed seals. I think there's the in-river and closed in environment, but I think there's also the environment in the Pacific. The big thing is—

Mr. Ken Hardie: I have to intercept you, here.

I have another question that I want to pose to all of you. I know you won't all have time to respond, so, if you could present something in writing, that would be useful.

We have heard that the main barrier to managing the populations is public perception that this is cruel. It has certainly been driven by a lot of people who may have good intentions, but really don't understand what life is like for the people who are involved and a stakeholder in all of this. What do we do?

Murray, I'll turn to you for a comment. The others can chime in written-wise, if necessary.

Can we mobilize first nations groups, fisheries and unions on both sides of the border to really come up with a single voice as to what needs to be done and how best it's to be done?

● (1700)

Mr. Murray Ned-Kwilosintun: Thank you for the question. I appreciate it.

Our first initiative would be to get the baseline data and the information on the population—that's what we want to do—and then determine if they're overpopulated. I don't think we have that information at this point. If there was a surplus of pinnipeds available, we would look at harvesting. That would also contribute to saving many of the salmon that my friend Jesse and others were talking about.

In terms of the proactive work to be done with our U.S. counterparts, I'd love to do that work on the Pacific Salmon Treaty. We are often working with tribal groups down there. As well, we have the Coast Salish Gathering, which is 54 first nations and tribes within the Pacific northwest.

All that is to say is we can learn from one another, and we must learn from one another and utilize that into the future.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

If others have an answer to that particular question, by all means, please send it in to the clerk. We'll make sure that it's a part of the committee's study.

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

[*Translation*]

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

I thank the witnesses for their valuable testimony.

Ms. Shears, I was very moved by what you said because your approach is very humane and you seem to have a great deal of respect for the animal, its survival and its ecological balance, the whole picture. You are also resource conscious. You said that, if we do not manage the pinniped population, there will be no more market because there will be no more fish.

What can we do in 2023 to restore acceptability? I think you have the right approach, but how can we further promote it? Can we help you with that?

Ms. Jen Shears: Education is very important. As I said in my opening remarks, members of the government need to know what supports these activities, such as the process for hunting seals. There are steps that you need to follow to be in compliance with the regulations. We need to start with education so that those in power know what is at stake. Then, as someone mentioned, I think that we need to establish partnerships with organizations and industries in other places, like the United States. They could relay those same messages. I think that education is very important.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: You are talking about education, but there are several aspects to that. There are, of course, various educational approaches that can be taken, for example, on ethical seal hunting techniques and how to hunt seal in a way that maximizes the resource, in other words, not sacrificing the life of the animal and then wasting three-quarters of its body. That is one area of education.

Another area would be to teach ethical hunting skills. Is that another way of doing things? Education is very broad term. Could you be more specific?

Ms. Jen Shears: We need to provide education on products. I think that is what Canadian Seal Products is doing. That organization educates people by teaching them that the products are sustainable and biodegradable and that they contribute to people's health and the health of the animals themselves.

It is difficult because these realities are not necessarily what the organizations that are against seal hunting like to present or want to hear. First, we need to communicate with Canadians to educate them about the hunt and its outcomes. That is important. We also need to educate those in power so that they understand what seal hunting is all about and defend it when necessary.

● (1705)

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Do you think that legislative and financial support could help the organizations that are sharing a positive message?

Ms. Jen Shears: Yes, of course.

What is more, if we could show that these countries are violating the conventions on biological diversity by imposing these bans and if we could call into question the validity of these bans, then we could show the world that we are on the right side.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: We need to give ourselves the tools to counterbalance the bad propaganda.

Ms. Jen Shears: Yes, absolutely.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: That is all for me. Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Desbiens.

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

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Ms. Shears, I was wondering if you can expand a bit further on what you were saying about the ways in which the seal product ban is in direct contraction with UNDRIP. Can you expand on that?

Ms. Jen Shears: Yes, we have indigenous populations and local populations saying that the bans are reducing prices overall, so it's not worthwhile for them to go out to harvest the product and put it to market.

I'm a broken record sometimes, but *Angry Inuk* shows you a prime example of how these bans are spitting in the face of indigenous peoples and of local, rural Canadians, and for no good reason. It's hypocritical. It's racist. It does no good for the wildlife that these organizations claim to care about. It's so short-sighted. I honestly can't believe we're here in 2023, when renewable resources that are abundant, biodegradable products, healthy things, humane harvesting and these things are so important to the world, and we're here trying to figure out how to make it happen.

It contravenes conventions. It contravenes common sense. It contravenes how we should be living.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Ms. Shears.

Mr. Ned, Kwilosintun, would you like to share your thoughts as well? I know you also mentioned the direct impacts and the contradictions with UNDRIP.

Mr. Murray Ned-Kwilosintun: Yes, thank you, and you did pretty well with the pronunciation of Kwilosintun.

I think most nations are starting their path forward in terms of UNDRIP implementation, and sometimes we have to wait for government ministries, like DFO, to begin implementing it. We can't wait too long, especially with the decline of salmon. I know we're talking about pinnipeds here, but maybe we have to be the balance. We have an inherent right and an obligation to look after resources within our territories, and certainly the nations are looking at that as an opportunity to work with government, partner if we can, and if we can't I think sometimes you just have to do things for the sake of the resource.

As an example, we have chinook for salmon ceremonies, and we can't have those now for a number of reasons. I mentioned in my comments that climate change is affecting salmon, but if we can't have those, then we have to figure out what the issues are. Sometimes it is predation and it's pinnipeds actively going after those particular fish.

In terms of UNDRIP and DRIPA and reconciliation, the time is now and first nations are ready, at least in the Lower Fraser.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you so much.

My next question is for Mr. Zeman.

Mr. Zeman, I'm so sad that I wasn't able to make the B.C. Wildlife Federation convention that took place in my riding just recently, in Nanaimo. Could you expand—because it's unfortunate that I missed it—about the resolution you were referencing that was brought forward dealing with a sustainable seal harvest?

● (1710)

Mr. Jesse Zeman: Yes. Being such a big organization, it is a major operation to bring representatives for over 41,000 people, but essentially we have resolutions that come forward every year and we deal with them.

One came forward around pinnipeds, and we had Dr. Murdoch McAllister speaking. We're actually supporting a post-doc at UBC around steelhead recovery, so we deferred the resolution until after he was done and essentially, as an organization now that is involved in all facets of trying to restore salmon, our message is that we support pinniped management.

We obviously support what Ms. Shears is talking about around sustainable use. That's a way of life for us and for our members. Murray referred to the Lower Fraser collaborative table, and certainly we're a part of that and there is consistency across all groups.

We have our days where there are fireworks, but with regard to pinnipeds I think there's consistency across the groups. It's just a way to formalize how we think and how we lead, as a conservation organization.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you so much.

I believe this will be my final question, looking at my time, but I'll try to get more in, because I do that.

The Steelhead Society is another organization I have met with as well. Thank you for bringing up the impacts on the steelhead. One of the key recommendations the Steelhead Society is bringing forward in order to begin protecting steelhead is around monitoring and comprehensive data gathering. You spoke a bit about this as well.

Can you speak to whether you're in agreement with that? Is it one of the number one things that need to happen? How does it relate to pinniped management?

Mr. Jesse Zeman: We have a number of systems we monitor extensively. As it's been said, the Gold River is on Vancouver Island. It's on the west coast, of course. You know where it is. It's a couple of hours from your backyard. When you get down and you start counting zeros, the time for monitoring has long passed us. When you get down to 20 fish in the Chilcotin and 104 in the Thompson.... We can start counting in the Skeena and do a better job because we still have thousands of fish, but on Vancouver Island and off the Fraser, we do not have thousands of fish to count anymore.

Again, I would urge this committee to take the triage approach and say, “We don't have any fish in these areas. We need to start pulling all tools available so that we can ensure that these animals, these fish, do not go functionally extinct.”

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

We'll now go to Mr. Small for five minutes or less, and not a second over.

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

My question is for Ms. Shears.

You mentioned an underlying racism in animal rights campaigns against sealing. Would you like to elaborate a bit more on that?

Ms. Jen Shears: It's such a loaded question.

When the anti-seal hunt group—or animal rights groups in general—targets people.... They might not necessarily intend to target them, but when you're targeting people who live off the land, you're targeting indigenous peoples and you're targeting rural peoples. They don't seem to have any concept or regard for how humans are part of the ecosystem and how, since time immemorial, we have been part of the ecosystem. We're no better and we're no worse, but we're with it. We certainly have the steward component of it. They have no regard.

The EU ban in 2009, for example, put in the exemption for indigenous products, but indigenous peoples and indigenous communities said, “This does not work for us, because this drives the price so low for seal pelts, for example, that it doesn't make it financially feasible anymore.” They just went on their merry way and carried on with their tactics and their plans despite that.

It's very patronizing and racist, for sure.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Ms. Shears.

Would you be able to tell the committee about your experience in your business, Natural Boutique, with potential customers from outside Canada? What have you experienced in terms of demand for your products?

● (1715)

Ms. Jen Shears: We have lots of demand from the United States and Europe. We have orders coming in online, because people don't bother to read the.... They might not not bother to read the line below, saying we can't send anything to the States or the EU, but they might be trying to get us to ship it anyway. We have orders that come in maybe every couple of weeks or every month that we need to refund. We reply to them and say, “We're sorry. We can't ship there due to ill-conceived bans.”

We get cruise ships. We're in downtown St. John's, on Water Street, and cruise ships come in with thousands of people at a time. Most of them are Americans, and they flock to the store. They love the product. They love the idea of it. We actually had our staff members take the humane harvesting course so that, even though they're not sealers, they're well-informed on the whole process. The people who visit want to buy it. They want to support local. They want to support renewable products. You ask them, “Where are you from?”, and you just hope they don't say the United States, but you know they're going to say that, and they walk out.

I'd say over the past 12 months, I've had to refund maybe $25,000 to people from the United States. That's not counting the people who would have bought but who read the disclaimer at the bottom and didn't bother placing the order.

The market is there. We have people crying out for it, but we just can't fill the orders.

Mr. Clifford Small: Briefly, if we could get our seal products exempted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, how big an impact would that have on our markets for seal products?

Ms. Jen Shears: I don't think it can be quantified, and that's in terms of being astronomical. I think opening up the American market would be a game-changer.

Mr. Clifford Small: In terms of the Canadian market, do you think some sort of tax break, an HST holiday or tax credit, on the purchase of pinniped products would help us get some growth in the Canadian market for that product, if the government would support it in that way? What do you think of that?

Ms. Jen Shears: Absolutely, a tax credit of some sort always helps people purchase things, so yes, I think that would be a wonderful thing that would help us in our local market and get people buying more seal products.

Mr. Clifford Small: Mr. Chair, I'm going to give my colleague the floor here.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Thank you. That's beyond generous.

My question is for the B.C. Wildlife Federation. Given the decision not to actively manage a large component of the ecosystem when it comes to pinnipeds, are there any other examples in British Columbia right now where a government has basically made an emotional decision not to actively manage apex predators, through hunting or another way, to the detriment of future ungulates or, in this case, fish? What is the damage that is done when these emotionally based decisions are followed through on, which are not rooted in science at all?

The Chair: I'm going to have to ask for a write-in for the answer. It's gone a little bit over time now.

We'll move on to Mr. Cormier for five minutes or less, please.

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

Today I will give my time to Mr. Kelloway.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I'm identifying as Mr. Kelloway right now.

The Chair: I don't think so, no. You'd have a job to pull that off.

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): There you go. Trust me; you don't want to be Mr. Kelloway.

Thank you. That is also generous, Mr. Cormier, through the chair.

I would like to make a comment and then ask a question to Ms. Shears. You mentioned the threats that your family has been under or has experienced. You mentioned that it's unfortunate and racist. Yes, it's wrong. It's vile, and I would argue it's criminal, so I'm sorry you have had to go through that on a regular basis, it seems.

I also want to go a little deeper in terms of your thoughts on the study as it relates to our recommendations, because a lot of great points have been made in relation to looking to access markets, looking at the infrastructure that is needed and looking at how we align coalitions of the willing. We heard today Mr. Hardie mentioning indigenous people in the United States and indigenous people in Canada working together. How do we work that? How do we look at other examples?

Mr. Hardie in particular has mentioned the seals in Norway numerous times and asked many questions about what happened to them. No one seems to know what happened to the seals in Norway. It would have been good to have gone over to Norway to ask that question of locals. We seem to not have the opportunity here to have people come testify. Either there's an unwillingness or there is a worry in doing so.

All that being said, when we look at the recommendations that come down, and when you go to look at this report.... As a business person, as somebody who relies on this to make a living that's part of your culture and who you are, what would you want to see in this recommendation that would catch your interest and eye in terms of getting a foothold and moving forward on this?

● (1720)

Ms. Jen Shears: I would like to see an acknowledgement of traditional knowledge and of local knowledge. Those things are huge. I would like to see a gap analysis in the current science we have because, if we can show that the science we have isn't relevant, I think that's a lot of it. The science we have isn't really relevant, but the stuff we do have confirms what many of the witnesses are saying. I would like to see an acknowledgement of that.

The ocean and the government, as it's been for many years and as far as the seal hunt goes, have a lot of invertebrates. I think a backbone needs to be grown, frankly, by people—maybe in the past, maybe in the present—because we are letting people dictate how we manage our resources, and they're dictating that based on emotion and based on some other reality. I don't know what reality that is, but it's definitely not the reality on the ground or in the oceans, so I would like an acknowledgement of that. I would like a backbone, and I would like an acknowledgement of what people have been saying for the last 30 years on the ground, because I think there's a lot of value in that.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: That's duly noted. I appreciate the vertebrae example in terms of having backbone and resolve to this. Again, we've heard a lot of great testimony in terms of looking at.... I would just say that there is no one around this table who has ever said the word "cull". I haven't heard it. No one has talked about it. Some witnesses have talked about it.

We're talking about how we create a harvest that is inclusive of first nations and that focuses on the need to open our markets and how to do that. There's a common willingness here. A lot of times in Ottawa when you turn on CPAC you see a lot of interesting theatrics on all sides, but we need to get this right. It's important not just to the species of fish. We've heard four species are in danger, probably more. We've talked about the inability of people who rely on this as a culture and livelihood and how they're being harassed. We need to turn that around.

I appreciate your efforts and your resolve and your backbone. You talk about backbone in terms of the greater we, but I appreciate your backbone because the way we're going to move forward is not just through government. It's going to be establishing coalitions of industry, fishing unions, academics, other levels of government, first nations governments, and so forth and so on. I really appreciate your opening remarks, but I also appreciate your talking about the fact that we need to acknowledge traditional knowledge.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kelloway.

I want to get to Madam Desbiens and Ms. Barron before we close off.

Madam Desbiens, you have two and a half minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

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

We appreciate everyone being here. Unfortunately, I was not able to ask questions of everyone.

Mr. Ned-Kwilosintun, I would like to hear your thoughts on the space that you think we need to give field knowledge in our study on reestablishing an acceptable pinniped population that would not be harmful to the other resources. Do we need to put more emphasis on field knowledge?

● (1725)

[*English*]

Mr. Murray Ned-Kwilosintun: I'm not sure I understood your question completely, but I'm going to try. In terms of the space that's required, the first thing I would say and share out with everybody is that first nations have been displaced from the ability to manage for over 150 years in their territories, so "we're renewing our interest" is maybe a good way of trying to describe how we want to move forward in terms of how to manage the resource moving forward.

Conservation has always been important to the nations, of course, and we've had our own ways of managing that historically. This is why we want to find the baseline data for the particular pinnipeds that are in our Lower Fraser region to be able to manage that resource in partnership with others, if others are interested, but we really see the UN declaration and the inherent rights to try to advance that.

I don't know that I answered your question completely, and I apologize for that if I didn't, but if you wanted to provide more clarity on the question I'd give it another shot.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Desbiens.

We'll now go to Ms. Barron for two and a half minutes or less, please.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Shears, I was wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more. You spoke about the business and that you're having to refund sales from the EU and from the U.S. Where are people purchasing your goods—I can't find a better word than that right now—and what does that look like as far as the distribution of sales locally, domestically and internationally is concerned?

Ms. Jen Shears: When we first opened up the shop in 2012 in St. John's, we knew that Christmas season would be really busy with locals, but my husband and I were asking what we were going to put in the store in the summertime and if we'd have to sell Newfoundland T-shirts or something like that, or CDs. As it turned out, visitors love the products, so we've really benefited from people from Ontario, from Quebec, from British Columbia and from Alberta purchasing things on their holidays, bringing them home, spreading the word and spreading the messaging that we're able to.... I believe firmly that we can start off with positive messaging to influence people. I don't turn my nose up at kicking doors down sometimes when I need to, but positive messaging and working my way into it is the way I like to start.

They have spread the messaging, and they've spread the products around. Then we get online orders and the comments say, "Our friends bought it when they were in Newfoundland and we saw it and liked it so now we're ordering it," all through the country really.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Is there nowhere outside the country currently?

Ms. Jen Shears: Not really, no. People from the EU buy it because, I think, as it stands, they can bring items in personally. It's just that we can't ship it as a business, so Europeans have purchased it. Some European parliamentarians purchased seal coats a few years ago when that whole kerfuffle was happening. They brought them back and loved them, but yes, it's mostly in Canada.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I have more questions if there is more time.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Great. Thank you.

I have a quick question for Mr. Zeman.

Mr. Zeman, I believe you have mentioned the CSAS process, and I'm wondering, if you did, if you can speak a little bit as to how the CSAS process has impacted management decisions around pinniped harvesting.

Mr. Jesse Zeman: I think that steelhead is just an observation that the process is broken and that there is bureaucratic interference happening in the world of science, and that is not good for any of us. It doesn't matter if they are fish, seals or sturgeon. It matters that the right information is getting out to the right people so they can make the right decision.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

I'm going to allow Mr. Calkins to ask a question instead of having him here playing with his phone.

Mr. Calkins, you're up for a couple of minutes, and the clock is ticking. I feel generous.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you, Chair.

I did ask a question that didn't get answered, so I would re-pose the question to the B.C. Wildlife Federation about when governments are afraid to manage an entire tier of the ecosystem, such as what happens with the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and now we see grizzly bears and other apex predators in provinces such as British Columbia where ministers, during their announcements, say that the decision has nothing to do with science and has everything to do with emotion.

What will the long-term consequences to the rest of the food chain look like, including any negative human-wildlife conflicts that are bound to arise?

● (1730)

Mr. Jesse Zeman: That's kind of the same as the last question.

In our world of sustainability and conservation, science is what guides us. We have experienced the same thing federally related to wolves and caribou as we have with grizzly bears.

I refrain from speaking on behalf of first nations, but I can tell you that, in British Columbia, the values of a number of partners and nations we've worked with related to wildlife management and conservation align completely with ours. I'll echo in small part what Murray and Jen said about the world of reconciliation. These values quite often are shared, and elected officials are not listening.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Calkins.

I want to say a big thank you, of course, to our witnesses for this second hour of testimony—Mr. Zeman, Mr. Ned-Kwilosintun, and, of course, Ms. Shears—for sharing their knowledge with us this afternoon.

Thanks to Ms. Shears for appearing in person. It's always nice to have people in the flesh, so to speak, so that we can get their expressions and they can see exactly how the committee operates.

I will let the committee know that on Monday we will have our eighth and final meeting with witnesses for the pinniped study next week, which, of course, is May. On Thursday we will provide drafting instructions to the analysts for the report on pinnipeds and discuss committee business. That will be next Thursday, so keep that in mind if you have anything to raise during committee business. We'll also have drafting instructions for this particular study.

Again, everybody, enjoy your weekend.

Go ahead, Madam Desbiens.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Excuse me, Mr. Chair. I just need 30 seconds of your time. I just wanted to say that I really like the way this committee works. It runs smoothly, and we always get our two and a half minutes at the end.

I also appreciate my colleagues. Often, we often talk about things that are not working, but I think we need to talk about the things that are working too. I just wanted to acknowledge that.

I also want to thank our interpreters.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you for that.

This meeting is adjourned.