



WALKING ON ICE: An Eco-Tourist in Wonderland

Forty minutes out over the Gulf pack ice, we see the seals. Females appear like dark curls against the snow, and throughout the herd there are bright pink patches of blood.

Blood on the ice first drew the world's attention to what was called the plight of the baby Harp seals. Every March, as winds moved pack ice back and forth around the islands like battering rams, landsmen from the îles-de-la-Madeleine hauled equipment in boats called *canotes* over drifting ice and open water to hunt the Harp seal and its newborn pup, the whitecoat. The season lasted only a few weeks because, once weaned, the white seals moulted and returned to the water where the herd began its northward migration, out of range of the land-based hunters.

Now helicopters disgorge orange-suited tourists, startling the seals from their sunning and nursing. The blood they see is only the stain of afterbirth. Mounting public outcry and the strenuous efforts of animal rights groups succeeded in shutting down international markets for seal pelts and, as seal hunting dwindles, cameras have replaced clubs; the seal hunt has been all but replaced by the seal watch.

The îles-de-la-Madeleine, a tiny archipelago in the Gulf of St Lawrence, are one of the new destinations for a growing contingent of eco-tourists for whom the ordinary lure of travel is spiced

with the prospect of helping to preserve the world's wildernesses and their denizens. This area differs, though, from most in that it's a temporary scape that harbors its wildlife for only a short time. It is not a fragile ecosystem like a rain forest or an African veldt. And it is arguable whether or not the creatures rescued from the hunters' clubs were ever in danger of extinction.

We flew from Montréal, touching down at small airfields along the Gaspé. Another hour east brought us over the islands, floating among blue-green ice and black water like flotsam. We were met at the airport by Réginald Poirier, a young hotelier who drove us to Cap-aux-Meules. Evidences of a relentless wind were everywhere in the twisted spruce, the huddled dunes, the fields swept almost bare of snow though winter still locked fishing boats in the harbors and creaked in the shutters of the brightly painted houses whose outlandish colors seemed a perfect rebuttal to the monochrome landscape.

Reggie drove us around the perimeter of the island past sandstone cliffs glowing in the orange afternoon light. North America's largest wooden church towered against a hard blue sky. We talked about the traditions of the Madelinots, especially those concerning the seal hunt.

For centuries, March had signaled the end of a hardscrabble winter for the islanders. With the fishing season a month or more away, seal hunting provided a small but much-needed income for fishermen to refurbish their boats, repair their equipment. If the pack ice had been blown close enough to shore, which was never certain from year to year, the men loaded their canotes with

supplies and set out over forbidding terrain in search of the herd. Once they located a group of Harp seals they slaughtered adults for meat and whitecoats for pelts. They took as many as was permitted by law. The method they used was clubbing.

Large vessels were also permitted by the Canadian government to take seals. That number, too, was regulated, and it was policy that landsmen would be employed as hunters.

As early as the 16th century, Basque, Norman and Breton fishermen hunted seals in these waters. Inhabitants of coastal villages harvested seals from shore. When wooden schooners were introduced to Newfoundland waters, the annual hunt yielded upwards of 500,000 seals. It was not until 1949, when Newfoundland became a province of Canada, that extensive research on Harp seals began. In 1961, a closing date was imposed on the hunt to protect adult females. In 1970 the use of aircraft to hunt seals was banned, and in 1971 the first quota of 245,000 seals was introduced. This was reduced to 150,000 in 1972, and to 127,000 in 1975.

In the early 80s, a vocal and well-publicized protest movement caused a dramatic drop in fur prices worldwide, effectively halting the hunt altogether. The movement was spearheaded by an Englishman, Brian Davies, and the organization he founded, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). Davies was instrumental in promoting tourism both to further his cause and to create an alternate source of income for the Madelinots.

While the îles-de-la-Madeleine host thousands of vacationers in the summer, only the promise of seeing hoards of Harp seals in the wild could lure visitors to these islands in March. With the

increasing influx of eco-tourists, more and more hotels and restaurants, normally still shuttered, are opening for a few weeks at the damp end of winter to accommodate them.

Claude Richard, Director of the îles-de-la-Madeleine Tourist Association, estimates that \$200,000 tourist dollars stay on the islands as a result of the seal watch. "Of course," he remarks, "that money is not going to the fishermen." It goes to the community's hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops and provides temporary employment for people in service jobs.

Dan Goodman, Senior Policy Program Advisor for Marine Mammals, elaborated. "Between 1977 and 1982, the dollar value of seal pelts was between \$157,000 and \$348,000. These figures do not account for the ancillary businesses such as net repair, meat packing, trucking and the like. There's no question but that the local culture has experienced a significant upheaval."

Richard sees business growing every year as a result of the seal watch. "We are getting a different type of tourist," he explains. "Older and with a specific purpose. In summer, 75% of the visitors are from Québec. In winter we see mainly Americans, Europeans and Japanese." At first the islanders were resentful; these new tourists represented the death of an old tradition. "But things are changing," says Richard. "People here have come to accept the seal watch."

"You see," remarked Jim Butler when I called him for his opinion, "it's most often the outsiders who cause the shift." Butler has been involved in eco-tourism for more than 20 years and has traveled to the wildest edges of the earth to observe and

record what he calls a new reality. "One must make a distinction between nature tourism and eco-tourism. Eco-tourism isn't simply the going into a wilderness, it's a particularly sensitive way of visiting natural areas in such a way that the environment is not degraded." Butler, a Professor of Conservation Biology at the University of Alberta, believes that eco-tourism is one of the answers to the taking of land and creatures by people who view the world in what he says is a homocentric perspective. "This view is changing and, I think, for the betterment not only of the environment, but of the people who inhabit it."

In order to appreciate what Butler is saying, we have to allow at least four to five days for a first visit. Weather dictates the helicopter flights to the ice and there are often long periods of waiting for the skies to clear. Americans often seem most impatient in the face of delays and tour operators have devised various ways to keep them and others happily occupied. There are cross country skiing and snowshoeing expeditions. Mini-vans scoot tourists along twisting island roads, past thatched barns--called *baragues*--of a unique design born of necessity and found only in wind-ravaged lands, poor in wood.

We drove our rented car down back roads, across causeways. One afternoon we picked up a young hitchhiker who brought us to the village of Bassin where we walked out onto the ice and talked about his grandfather, the hunter Willy LaBelle, the old days, and how it is now. His name was Serge; he was studying to be a carpenter. Our French/English communication was rough, but serviceable. We even managed a bi-lingual joke. Serge wanted to

bring us to a dock--au quai--and he asked "Au quai?" We responded: "OK." Those two phrases sound identical when spoken. Au Quai.OK. It was enough to bind us in our separateness together in laughter.

Jim Butler delights in such moments. "Whether it's at Lake Baikal or near a river in Costa Rica, this coming together of different cultures cannot help but widen the experience of the visitor and the local person. Only when cultures interconnect can a vision of another sort of reality take root."

Even without the seals, the îles have a unique allure. I whiled away the better part of a day at the Salon Nadeau, a thelassotherapy spa in the Chateau Madelinot, where I soaked in a bath redolent of algae and essential oils and relaxed under the sure hands of a masseuse.

And there are movies and bowling and shopping, museums and lighthouses and a gallery filled with creations made of sand.

At night, the hotel dining rooms and island cafés serve *pot-en-pot*, a deep dish seafood pie that's a local specialty, and French cuisine, imported wines. There are piano bars and country-western hangouts. And the lectures.

Most of the seal-watching tours have put together programs of videos and speakers. The night we attended a *Nortour* presentation at the Chateau Madelinot, several biologists and representatives of Canadian Fisheries and Oceans addressed the dinner audience of people of a variety of ages and backgrounds.

We listened to a short history of Atlantic coast sealing, from its ancient native past through its heyday in the 1800s up to the present.

Then a biologist described seal behavior at birthing time. He told us about the relationship of the female to her offspring, perhaps one of the briefest among herd animals. Although the female unerringly recognizes her own pup among the hundreds around her, when the pup is weaned, at about two weeks old, she abandons it. Fully molted at four weeks, the young pup, called a "beater," enters the water and begins to feed, moving northward toward Greenland.

We saw a Brian Davies film, a passionate and unabashedly emotional appeal for the protection of the whitecoat. At one point in the film, Davies described the female seals as "crying" when their pups were killed, though the biologist had explained this tearing was a natural protection against wind and frigid water.

The evening's ensuing debate raised questions, some about animal rights activists and their tactics. Jeremy Conway, from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in Nova Scotia, had described to me an occasion when he took an activist and "a starlet" to the ice off Sydney. The man agreed that seal hunting methods were more humane than those used in commercial slaughterhouses but, he said to Conway, "I can get the money I need to fight pollution in New York Harbor from the sealing issue."

The issue can be taken beyond that of politics or humane methods of killing or even that of species survival. Dr. Elliott Katz, DVM, founder of the organization In Defense of Animals believes that "it's not necessary that an animal be endangered for it to be protected. Endangerment is not necessarily the basis for

an animal rights position. Our point of view is that humans should begin to move away from using animals for food and clothing. Even when subsistence is the issue, there are alternatives."

Jim Butler feels it's time to stop regarding the animal world as a human "resource." In what is fast becoming a post-industrial society, humans are beginning to see that they share a common environment in which all the inhabitants have rights. "It's an 'atom-centric' point of view; one in which all creatures are equal."

The discussions lasted well into the night and served to make the next morning's trip to the ice an even more intriguing prospect.

We rose before dawn and climbed into bulky survival suits and heavy boots. The helicopter pilots loaded our gear and stuffed us into narrow seats. We shared our craft with a two-man film crew from France. Our pilot was a cheerful Scot whose job took him to ocean oil platforms and tundra camps at other times in the year.

Several more helicopters flew beside us like bumblebees as we sped over ice that filled the world to the horizon. Ice. One word to encompass sheets, chunks, spires, holes, long black splits. Ice. Shades of white and shades of gray. Ice glowing green just under the freezing water. Blue ice. And then, forty miles out, ice spotted with blood. The seal herd.

The mottled females and their cream-colored young were scattered everywhere as we landed on a pan. The din of rotors sent adults slipping into the sea, leaving the pups alone. The engines stopped. We stepped onto the ice. Immediately the sound of the

wind was laced with the mewling, gull-like cries of seals. As we set out, testing the way with ski poles, the females reappeared, slithering back to their young, some still alert to danger, some all but oblivious of the orange-suited aliens.

We met a team from Los Angeles who had been shooting film since daybreak. Our Frenchmen set up their equipment near a large group of seals and they, too, began filming. A photographer on assignment for a children's book publisher lay sprawled on the ice, nose to nose with a wet-eyed whitecoat. The rest of us wandered among ice boulders, encountering pup after pup. The females kept a wary distance.

Nortour is the only seal-watching organization currently employing ex-landsmen to escort groups. Léonard Chevrier, a fisherman and hunter, walked with us, poking at the ice, showing us the thin spots to avoid. Léonard was bareheaded among this tribe of bundled strangers. He negotiated the ice as easily as a Maine lobsterman might walk a pitching deck. "Not many fishermen are bi-lingual," he explained. "There aren't a lot of us who feel comfortable talking to strangers. We're fishermen, not guides." We broached the subject of the hunt. Léonard spoke cautiously at first, unsure of our motives for asking. "I was one of the last," he said, "and even I know only a third of what the old hunters know. If licenses were given out today, most of the guys would have to learn from the beginning."

He told us about years, like this one, when the ice was too far offshore to reach; years when the ice was so rugged that, within a short time of starting out, the men were stripped to

their shirtsleeves. He described how the *canotes* were alternately dragged and floated for torturous miles in search of the ever-shifting herd, how quickly the killing and skinning had to be done in order to return to shore before dark.

A female seal reared at our casual approach. Léonard was wary, alert. "You can't take them for granted. Or the ice either. The other day I saw a guide tell his people to jump a lead. They stepped on floating ice to get over a gap. God," he said, "They might have drowned!"

I stayed close to Léonard as we explored the brilliant, floating landscape for more than three hours. I watched our companions as they took portraits of the animals. A few held startled creatures in their arms, despite strict tour instructions, and posed for photos. Meanwhile, more whitecoats nursed, slept in the sun.

I asked Mike Hammill, a wildlife biologist studying the Harp seal, if these tourist excursions might have an adverse impact on the herd. "As far as we can tell up to now, there seems to be very little effect on the females or their pups. The females don't seem to mind that their young have been handled by humans, and the pups...well, each one reacts differently. Some seem to enjoy being stroked, others exhibit fear or even mild aggression. But none show any long-term negative effects that we have observed. Of course, there have not been that many visitors yet. If the numbers should increase dramatically, the impact on the herd might be more severe."

For those who worry that eco-tourism represents simply a more

subtle kind of invasion, the Gulf of St Lawrence seal watch might prove an exception. On this temporary terrain, among unusually sanguine animals, curious bands of observers seem to leave little mark.

Most experts whom I talked to agree that the nature of the shifting ice and the movement of the herd makes human contact a passing and insignificant event. "if I were a baby seal," remarked Butler, "I'd certainly prefer a momentary disruption of my day to being clubbed to death."

There are at least four organizations that offer seal watching packages. Each has its particular slant.

Nortour seems to me the most straightforward in its intent, which is to attract tourist dollars and introduce visitors to the islands. *Nortour*, based in Montréal, is a booking agent for the seal watch trips, which are locally run by André Bourque and his wife Maryse, proprietors of the Chateau Madelinot. The Bourques arrange the lectures and presentations, organize island activities and provide gear for participants.

Eugene Lewis, a professor at the University of New Brunswick, runs *Atlantic Marine Wildlife Tours* out of Prince Edward Island. An adventurer and world traveler himself, he is an enthusiastic proponent of eco-tourism. Just back from a trip to Japan to promote his seal watch venture to Japanese wholesalers, he told me that he had "the hottest tour product of the more than 50 companies in the trade show." The Japanese, it seems, have made something of a national pet of the whitecoat. The image of *goma-chan* appears everywhere on t-shirts and buttons. "They don't

know much about the seal hunt and the protest movement," Lewis said. In fact, "the last thing my people want to hear about is baby seal clubbing." He thinks that, while the US market may be approaching saturation, the curve is on the climb in Japan and Europe. Lewis has even gone so far as to have his brochures translated into Japanese.

Mike Beedell's *Adventure Canada* program is designed for the tourist/photographer. "I try to teach people to observe and appreciate what they are experiencing," he told me. Beedell specializes in small, personalized excursions that feature photography workshops and informal discussions. Beedell leads excursions to other remote environments throughout the year.

Natural Habitat is the organization through which the International Fund for Animal Welfare operates (without, the literature asserts, benefiting financially from its activities). It is the most visible of the groups, with its posters, t-shirts, and stuffed animals. The glossy brochure features Brian Davies, founder of IFAW, making his impassioned pitch for the preservation of the Harp seal.

Davies is as sentimental about the creatures as Beedell is pragmatic. While Davies is pictured prone on the ice with a whitecoat in his arms, Beedell eschews the handling of the pups. Davies calls them "beautiful, cuddly animals;" Beedell says they are wild animals whose space should be respected. "Just because they can't get away is no excuse to handle them. If you look at the postcard picture of a person holding a baby seal with its mouth open and its head arched, what you're looking at is terror."

If the reaction of the panting pup that was dumped in my arms by Léonard is any indication, I'd have to say that Beedell is probably right. The heavy, helpless creature was an unwilling subject of a photo opportunity in this wilderness petting zoo.

All the tour operators caution against handling the pups or approaching the females, but clearly the temptation to hold the babies often proves irresistible. "I have yet to find another species that will permit this kind of contact," says Eugene Lewis. His Rule Book specifies that the visitor not handle the pups and stay 30 feet from females.

Seals or no, the experience of walking on the frozen skin of the planet is singular. The soles of my feet remembered treading an ice crust in a maple grove to tap trees, trudging up a hill with a sled, skidding over a pond on skates. But nothing compared to this walk among sculpture and sculptors' models.

The pilot who returned for us hours later remarked on the ice drift; we had been carried over two miles of water in the brief period we'd been on the floe. "Most of the time," explained Scotty, "we don't visit the same congregation of seals more than once." That factor must also be accounted for when considering the impact of eco-tourism on the herd.

In 1990, the Canadian government conducted an aerial survey of the Harp seal population which had been estimated to be in excess of three million animals. Technical difficulties have slowed the process of analysis, but preliminary results suggest that the herd has grown substantially. And stringent seal protection policies are being consolidated under new Canadian Marine Mammal

Regulations. Current quotas for Harp seals are 180,000, with an actual estimated 70,000 seals killed annually to satisfy local demand for meat and European markets for clothing and leather.

Questions have arisen concerning an augmented seal population in relation to the numbers of fish that they feed on. Are the seals now jeopardizing the fisheries industry? Again Dan Goodman of the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans: "There's no simple answer to that question. For example, to determine what the seals are eating, we have to sample the stomach contents of a large number of seals over a broad area during four seasons of five years. And even then the results are not conclusive. Capelin form part of a seal's diet, but capelin are also prey for cod. Seals and other marine mammals are part of a larger eco-system, and it will take over five years to make even educated guesses."

"Fishermen," he said, "will always tell you that seals are eating fish they would have otherwise caught; some marine biologists assert there is no evidence that reductions in the seal population would result in an increased catch for fishermen. And we may never have a definitive answer."

As we flew back to land, Scotty swooped low over a group of Hood seals, another species that comes to the ice pack every season. These seals, he said, were much more aggressive than the Harp. "Once I landed too close to one and it attacked my helicopter's pontoon." He was shouting over the din of the rotor. "I guess it thought the pontoon was a rival seal!"

Looking down at the frozen pans, we were again fascinated by the ice patterns, which Scotty said the seals read from underwater

like maps. We landed as the skies were lowering and the wind was picking up.

By dusk, the last groups were returning. We watched from the hotel bar as the pilots struggled to secure their craft on the beach, rotor covers and cab covers whipping like mainsails in a gale. Snow raced past in horizontal sheets. The wind swept up and down a crazy scale like the invention of an avant-garde composer.

Léonard joined us for a beer in the hotel bar and, as the piano player crooned slow songs, we talked some more. He was angry and frustrated at the portrayal of hunters as brutal. "We took what was allowed by law; we used the quickest, most humane method of killing. Then the protesters came with cameras and movie stars. I know a guy," he said, "whose father was paid to skin a seal alive so the activists could claim this was what we did."

Old ways and questions of livelihood still weigh heavily on a scale tipped on the other side by animal rights activists. Feelings still run high. Annamieke Röell, North American Coordinator of the IFAW, reacted strongly to some of the issues landmen and others have raised, specifically to charges of misrepresentation of hunters' methods. She was outraged at reports that IFAW members would skin a seal alive or stage brutal killings to inflame public sentiment. "We would be hypocritical if we claimed cruelty to animals and then paid to have those acts committed. Landmen have told me those stories, too; I won't even respond to the accusations. It's possible, I suppose, that someone might have done such a thing, but not our people." When I asked her about Brian Davies and the crying female seals, she said,

"Brian is very emotional person and that's the way he perceives it."

From desolate ice floe to dinner at Le P'tit Café. We traded stories over lobster crêpes and French wine with the others who'd been out. What were the real reasons behind the banning of the hunt? What would be the impact on the seals as more and more tourist-laden helicopters invaded their birthing grounds? How were the islands' economy reacting to this new reality? Would tourism replace sealing for the men who'd made a part of their living from the hunt? And what of the lost traditions, the lost skills?

"It takes a community a long time to realize and capitalize on the benefits of a change." Jim Butler believes that, in the long run, old traditions can be supplanted by new ones. The hunter becomes a guide or translator, using old skills for new ends. The community learns to value its native resources and see them as valuable to others. "It's like a popular restaurant...people hear about it, they want to come. After a while, the demand becomes too great and people have to wait in line. If people want something enough, if they value it enough, they'll be willing to take their turn. In terms of any environment, the influx has to be managed. But it can be. And, in the last analysis, even poorly managed eco-tourism results in less damage than rampant exploitation of an undeveloped area. We have to face the fact that, in today's world, an undeveloped area is ripe for exploitation. The eco-tourist may be the only alternative."

Claude Richard is hopeful that the economy of the îles-de-la-Madeleine will benefit from the annual influx of seal

watchers. More and more hotels and restaurants will open for the season, employing more Madelinots. Reggie Poirier, for one, is winterizing his small inn in anticipation of growing numbers of seal enthusiasts. Most of the new jobs will not go to the fishermen whose lives have been disrupted but, as Eugene Lewis put it, "This money is, in the end, for the islands' children."

On the eve of our departure, the storm was still raging. As we had waited for the weather to allow us access to the seals, now we waited to see if it would permit us to leave. The prospect seemed bleak, but even after only five days here, we had grown accustomed to the fickle winds.

This, it seems to me, is part of the appeal of the eco-trip from the tourist's vantage point. The unexpected. The sensation of roughing it without a present danger. The experience of a natural world unavailable to most dwellers in an industrial world. Mike Beedell says of his amateur photographers, "They're intrigued by nature and they're willing to take a step into a place they've never been before. This seal watch is an easy trip, and it is, for most people, a beginning."

The eco-tourism phenomenon is relatively new and has not yielded significant in-depth assessments of its impact, though there's a growing body of research and literature on the subject. Clearly there are distinctions to be made depending on particular species and geographies. What seems evident, though, is that this species--the Harp seal, and this terrain--the ice pack, present a convincing argument for eco-tourism as an alternative source of income for a culture whose hunting traditions are all but

extinguished. However, the results of the inevitable upheavals within this and other societies will not be evident for at least a generation.

As the winds keened, we shared another round with Léonard. His mood was lighter, if resigned. "So now, every March, I'm a guide. This is the reality now. I'm lucky to be able to adapt."

4703 words

M. Harris

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Now in March, helicopters disgorge orange-suited tourists, startling the seals from their sunning and nursing. The blood they see is only the stain of afterbirth; mounting public outcry and the strenuous efforts of several animal rights groups succeeded in shutting down markets for seal pelts, ending the whitecoat harvest and ushering in the seal watch.

For centuries, March signaled the end of a hardscrabble winter for the Madelinots. With the fishing season a month or more away, seal hunting provided a small but much-needed income for fishermen to refurbish their boats, repair their equipment. If the pack ice had been blown close enough to shore, which was never certain, the men loaded their *canotes* with supplies and

set out over forbidding terrain in search of the herd. Once they located a group of seals, they slaughtered as many pups as was permitted by law. The method they used was clubbing. The seals were skinned, and pelts and meat were lugged back the several miles to land.

Recently, with the precipitous decline of seal hunting, tourism is beginning to offer the islanders an alternative source of revenue.

For a few weeks at the damp end of winter, hotels and restaurants, normally still shuttered, open to accommodate several hundred scientists and tourists. And, because seal watching is dependent on the vagaries of the weather, and long days can go by before the skies clear enough to permit helicopter flights, hotel keepers and tour operators offer various activities to still the impatience of their guests, from cross country skiing and snowshoeing, to visiting the Maritime Museum or hiking the red sandstone bluffs.

Indoor activities abound as well: movies and swimming, bowling and shopping. One of the more pleasantly indulgent pastimes can be had at the Salon Nadeau in the Chateau Madelinot where one can spend several hours in a thelassotherapy spa luxuriating in a bath redolent of algae and essential oils and relaxing under the competent hands of a masseuse.

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French cuisine, imported wines. There are piano bars and country-western hangouts. And the lectures.

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We listened to a short history of Atlantic coast sealing, from its ancient native past through its heyday in the 1800s when European fishermen in wooden schooners took upwards of 500,000 seals in a season. Though meat and oil products, as well as a growing demand for pelts, were in increasing demand worldwide, laws were enacted to restrict the indiscriminate taking of seals. In 1949, extensive Harp seal research was initiated by the Canadian government. In 1961, a closing date was imposed on the hunt to protect adult females in molting concentrations. By 1967, the International Commission for Northwest Atlantic Fisheries, representing most countries fishing in North Atlantic waters, began gathering data on Harp and Hooded seal populations. The use of aircraft to hunt seals was banned. Quotas were introduced. The Committee on Seals and Sealing, comprised of scientists, veterinarians and members of humane societies, was established to provide the government with an independent source of management information.

In 1975, the seal quota had been reduced to 127,000. About this time, the animal rights protest movement was gathering

momentum.

Brian Davies, founder of the International Fund for Animal Welfare and passionate spokesman for the whitecoat, had discovered the baby Harp seals in 1965. This is the account of his epiphany as printed in the brochure of *Natural Habitat*, a tour group under contract to the IFAW. "The impression this lovely animal left with (Davies) was so compelling and its plight so desperate that he devoted his life to Harp seal protection.... Brian is convinced that each person who visits these vulnerable and beautiful animals and shares this vital part of their life cycle will be touched by the experience while simultaneously helping to replace seal hunting with seal watching. (Davies) still returns to the ice each March to renew his ties with these endearing creatures, and rededicate himself to their conservation." Davies spearheaded the effort to halt the hunting of whitecoats. His appeal was unabashedly emotional. At one point in the film, Davies describes the female seals as "crying" when their pups were killed.

A biologist told us that seals tear constantly as protection against wind and cold water. And, although the female unerringly recognizes her pup among the hundreds around her, she has what might be the shortest relationship to it of all herd animals. When the pup is weaned, at about two weeks old, she abandons it. Fully molted at four weeks, the young pup, called a "beater," enters the water and begins to feed, moving northward toward

Greenland.

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As we set out, testing the way with ski poles, the females reappeared, slithering back to their young, some still alert to danger, some all but oblivious of the orange-suited aliens.

We explored the brilliant, floating landscape for more than three hours. Everyone took portraits of the pups with their imploring eyes. A few held the startled creatures in their arms and posed for photos while other whitecoats nursed, slept in the sun.

I asked Mike Hammill, a wildlife biologist studying the Harp seal, if these tourist excursions might have an adverse impact on the herd. "As far as we can tell up to now, there seems to be very little effect on the females or their pups. The females don't seem to mind that their young have been handled by humans, and the pups...well, each one reacts differently. Some seem to enjoy being stroked, others exhibit fear or even mild aggression. But none show any long-term negative effects that we have observed. Of course, there have not been that many visitors yet. If the numbers should increase dramatically, the impact on the herd might be more severe."

Eco-tourism is fast becoming a popular vacation choice for many people. Some see it as a sign of the public's growing responsiveness to a threatened wilderness and its denizens; others worry that eco-tourists represent simply a more subtle kind of invasion. But the Gulf of St Lawrence seal watch might be an exception. On this temporary terrain, among unusually

sanguine animals, curious bands of observers seem to leave little mark.

The pilot who returned for us spoke about ice drift; we had been carried over two miles just in the hours we'd been on the floe. "Most of the time," explained Scotty as we flew low over a small group of Hood seals on our way back in, "we don't visit the same congregation of seals more than once."

In 1990, the Canadian government conducted an aerial survey of the Harp seal population which had been estimated to be in excess of two million animals. Technical difficulties have slowed the process of analysis, but preliminary results suggest that the herd has grown substantially. And stringent seal protection policies are being replaced by even more explicit ones under new Canadian Marine Mammal Regulations. Current quotas for Harp seals are 180,000, with an actual estimated 70,000 seals killed annually to satisfy local demand for meat and European markets for clothing and leather.

But old traditions and questions of livelihood still weigh heavily on a scale tipped on the other side by animal rights activists. And feelings still run high. Annamieke Röell, North American Coordinator of the IFAW, reacted strongly to some of the issues landmen and others have raised, specifically to charges of misrepresentation of hunters' methods. She was outraged at reports that IFAW members would skin a seal alive or stage brutal killings to inflame public sentiment. "We would be hypocritical if we claimed cruelty to animals and then paid to

M. Harris

have those acts committed. Landsmen have told me those stories, too; I won't even respond to the accusations. It's possible, I suppose, that someone might have done such a thing, but not our people." When I asked her about Brian Davies and the crying female seals, she said, "Brian is very emotional person and that's the way he perceives it."

Claude Richard of the local Tourist Association is hopeful that the economy of the îles-de-la-Madeleine will benefit from the annual influx of seal watchers. More and more hotels and restaurants will open for the season, employing more Madelinots. Most of the new jobs will not go to the fishermen whose lives have been disrupted but, as Eugene Lewis of *Atlantic Marine Wildlife Tours* told me, "This money is, in the end, for the island's children." Some estimates put the income from seal watch tours at five times that of the hunt.

While the experience of visiting the Harp seal herd on spectacular ice floes off the îles-de-la-Madeleine is an exhilarating and unusual one, it raises questions, as perhaps any such excursion should, of the relationships between humans and animals and the planet they share. It raises questions, too, concerning the destinations of eco-tourists and the ultimate use to which their contributions are put.

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WALKING ON ICE: An Eco-Tourist in Wonderland

Forty minutes out over the Gulf pack ice, we see the seals. Females appear like dark curls against the snow, and throughout the herd there are bright pink patches of blood.

Blood on the ice first drew the world's attention to what was called the plight of the baby Harp seals. Every March, as winds moved pack ice back and forth around the islands like battering rams, landsmen from the îles-de-la-Madeleine hauled equipment in boats called *canotes* over drifting ice and open water to hunt the Harp seal and its newborn pup, the whitecoat. The season lasted only a few weeks because, once weaned, the white seals moulted and returned to the water where the herd began its northward migration, out of range of the land-based hunters.

Now helicopters disgorge orange-suited tourists, startling the seals from their sunning and nursing. The blood they see is only the stain of afterbirth. Mounting public outcry and the strenuous efforts of animal rights groups succeeded in shutting down international markets for seal pelts and, as seal hunting dwindles, cameras have replaced clubs; the seal hunt has been all but replaced by the seal watch.

The îles-de-la-Madeleine, a tiny archipelago in the Gulf of St Lawrence, are one of the new destinations for a growing contingent of eco-tourists for whom the ordinary lure of travel is spiced

with the prospect of helping to preserve the world's wildernesses and their denizens. This area differs, though, from most in that it's a temporary scape that harbors its wildlife for only a short time. It is not a fragile ecosystem like a rain forest or an African veldt. And it is arguable whether or not the creatures rescued from the hunters' clubs were ever in danger of extinction.

We flew from Montréal, touching down at small airfields along the Gaspé. Another hour east brought us over the islands, floating among blue-green ice and black water like flotsam. We were met at the airport by Réginald Poirier, a young hotelier who drove us to Cap-aux-Meules. Evidences of a relentless wind were everywhere in the twisted spruce, the huddled dunes, the fields swept almost bare of snow though winter still locked fishing boats in the harbors and creaked in the shutters of the brightly painted houses whose outlandish colors seemed a perfect rebuttal to the monochrome landscape.

Reggie drove us around the perimeter of the island past sandstone cliffs glowing in the orange afternoon light. North America's largest wooden church towered against a hard blue sky. We talked about the traditions of the Madelinots, especially those concerning the seal hunt.

For centuries, March had signaled the end of a hardscrabble winter for the islanders. With the fishing season a month or more away, seal hunting provided a small but much-needed income for fishermen to refurbish their boats, repair their equipment. If the pack ice had been blown close enough to shore, which was never certain from year to year, the men loaded their *canotes* with

supplies and set out over forbidding terrain in search of the herd. Once they located a group of Harp seals they slaughtered adults for meat and whitecoats for pelts. They took as many as was permitted by law. The method they used was clubbing.

Large vessels were also permitted by the Canadian government to take seals. That number, too, was regulated, and it was policy that landsmen would be employed as hunters.

As early as the 16th century, Basque, Norman and Breton fishermen hunted seals in these waters. Inhabitants of coastal villages harvested seals from shore. When wooden schooners were introduced to Newfoundland waters, the annual hunt yielded upwards of 500,000 seals. It was not until 1949, when Newfoundland became a province of Canada, that extensive research on Harp seals began. In 1961, a closing date was imposed on the hunt to protect adult females. In 1970 the use of aircraft to hunt seals was banned, and in 1971 the first quota of 245,000 seals was introduced. This was reduced to 150,000 in 1972, and to 127,000 in 1975.

In the early 80s, a vocal and well-publicized protest movement caused a dramatic drop in fur prices worldwide, effectively halting the hunt altogether. The movement was spearheaded by an Englishman, Brian Davies, and the organization he founded, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). Davies was instrumental in promoting tourism both to further his cause and to create an alternate source of income for the Madelinots.

While the îles-de-la-Madeleine host thousands of vacationers in the summer, only the promise of seeing hoards of Harp seals in the wild could lure visitors to these islands in March. With the

Increasing influx of eco-tourists, more and more hotels and restaurants, normally still shuttered, are opening for a few weeks at the damp end of winter to accommodate them.

Claude Richard, Director of the îles-de-la-Madeleine Tourist Association, estimates that \$200,000 tourist dollars stay on the islands as a result of the seal watch. "Of course," he remarks, "that money is not going to the fishermen." It goes to the community's hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops and provides temporary employment for people in service jobs.

Dan Goodman, Senior Policy Program Advisor for Marine Mammals, elaborated. "Between 1977 and 1982, the dollar value of seal pelts was between \$157,000 and \$348,000. These figures do not account for the ancillary businesses such as net repair, meat packing, trucking and the like. There's no question but that the local culture has experienced a significant upheaval."

Richard sees business growing every year as a result of the seal watch. "We are getting a different type of tourist," he explains. "Older and with a specific purpose. In summer, 75% of the visitors are from Québec. In winter we see mainly Americans, Europeans and Japanese." At first the islanders were resentful; these new tourists represented the death of an old tradition. "But things are changing," says Richard. "People here have come to accept the seal watch."

"You see," remarked Jim Butler when I called him for his opinion, "it's most often the outsiders who cause the shift." Butler has been involved in eco-tourism for more than 20 years and has traveled to the wildest edges of the earth to observe and

record what he calls a new reality. "One must make a distinction between nature tourism and eco-tourism. Eco-tourism isn't simply the going into a wilderness, it's a particularly sensitive way of visiting natural areas in such a way that the environment is ~~in no~~ ^{not} way degraded." Butler, a Professor of Conservation Biology at the University of Alberta, believes that eco-tourism is one of the answers to the taking of land and creatures by people who view the world in what he says is a homocentric perspective. "This view is changing and, I think, for the betterment not only of the environment, but of the people who inhabit it."

In order to appreciate what Butler is saying, we have to allow at least four to five days for a first visit. Weather dictates the helicopter flights to the ice and there are often long periods of waiting for the skies to clear. Americans often seem most impatient in the face of delays and tour operators have devised various ways to keep them and others happily occupied. There are cross country skiing and snowshoeing expeditions. Mini-vans scoot tourists along twisting island roads, ~~pointing out~~ ^{past} thatched barns--called *baraques*--of a unique design born of necessity and found only in wind-ravaged lands, poor in wood.

We drove our rented car down back roads, across causeways. One afternoon we picked up a young hitchhiker who brought us to the village of Bassin where we walked out onto the ice and talked about his grandfather, the hunter Willy LaBelle, the old days, and how it is now. His name was Serge; he was studying to be a carpenter. Our French/English communication was rough, but servicable. We even managed a bi-lingual joke. Serge wanted to

bring us to a dock--au quai--and he asked "Au quai?" We responded:
"OK." Those two phrases sound identical when spoken. Au Quai.OK.
p.o. box 203, barrington, n.h. 03825

It was enough to bind us in our separateness together in laughter.

Jim Butler delights in such moments. "Whether it's at Lake Baikal or near a river in Costa Rica, this coming together of different cultures cannot help but widen the experience of the visitor and the local person. Only when cultures interconnect can a vision of another sort of reality take root."

Even without the seals, the îles have a unique allure. I whiled away the better part of a day at the Salon Nadeau, a thelassotherpay spa in the Chateau Madelinot, where I soaked in a bath redolent of algae and essential oils and relaxed under the sure hands of a masseuse.

And there are movies and bowling and shopping, museums and lighthouses and a gallery filled with creations made of sand.

At night, the hotel dining rooms and island cafés serve *pot-en-pot*, a deep dish seafood pie that's a local specialty, and French cuisine, imported wines. There are piano bars and country-western hangouts. And the lectures.

Most of the seal-watching tours have put together programs of videos and speakers. The night we attended a *Nortour* presentation at the Chateau Madelinot, several biologists and representatives of Canadian Fisheries and Oceans addressed the dinner audience of people of a variety of ages and backgrounds.

We listened to a short history of Atlantic coast sealing, from its ancient native past through its heyday in the 1800s up to the present.

Then a biologist described seal behavior at birthing time. He told us about the relationship of the female to her offspring, perhaps one of the briefest among herd animals. Although the female unerringly recognizes her own pup among the hundreds around her, when the pup is weaned, at about two weeks old, she abandons it. Fully molted at four weeks, the young pup, called a "beater," enters the water and begins to feed, moving northward toward Greenland.

We saw a Brian Davies film, a passionate and unabashedly emotional appeal for the protection of the whitecoat. At one point in the film, Davies described the female seals as "crying" when their pups were killed, though the biologist had explained this tearing was a natural protection against wind and frigid water.

The evening's ensuing debate raised questions, some about animal rights activists and their tactics. Jeremy Conway, from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in Nova Scotia, had described to me an occasion when he took an activist and "a starlet" to the ice off Sydney. The man agreed that seal hunting methods were more humane than those used in commercial slaughterhouses but, he said to Conway, "I can get the money I need to fight pollution in New York Harbor from the sealing issue."

The issue can be taken beyond that of politics or humane methods of killing or even that of species survival. Dr. Elliott Katz, DVM, founder of the organization In Defense of Animals believes that "it's not necessary that an animal be endangered for it to be protected. Endangerment is not necessarily the basis for

an animal rights position. Our point of view is that humans should begin to move away from using animals for food and clothing. Even when subsistence is the issue, there are alternatives."

Jim Butler feels it's time to stop regarding the animal world as a human "resource." In what is fast becoming a post-industrial society, humans are beginning to see that they share a common environment in which all the inhabitants have rights. "It's an 'atom-centric' point of view; one in which all creatures are equal."

The discussions lasted well into the night and served to make the next morning's trip to the ice an even more intriguing prospect.

We rose before dawn and climbed into bulky survival suits and heavy boots. The helicopter pilots loaded our gear and stuffed us into narrow seats. We shared our craft with a two-man film crew from France. Our pilot was a cheerful Scot whose job took him to ocean oil platforms and tundra camps at other times in the year.

Several more helicopters flew beside us like bumblebees as we sped over ice that filled the world to the horizon. Ice. One word to encompass sheets, chunks, spires, holes, long black splits. Ice. Shades of white and shades of gray. Ice glowing green just under the freezing water. Blue ice. And then, forty miles out, ice spotted with blood. The seal herd.

The mottled females and their cream-colored young were scattered everywhere as we landed on a pan. The din of rotors sent adults slipping into the sea, leaving the pups alone. The engines stopped. We stepped onto the ice. Immediately the sound of the

wind was laced with the mewling, gull-like cries of seals. As we set out, testing the way with ski poles, the females reappeared, slithering back to their young, some still alert to danger, some all but oblivious of the orange-suited aliens.

We met a team from Los Angeles who had been shooting film since daybreak. Our Frenchmen set up their equipment near a large group of seals and they, too, began filming. A photographer on assignment for a children's book publisher lay sprawled on the ice, nose to nose with a wet-eyed whitecoat. The rest of us wandered among ice boulders, encountering pup after pup. The females kept a wary distance.

Nortour is the only seal-watching organization currently employing ex-landsmen to escort groups. Léonard Chevrier, a fisherman and hunter, walked with us, poking at the ice, showing us the thin spots to avoid. Léonard was bareheaded among this tribe of bundled strangers. He negotiated the ice as easily as a Maine lobsterman might walk a pitching deck. "Not many fishermen are bi-lingual," he explained. "There aren't a lot of us who feel comfortable talking to strangers. We're fishermen, not guides." We broached the subject of the hunt. Léonard spoke cautiously at first, unsure of our motives for asking. "I was one of the last," he said, "and even I know only a third of what the old hunters know. If licenses were given out today, most of the guys would have to learn from the beginning."

He told us about years, like this one, when the ice was too far offshore to reach; years when the ice was so rugged that, within a short time of starting out, the men were stripped to

their shirtsleeves. He described how the canotes were alternately dragged and floated for torturous miles in search of the ever-shifting herd, how quickly the killing and skinning had to be done in order to return to shore before dark.

A female seal reared at our casual approach. Léonard was wary, alert. "You can't take them for granted. Or the ice either. The other day I saw a guide tell his people to jump a lead. They stepped on floating ice to get over a gap. God," he said, "They might have drowned!"

I stayed close to Léonard as we explored the brilliant, floating landscape for more than three hours. I watched our companions as they took portraits of the animals. A few held startled creatures in their arms, despite strict tour instructions, and posed for photos. Meanwhile, more whitecoats nursed, slept in the sun.

I asked Mike Hammill, a wildlife biologist studying the Harp seal, if these tourist excursions might have an adverse impact on the herd. "As far as we can tell up to now, there seems to be very little effect on the females or their pups. The females don't seem to mind that their young have been handled by humans, and the pups...well, each one reacts differently. Some seem to enjoy being stroked, others exhibit fear or even mild aggression. But none show any long-term negative effects that we have observed. Of course, there have not been that many visitors yet. If the numbers should increase dramatically, the impact on the herd might be more severe."

For those who worry that eco-tourism represents simply a more

subtle kind of invasion, the Gulf of St Lawrence seal watch might prove an exception. On this temporary terrain, among unusually sanguine animals, curious bands of observers seem to leave little mark.

Most experts whom I talked to agree that the nature of the shifting ice and the movement of the herd makes human contact a passing and insignificant event. "if I were a baby seal," remarked Butler, "I'd certainly prefer a momentary disruption of my day to being clubbed to death."

There are at least four organizations that offer seal watching packages. Each has its particular slant.

Nortour seems to me the most straightforward in its intent, which is to attract tourist dollars and introduce visitors to the islands. Nortour, based in Montréal, is a booking agent for the seal watch trips, which are locally run by André Bourque and his wife Maryse, proprietors of the Chateau Madelinot. The Bourques arrange the lectures and presentations, organize island activities and provide gear for participants.

Eugene Lewis, a professor at the University of New Brunswick, runs Atlantic Marine Wildlife Tours out of Prince Edward Island. An adventurer and world traveler himself, he is an enthusiastic proponent of eco-tourism. Just back from a trip to Japan to promote his seal watch venture to Japanese wholesalers, he told me that he had "the hottest tour product of the more than 50 companies in the trade show." The Japanese, it seems, have made something of a national pet of the whitecoat. The image of *goma-chan* appears everywhere on t-shirts and buttons. "They don't

know much about the seal hunt and the protest movement," Lewis said. In fact, "the last thing my people want to hear about is baby seal clubbing." He thinks that, while the US market may be approaching saturation, the curve is on the climb in Japan and Europe. Lewis has even gone so far as to have his brochures translated into Japanese.

Mike Beedell's Adventure Canada program is designed for the tourist/photographer. "I try to teach people to observe and appreciate what they are experiencing," he told me. Beedell specializes in small, personalized excursions that feature photography workshops and informal discussions. Beedell leads excursions to other remote environments throughout the year.

Natural Habitat is the organization through which the International Fund for Animal Welfare operates (without, the literature asserts, benefiting financially from its activities). It is the most visible of the groups, with its posters, t-shirts, and stuffed animals. The glossy brochure features Brian Davies, founder of IFAW, making his impassioned pitch for the preservation of the Harp seal.

Davies is as sentimental about the creatures as Beedell is pragmatic. While Davies is pictured prone on the ice with a whitecoat in his arms, Beedell eschews the handling of the pups. Davies calls them "beautiful, cuddly animals;" Beedell says they are wild animals whose space should be respected. "Just because they can't get away is no excuse to handle them. If you look at the postcard picture of a person holding a baby seal with its mouth open and its head arched, what you're looking at is terror."

If the reaction of the panting pup that was dumped in my arms by Léonard is any indication, I'd have to say that Beedell is probably right. The heavy, helpless creature was an unwilling subject of a photo opportunity in this wilderness petting zoo.

All the tour operators caution against handling the pups or approaching the females, but clearly the temptation to hold the babies often proves irresistible. "I have yet to find another species that will permit this kind of contact," says Eugene Lewis. His Rule Book specifies that the visitor not handle the pups and stay 30 feet from females.

Seals or no, the experience of walking on the frozen skin of the planet is singular. The soles of my feet remembered treading an ice crust in a maple grove to tap trees, trudging up a hill with a sled, skidding over a pond on skates. But nothing compared to this walk among sculpture and sculptors' models.

The pilot who returned for us hours later remarked on the ice drift; we had been carried over two miles of water in the brief period we'd been on the floe. "Most of the time," explained Scotty, "we don't visit the same congregation of seals more than once." That factor must also be accounted for when considering the impact of eco-tourism on the herd.

In 1990, the Canadian government conducted an aerial survey of the Harp seal population which had been estimated to be in excess of three million animals. Technical difficulties have slowed the process of analysis, but preliminary results suggest that the herd has grown substantially. And stringent seal protection policies are being consolidated under new Canadian Marine Mammal

Regulations. Current quotas for Harp seals are 180,000, with an actual estimated 70,000 seals killed annually to satisfy local demand for meat and European markets for clothing and leather.

Questions have arisen concerning an augmented seal population in relation to the numbers of fish that they feed on. Are the seals now jeopardizing the fisheries industry? Again Dan Goodman of the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans: "There's no simple answer to that question. For example, to determine what the seals are eating, we have to sample the stomach contents of a large number of seals over a broad area during four seasons of five years. And even then the results are not conclusive. Capelin form part of a seal's diet, but capelin are also prey for cod. Seals and other marine mammals are part of a larger eco-system, and it will take over five years to make even educated guesses."

"Fishermen," he said, "will always tell you that seals are eating fish they would have otherwise caught; some marine biologists assert there is no evidence that reductions in the seal population would result in an increased catch for fishermen. And we may never have a definitive answer."

As we flew back to land, Scotty swooped low over a group of Hood seals, another species that comes to the ice pack every season. These seals, he said, were much more aggressive than the Harp. "Once I landed too close to one and it attacked my helicopter's pontoon." He was shouting over the din of the rotor. "I guess it thought the pontoon was a rival seal!"

Looking down at the frozen pans, we were again fascinated by the ice patterns, which Scotty said the seals read from underwater

like maps. We landed as the skies were lowering and the wind was picking up.

By dusk, the last groups were returning. We watched from the hotel bar as the pilots struggled to secure their craft on the beach, rotor covers and cab covers whipping like mainsails in a gale. Snow raced past in horizontal sheets. The wind swept up and down a crazy scale like the invention of an avant-garde composer.

Léonard joined us for a beer in the hotel bar and, as the piano player crooned slow songs, we talked some more. He was angry and frustrated at the portrayal of hunters as brutal. "We took what was allowed by law; we used the quickest, most humane method of killing. Then the protesters came with cameras and movie stars. I know a guy," he said, "whose father was paid to skin a seal alive so the activists could claim this was what we did."

Old ways and questions of livelihood still weigh heavily on a scale tipped on the other side by animal rights activists. Feelings still run high. Annamieke Röell, North American Coordinator of the IFAW, reacted strongly to some of the issues landsmen and others have raised, specifically to charges of misrepresentation of hunters' methods. She was outraged at reports that IFAW members would skin a seal alive or stage brutal killings to inflame public sentiment. "We would be hypocritical if we claimed cruelty to animals and then paid to have those acts committed. Landsmen have told me those stories, too; I won't even respond to the accusations. It's possible, I suppose, that someone might have done such a thing, but not our people." When I asked her about Brian Davies and the crying female seals, she said,

"Brian is very emotional person and that's the way he perceives it."

From desolate ice floe to dinner at Le P'tit Café. We traded stories over lobster crêpes and French wine with the others who'd been out. What were the real reasons behind the banning of the hunt? What would be the impact on the seals as more and more tourist-laden helicopters invaded their birthing grounds? How were the islands' economy reacting to this new reality? Would tourism replace sealing for the men who'd made a part of their living from the hunt? And what of the lost traditions, the lost skills?

"It takes a community a long time to realize and capitalize on the benefits of a change." Jim Butler believes that, in the long run, old traditions can be supplanted by new ones. The hunter becomes a guide or translator, using old skills for new ends. The community learns to value its native resources and see them as valuable to others. "It's like a popular restaurant...people hear about it, they want to come. After a while, the demand becomes too great and people have to wait in line. If people want something enough, if they value it enough, they'll be willing to take their turn. In terms of any environment, the influx has to be managed. But it can be. And, in the last analysis, even poorly managed eco-tourism results in less damage than rampant exploitation of an undeveloped area. We have to face the fact that, in today's world, an undeveloped area is ripe for exploitation. The eco-tourist may be the only alternative."

Claude Richard is hopeful that the economy of the îles-de-la-Madeleine will benefit from the annual influx of seal

watchers. More and more hotels and restaurants will open for the season, employing more Madelinots. Reggie Poirier, for one, is winterizing his small inn in anticipation of growing numbers of seal enthusiasts. Most of the new jobs will not go to the fishermen whose lives have been disrupted but, as Eugene Lewis put it, "This money is, in the end, for the islands' children."

On the eve of our departure, the storm was still raging. As we had waited for the weather to allow us access to the seals, now we waited to see if it would permit us to leave. The prospect seemed bleak, but even after only five days here, we had grown accustomed to the fickle winds.

This, it seems to me, is part of the appeal of the eco-trip from the tourist's vantage point. The unexpected. The sensation of roughing it without a present danger. The experience of a natural world unavailable to most dwellers in an industrial world. Mike Beedell says of his amateur photographers, "They're intrigued by nature and they're willing to take a step into a place they've never been before. This seal watch is an easy trip, and it is, for most people, a beginning."

The eco-tourism phenomenon is relatively new and has not yielded significant in-depth assessments of its impact, though there's a growing body of research and literature on the subject. Clearly there are distinctions to be made depending on particular species and geographies. What seems evident, though, is that this species--the Harp seal, and this terrain--the ice pack, present a convincing argument for eco-tourism as an alternative source of income for a culture whose hunting traditions are all but

extinguished. However, the results of the inevitable upheavals within this and other societies will not be evident for at least a generation.

As the winds keened, we shared another round with Léonard. His mood was lighter, if resigned. "So now, every March, I'm a guide. This is the reality now. I'm lucky to be able to adapt."

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(Call the COSS for current figures/quotas/impact on fisheries)

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Visitors must allow four to five days for their excursion.

7 J.B. acceptance

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Indoor activities abound as well: movies and swimming, bowling and shopping. One of the more pleasantly indulgent pastimes can be had at the Salon Nadeau in the Chateau Madelinot where one can spend several hours in a thellassotherapy spa luxuriating in a bath redolent of algae and essential oils and relaxing under the competent hands of a masseuse.

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Then a biologist described seal behavior at birthing time. He told us about the relationship of the female to her offspring, perhaps one of the briefest among herd animals. Although the female unerringly recognizes her own pup among the hundreds around her, when the pup is weaned, at about two weeks old, she abandons it. Fully molted at four weeks, the young pup, called a "beater," enters the water and begins to feed, moving northward toward Greenland.

We saw a Brian Davies film, a passionate and unabashedly emotional appeal for the protection of the whitecoat. At one point in the film, Davies described the female seals as "crying" when their pups were killed, though the biologist had explained this tearing was a natural protection against wind and frigid water.

The evening's ensuing debate raised questions, some about animal rights activists and their tactics. Jeremy Conway, from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in Nova Scotia, had described to me an occasion when he took an activist and "a starlet" to the ice off Sydney. The man agreed that seal hunting methods were more humane than those used in commercial slaughterhouses but, he said to Conway, "I can get the money I need to fight pollution in New York Harbor from the sealing issue."

And the issue can be taken beyond that of politics or humane methods of killing or even that of species survival. Dr. Elliott Katz, DVM, founder of the organization In Defense of Animals believes that "it's not necessary that an animal be endangered for it to be protected. Endangerment is not necessarily the basis for an animal rights position. Our point of view is that humans should begin to move away from using animals for food and clothing. Even when subsistence is the issue, there are alternatives."

More
MGE
JS

people's
questions

JB - new consciousness

The discussions lasted well into the night and served to make the next morning's trip to the ice an even more intriguing prospect.

We rose before dawn and climbed into bulky survival suits and heavy boots. The helicopter pilots loaded our gear and stuffed us into narrow seats. We shared our craft with a two-man film crew from France. Our pilot was a cheerful Scot whose job took him to ocean oil platforms and tundra camps at other times in the year.

Several more helicopters flew beside us like bumblebees as we sped over ice that filled the world to the horizon. Ice. One word to encompass sheets, chunks, spires, holes, long black splits. Ice. Shades of white and shades of gray. Ice glowing green just under the freezing water. Blue ice. And then, forty miles out, ice spotted with blood. The seal herd.

The mottled females and their cream-colored young were scattered everywhere as we landed on a pan. The din of rotors sent adults slipping into the sea, leaving the pups alone. The engines stopped. We stepped onto the ice. Immediately the sound of the wind was laced with the mewing, gull-like cries of seals. As we set out, testing the way with ski poles, the females reappeared, slithering back to their young, some still alert to danger, some all but oblivious of the orange-suited aliens.

We met a team from Los Angeles who had been shooting film since daybreak. Our Frenchmen set up their equipment near a large group of seals and they, too, began filming. A photographer on assignment for a children's book publisher lay sprawled on the ice, nose to nose with a wet-eyed whitecoat. The rest of us wandered among ice boulders, encountering pup after pup. The females kept a wary distance.

Nortour is the only seal-watching organization currently employing ex-landsmen to escort groups. Léonard Chevrier, a fisherman and hunter, walked with us, poking at the ice, showing us the thin spots to avoid. "Not many fishermen are bi-lingual," he explained. "There aren't a lot of us who feel comfortable talking to strangers. We're fishermen, not guides." We broached the subject of the hunt. Léonard spoke cautiously at first, unsure of our motives for asking. "I was one of the last," he said, "and even I know only a third of what the old hunters know. If licenses were given out today, most of the guys would have to learn from the beginning."

What did he look like?

He told us about years, like this one, when the ice was too far offshore to reach; years when the ice was so rugged that, within a short time of starting out, the men were stripped to their shirtsleeves. He described how the canotes were alternately dragged and floated for torturous miles in search of the ever-shifting herd, how quickly the killing and skinning had to be done in order to return to shore before dark.

We explored the brilliant, floating landscape for more than three hours. Everyone took portraits of the animals. A few held startled creatures in their arms and posed for photos while other whitecoats nursed, slept in the sun.

not kosher

I asked Mike Hammill, a wildlife biologist studying the Harp seal, if these tourist excursions might have an adverse impact on the herd. "As far as we can tell up to now, there seems to be very

little effect on the females or their pups. The females don't seem to mind that their young have been handled by humans, and the pups...well, each one reacts differently. Some seem to enjoy being stroked, others exhibit fear or even mild aggression. But none show any long-term negative effects that we have observed. Of course, there have not been that many visitors yet. If the numbers should increase dramatically, the impact on the herd might be more severe." ~~A + B petting is clubbing~~

For those who worry that eco-tourism represents simply a more subtle kind of invasion, the Gulf of St Lawrence seal watch might prove an exception. On this temporary terrain, among unusually sanguine animals, curious bands of observers seem to leave little mark.

There are at least four organizations that offer seal watching packages. Each has its (particular) slant. *implied - from my observation*

Nortour seems the most straightforward in its intent, which is to attract tourist dollars and introduce visitors to the islands. Nortour, based in Montréal, is a booking agent for the seal watch trips, which are locally run by André Bourque and his wife Maryse, proprietors of the Chateau Madelinot. ~~the~~ Bourques arranges the lectures and presentations, organizes island activities and provides gear for participants.

Eugene Lewis, a professor at the University of New Brunswick, runs Atlantic Marine Wildlife Tours out of Prince Edward Island. An adventurer and world traveler himself, he is an enthusiastic proponent of eco-tourism. Just back from a trip to Japan to promote his seal watch venture to Japanese wholesalers, he told me that he had "the hottest tour product of the more than 50 companies in the trade show." The Japanese, it seems, have made something of a national pet of the whitecoat. The image of *goma-chan* appears everywhere on t-shirts and buttons. "They don't know much about the seal hunt and the protest movement," Lewis said. In fact, "the last thing my people want to hear about is baby seal clubbing." He thinks that, while the US market may be approaching saturation, the curve is on the climb in Japan and Europe. Lewis has even gone so far as to have his brochures translated into Japanese.

Mike Beedell's Adventure Canada program is designed for the tourist/photographer. "I try to teach people to observe and appreciate what they are experiencing," he told me. Beedell specializes in small, personalized excursions that feature photography workshops and informal discussions. *(his other tours)*

Natural Habitat is the organization through which the International Fund for Animal Welfare operates (without, the literature asserts, benefiting financially from its activities). It is the most visible of the groups, with its posters, t-shirts, and stuffed animals. ~~the~~ glossy brochure features Brian Davies, founder of IFAW, making his impassioned pitch for the preservation of the Harp seal.

Davies is as sentimental about the creatures as Beedell is pragmatic. While Davies is pictured prone on the ice with a whitecoat in his arms, Beedell eschews the handling of the pups. Davies calls them "beautiful, cuddly animals;" Beedell says they are wild animals whose space should be respected. "Just because

they can't get away is no excuse to handle them. If you look at the postcard picture of a person holding a baby seal with its mouth open and its head arched, what you're looking at is terror."

If the reaction of the panting pup that was dumped in my arms by Léonard is any indication, I'd have to say that Beedell is probably right, though no research has been done on the possible long-term effects on the creatures in this wilderness petting zoo.

All the tour operators caution against handling the pups or approaching the females, but clearly the temptation to hold the babies often proves irresistible. "I have yet to find another species that will permit this kind of contact," says Eugene Lewis. His Rule Book specifies that the visitor not handle the pups and stay 30 feet from females.

The pilot who returned for us hours later remarked on the ice drift; we had been carried over two miles in the brief period we'd been on the floe. "Most of the time," explained Scotty, "we don't visit the same congregation of seals more than once." That factor must also be accounted for when considering the impact of eco-tourism on the herd. JB - impact

In 1990, the Canadian government conducted an aerial survey of the Harp seal population which had been estimated to be in excess of three million animals. Technical difficulties have slowed the process of analysis, but preliminary results suggest that the herd has grown substantially. And stringent seal protection policies are being consolidated under new Canadian Marine Mammal Regulations. Current quotas for Harp seals are 180,000, with an actual estimated 70,000 seals killed annually to satisfy local demand for meat and European markets for clothing and leather.

Questions have arisen concerning an augmented seal population in relation to the numbers of fish that they feed on. Are the seals now jeopardizing the fisheries industry? Again Dan Goodman of the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans. "There's no simple answer to that question. For example, to determine what the seals are eating, we have to sample the stomach contents of a large number of seals over a broad area during four seasons of five years. And even then the results are not conclusive. Capelin form part of a seal's diet, but capelin are also prey for cod. Seals and other marine mammals are part of a larger eco-system, and it will take over five years to make even educated guesses."

"Fishermen," he said, "will always tell you that seals are eating fish they would have otherwise caught; some marine biologists assert there is no evidence that reductions in the seal population would result in an increased catch for fishermen. And we may never have a definitive answer."

As we flew back to land, Scotty swooped low over a group of Hood seals, another species that comes to the ice pack every season. These seals, he said, were much more aggressive than the Harp. "Once I landed too close to one and it attacked my helicopter's pontoon." He was shouting over the din of the rotor. "I guess it thought the pontoon was a rival seal!"

Looking down at the frozen pans, we were again fascinated by the ice patterns, which Scotty said the seals read from underwater like maps. We landed as the skies were lowering and the wind was picking up.

JB petting
vs.
chubby.

my
reactions
the
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a pup

Walk away - the
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By dusk, the last groups were returning. We watched from the hotel bar as the pilots struggled to secure their craft on the beach, rotor covers and cab covers whipping like mainsails in a gale. Snow raced past in horizontal sheets. The wind swept up and down a crazy scale like the invention of an avant-garde composer.

Léonard joined us for a beer in the hotel bar and, as the piano player crooned slow songs, we talked some more. He was angry and frustrated at the portrayal of hunters as brutal. "We took what was allowed by law; we used the quickest, most humane method of killing. Then the protesters came with cameras and movie stars. I know a guy," he said, "whose father was paid to skin a seal alive so the activists could claim this was what we did."

Old ways and questions of livelihood still weigh heavily on a scale tipped on the other side by animal rights activists. Feelings still run high. Annamieke Röell, North American Coordinator of the IFAW, reacted strongly to some of the issues landsmen and others have raised, specifically to charges of misrepresentation of hunters' methods. She was outraged at reports that IFAW members would skin a seal alive or stage brutal killings to inflame public sentiment. "We would be hypocritical if we claimed cruelty to animals and then paid to have those acts committed. Landsmen have told me those stories, too; I won't even respond to the accusations. It's possible, I suppose, that someone might have done such a thing, but not our people." When I asked her about Brian Davies and the crying female seals, she said, "Brian is very emotional person and that's the way he perceives it."

From desolate ice floe to dinner at Le P'tit Café. We traded stories over lobster crêpes and French wine with the others who'd been out. What were the real reasons behind the banning of the hunt? What would be the impact on the seals as more and more tourist-laden helicopters invaded their birthing grounds? How were the islands' economy reacting to this new reality? Would tourism replace sealing for the men who'd made a part of their living from the hunt? And what of the lost traditions, the lost skills? JB-wrap up.

7 Claude Richard is hopeful that the economy of the îles-de-la-Madeleine will benefit from the annual influx of seal watchers. More and more hotels and restaurants will open for the season, employing more Madelinots. Reggie Poirier, for one, is winterizing his small inn in anticipation of growing numbers of seal enthusiasts. Most of the new jobs will not go to the fishermen whose lives have been disrupted but, as Eugene Lewis put it, "This money is, in the end, for the islands' children."

The next night, on the eve of our departure, the storm was still raging. As we had waited for the weather to allow us access to the seals, now we waited to see if it would permit us to leave. The prospect seemed bleak, but even after only five days here, we had grown accustomed to the fickle winds.

This, it seems to me, is part of the appeal of the eco-trip from the tourist's vantage point. The unexpected. The sensation of roughing it without a present danger. The experience of a natural world unavailable to most dwellers in a post-industrial world. Mike Beedell says of his amateur photographers, "They're intrigued

by nature and they're willing to take a step into a place they've never been before. It's an easy trip, and it is, for most, a beginning."

The eco-tourism phenomenon is relatively new and has not yielded significant in-depth assessments of its impact, though there's a growing body of research and literature on the subject. Clearly there are distinctions to be made depending on particular species and geographies. What seems evident, though, is that this species--the Harp seal, and this terrain--the ice pack, present a convincing argument for eco-tourism as an alternative source of income for this culture whose hunting traditions are all but extinguished. However, the results of the inevitable upheavals within this and other societies will not be evident for at least a generation.

As the March winds keened, we shared another round with Léonard. His mood was lighter, if resigned. "So now, every March, I'm a guide. This is the reality now. I'm lucky to be able to adapt."

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