

InfoNorth

Navigating a Research Topic that is Close to Home

By Danita Catherine Burke

I AM A NEWFOUNDLANDER and have had the opportunity to research and write on a subject of much cultural significance and impact on my home—the legacy of the anti-sealing movement. Supported by a research fellowship from the J.R. Smallwood Foundation for Newfoundland and Labrador Studies and my academic institution, the Center for War Studies, University of Southern Denmark, I navigated the completion of a research project on the legacy of the anti-sealing movement and its impact on coastal peoples in Newfoundland and Labrador. As someone born and raised in rural Newfoundland with deep cultural and historical roots in the province, I have always been fascinated by my homeland and its place in Canada and the world.

I always knew sealing to be a polarizing topic, and growing up I was warned to be cautious with whom I spoke about the subject, but I did not really understand why such caution was advised. I was broadly educated by family and people in the community that anti-sealing activists, especially in the 1970s and early 1980s, were caustic for coastal fishing communities and the province's fishing industry and culture as whole. But growing up in the 1990s, the on-the-ground anti-sealing activism had passed its peak. The news was preoccupied with concerns about the collapse of the cod fishery, the decline of the pulp and paper industry, and the rise of offshore oil development.

Over two decades later, when I ventured into research on anti-sealing activism, I was shocked to learn about the scale of destruction caused to rural and coastal peoples, societies, and cultures by the unrelenting and overpowering attacks, misrepresentations, and mistruths by many prominent environmental and animal rights organizations and their supporters (Burke, 2020, 2021, 2022a; Phelps Bondaroff and Burke, 2014). As I reviewed archival holdings from the Centre for Newfoundland Studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland's Queen Elizabeth II Library and got local feedback on my work, a fuller picture of the stories I heard growing up emerged.

For example, I read about the fear of cultural assimilation and experiences of devaluation expressed by rural children in the newly minted Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador whose family members were sealers or participants in the sealing industry. Once I started to

publish my research, leading with the research-based discussion piece in *The Northern Review* titled, “The Case for a Greenpeace Apology to Newfoundland and Labrador,” and began raising public awareness of it on CBC Radio's The Broadcast and social media, people started to contact me and entrust me privately with their stories about being on the receiving end or observing anti-sealing activism and the harm that it caused local families and communities (CBC The Broadcast, 2021a; Burke, 2021).

The limited activist accountability for the harm deliberately and inadvertently inflicted over the decades, and the overt dismissal of coastal peoples' experiences by activists and many writers who praised the work of anti-sealing campaigners stood out to me. Most notably, experiences of decades of threats to kidnap and skin alive the children of sealers in Newfoundland and Labrador, and the lack of public awareness and concern about this insidious activity shocked me. The rationale for the threat appears to be a misguided understanding of sealing practices and a supposed desire to make sealers feel the pain of mother seals. This incorrect belief that seals are skinned alive can be directly traced to the 1964 documentary, *Les grands phoques de la banquise (Seals of the Floes)*, produced by Artek Films and aired on CBC (Îles de la Madeleine, 2021). The documentary showed images of a sealer in Quebec's Îles-de-la-Madeleine in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, allegedly skinning a whitecoat (newborn) harp seal alive. The cruel act depicted was deliberately portrayed as standard sealing practice, which it is not. It was later revealed that the film crew paid the sealer to skin the seal in that manner for the film.

In the research, though, it was the weaponization of familial love against sealers and their families that struck me for its viciousness. Time and again I read and heard of families in coastal Newfoundland and Labrador receiving threats to harm their children for the anti-sealing cause (e.g. CBC The Broadcast, 2021b; Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, 2006; also see Troake, 2005; Burke, 2022a). With my family and cultural connections to the seal hunt, this knowledge struck a nerve. My family's love for my siblings and me could have been the weapon used by activists to psychologically torment and pressure our parents, grandparents, and other relatives. It seems that for

some, there is no step too far in the name of the anti-sealing cause. And now the unexplained warnings I received and heeded growing up made more sense.

The irony is that many of the protesting organizations that led the charge to end sealing, such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare, Greenpeace, and Sea Shepherd, all claim to adhere to non-violence. But to the best of my knowledge, no former or current protesting organization has apologized for violence against sealers and their families in Newfoundland and Labrador, particularly for threats against children that they inspired in their followers or the cultural and societal destruction to Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, specifically from the province, who are living with the results of their unchecked activism and narratives. While Greenpeace offered a broad apology to Inuit, Indigenous, and coastal peoples in Canada in 2014, the content of its apology focused on Inuit peoples that it unintentionally harmed. The apology did not offer specifics on how and to what extent Greenpeace was sorry for harm it caused to people that, at the time, it deliberately targeted, most notably coastal people in Newfoundland and Labrador—ground zero for the anti-sealing protests.

Greenpeace Canada, for example, was contacted and provided a copy of my Northern Review piece before publication, which argued how the organization violated its own non-violence stance during its anti-sealing work and how it could take a lead in addressing its legacy of harm against sealers, their families, and communities in Newfoundland and Labrador. Greenpeace was given an opportunity for a right of reply, but it passed on it. CBC The Broadcast also reached out to Greenpeace Canada after my interview with them about my research, once again, silence.

My research into the anti-sealing movement and its impact on rural and coastal peoples opened my eyes to the depth of the impact that environmental and animal rights

organizations can play in situations of cultural violence and the severity of the impact on my home and culture. My existing and forthcoming publications aim to push the discussion on the legacy of the anti-sealing movement and inspire more critical consideration of the impact of activism on vulnerable peoples and challenge our thinking on the subject of tolerance for alternative cultures and traditions.

My argument that the experience with and repercussions of the anti-sealing movement for rural and coastal peoples amounts to cultural violence may be contested, but there is no denying that the legacy of the anti-sealing movement looms large, especially in the North American North. By extension, the legacy and repercussions of the wave of anti-sealing protests for peoples in the circumpolar North and beyond negatively impacts these peoples' willingness to trust and their perceptions of legitimacy for many environmental and animal rights organizations, whether they have direct connections to the movement or not.

If you would like to read more about my research on the impact and legacy of the anti-sealing movement on rural and coastal peoples and on perceptions of activism by environmental and animal rights organizations in the circumpolar North, you can learn more in my two forthcoming books: *Cultural Violence, Stigma and the Legacy of the Anti-Sealing Movement* (Burke, in press) and *WWF and Arctic Environmentalism: Conservationism and the ENGO in the Circumpolar North* (Burke, in press).

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