



SEALED OFF!



FHM GOES UNDERCOVER ON NAMIBIA'S SKELETON COAST TO
REPORT ON ONE OF THE LARGEST AND MOST
CONTROVERSIAL WILDLIFE SLAUGHTERS ON EARTH >

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Francois Hugo (pictured) from Seal Alert SA questions the legality of the seal cull



It is now all but impossible to film the seal cull in Namibia. For anyone contemplating a filming or protest mission: the army will be ready for you.

Anyone caught will be beaten up, arrested and thrown into one of the worst prisons in all of Africa. You enter at your own peril." This was the warning sent out by marine wildlife conservation group Sea Shepherd to animal-rights activists just days before the annual seal cull started in Namibia in July this year.

By the time you read this, roughly 91 000 Cape fur seals – 85 000 nursing pups and 6 000 adult bulls – will have been bludgeoned to death in a protected nature reserve near Cape Cross, home of the largest Cape fur seal colony in the world. Namibia's much-publicised seal-clubbing season lasts for 139 days, from 1 July to 15 November, every year; the world's largest mass slaughter of marine mammals. Eighty-one underpaid, government-employed sealers wield clubs in an indiscriminate frenzy that starts every morning at 6am and ends at 9am.

BROKEN SEALS

The seal pups, barely seven months old, are beaten over the head with a club before having their arteries severed.

Death is "instantaneous" and "humane", claims the Namibian Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources, which sponsors the notorious seal slaughter. Bulldozers scoop up the carcasses while others churn up the blood-soaked beach, throwing a sandy blanket over the grisly scene before 9am when the beach opens and the tour buses arrive laden with tourists from all over the world who flock to see and photograph these animals in their natural habitat.

Away from the beach, the dead seals are skinned, the pelts from the pups are packed into barrels of salty brine and shipped off to Turkey, where they are turned into coats that sell for

upwards of R230 000 each. The bulls' penises are dried and marketed as an aphrodisiac – each worth almost R4 000 in Asia. To many, clubbing vast numbers of baby seals in the name of fashion and superstition is the ultimate act of barbarism, a slaughter of unthinkable proportions. To the Namibian government it's a harvest, necessary to preserve dwindling fish stocks and create employment.

DEBATING DEATH

The argument has raged for years, and each year the anger on both sides grows, so much so that this year the Namibian government deployed its special forces to guard the culling site, banning all media from trying to visit the blood-stained

A FILMMAKER AND A JOURNALIST WERE BEATEN AND JAILED...

sands. Two years ago a filmmaker and a journalist were beaten by the clubbers and thrown in jail for attempting to film the cruel harvest, so flouting their own media freedom laws is nothing new.

What is new, is that the world has taken notice and international pressure on Namibia to kill the cull is increasing. Several countries, including the US, have begun boycotting Namibian products, leading analysts to warn that if the cull continues it may cost the country millions in lost taxes. Then there are the lost tourist dollars, as visitors are repelled by the negative publicity, as well as the additional cost of deploying military units to keep prying eyes away from harvest sites.

A comprehensive new study by international welfare organisations reveals that ironically, Namibia's seals are worth much more alive than they are dead. As much as 300 per cent more. Seal products generate about R3,7 million a year for the Namibian economy, seal-based eco-tourism could generate R12,5 million. The cull creates relatively few jobs, and with the backlash against it gathering momentum, why does it continue? Namibia's Minister of Fisheries, Bernhard Esau, claims that the seals consume 900 000 tons of fish a year. "We are not against the presence of seals in our waters, we just want to control matters so that we are not caught off guard," says Esau, ignoring the fact that, legally speaking, the government

has no jurisdiction over the seals when they are on land.

The Namibian government's figures don't add up. "Since independence, the government increased its annual fishing harvest... without doing any sustainability studies," confirms Pat Dickens, founder of The Seals Of Nam an organisation that "brings the stench of the Namibian massacre to the nostrils of an indignant world." "This is a blatant case of gross mismanagement of resources based on economic greed." Sixty per cent of the world's seal pelts go through just one man: notorious international sealskin trader Hatem Yavuz, a Turkish-born businessman living in Australia. Paying a mere R50 a

Animal rights activists claim the cull violates Namibia's anti-cruelty laws



FUR BY NUMBERS



6-8 seal skins to make an average-sized jacket

270 thousand seals culled in Canada this year

2+ number of blows it takes to kill a bull seal

11 months for a baby seal to be weaned off its mother

8 months – average age a baby seal is killed for its fur

47 million animals killed yearly for fur (including raccoons, rabbits, foxes, minks and chinchillas)

*Info from infuraction.com, Sea Shepherd, Fur Free South Africa



The harvest of seal pelts makes only a handful of people rich – all Namibia's pelts are bought by one Turkish guy

pelt, he has the contract to buy every skin from the seal slaughter until 2019. Describing himself as an “animal lover”, he is unrepentant about his business. One of his Facebook comments reads: “If humanity stops killing each other, maybe then the actions against furriers and animal killing may be justified. Think about it. For the sake of humanity, try spending your money and time protesting Gaza.”

In an attempt to see for ourselves, *FHM* decided to join two protest groups in Namibia, making our way from South Africa, through Botswana and into Nam. We'd heard reports of cars being stopped and searched for film equipment, so we hid our gear in cooler boxes, inside sleeping bags and under seats. We headed to Henties Bay, a creepy little desert town straight out of *From Dusk Till Dawn*. Here we met with other protesters who'd flown to Namibia from all around the world to protest the cull. Amongst them Earthrace Conservation Group's controversial front man Pete Bethune.

RIGHTS ON!

Kiwi Pete is one of the most hardcore animal-rights activists on the planet and his hands-on methods have been

criticised by a number of animal-welfare organisations. Last year he spent five months in a Japanese jail for boarding a Japanese whaling vessel and attempting to lay a citizen's arrest on the ship's captain.

The famous Sea Shepherd were there as well. Their strategy was to obtain footage depicting the brutality of the Namibian sealers, others were there just to protest the cull, kick up a stink, and ultimately we all planned to parade a dead seal outside the parliament buildings in Windhoek while dressed in “death” outfits.

The air thick with tension, we spoke to some of the locals about the cull, who – rather than being the club-wielding savages we'd envisaged – turned out to be fairly friendly folk. The majority supported their government's stance, viewing seals as fish-hungry mounds of barking blubber. One shopkeeper who specialises in selling seal products (fur coats, keyrings and shoes) complained “I don't see what the fuss is about! All over the world people kill animals for their skin and fur. Yet everyone has gone crazy about what happens here. It makes no sense!” One former fisherman – turned abalone farmer – Johannes Erasmus,



said: “A lot of ‘green’ people protest the culling of seals, but somewhere you need a balance between the seals and the fish. Culling is not a nice thing, but what is more important: feeding people or saving seals?”

But the longer we stayed in the area the more volatile the situation became. Twice our car was searched by police. Once we were tailed through the desert by a truck full of seal clubbers. Then news filtered through that Sea Shepherd's camera, disguised as a rock, had been found at the cull site. The government's response was to deploy additional army

units and three military ships at Cape Cross. We became paranoid and stopped using cellphones in case they were being tapped. We wiped all our hard drives of photos, footage and research in case our pozzie was raided. The rented house that the Sea Shepherd okes were using as a base was “burgled” while a crew member was still inside. The final straw was when the nationalities of the protest groups and our location were released to the public.

THE NEW WAR IN NAM

It was time to get the hell out of Namibia. We guess that Sea Shepherd’s beach stakeout was detected through the aid of thermal imaging used by offshore naval patrol boats. Soldiers were dispatched. Using night-vision equipment, the Sea Shepherd activists retreated through the desert to their vehicles and drove without headlights until they reached the South African border, but not before Namibian President Hifikepunye Pohamba declared them a “threat to national security”.

Elsewhere, another mini war was raging, this one between the Namibian government and Seal Alert SA, the organisation leading the way in calling for a ban on seal culling. Its founder, Francois Hugo, recently commissioned his attorney to provide an opinion on the laws governing the cull. The findings showed the actions of the Namibian government to be “unlawful, unsustainable and cruel, and in violation of the Constitution and the Convention



Anti-seal cull protesters gather outside Namibia’s parliament buildings in Windhoek

issued shortly after their escape from Namibia.

In an unexpected development, the Namibian ombudsman, who has the power to end the slaughter, invited those who’d been forced to flee the country a few weeks before to a closed-door meeting in Windhoek to submit scientific and legal evidence against the continuation of the cull. The ombudsman must report his findings and decision by September 2012, only after next year’s seal slaughter.

Deputy Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources Titus Lilende

GREEDY NON-NAMIBIAN CITIZENS PROFIT AT NAMIBIANS’ EXPENSE”

on the International Trade in Endangered Species”, which, as far back as 1977, listed the Cape fur seal as a potentially threatened species (ironically making a seal pelt worth more money.)

Prime Minister Nahas Angula responded to these claims curtly. “Normally for something to be illegal it needs to be declared [illegal] by a court of law.” But Hugo claims the sealers are clearly violating Namibia’s anti-cruelty laws. “Footage taken undercover clearly shows starving, extremely weak and thin endangered Cape fur seal pups being cruelly goaded, ill-treated, terrified and tortured by sealers.

“We must point the international spotlight of condemnation on the small group of greedy non-Namibian citizens who are profiting at the expense of innocent Namibian citizens as well as marine life,” asserted Sea Shepherd’s Captain Paul Watson, in a press release

maintains, quite simply, that the seals should always be culled because they eat fish, which affects his fisheries – though, of course, this also neatly spares him from explaining his ministry’s role in allowing many years of overfishing. He also accuses animal welfare groups of doctoring their seal cull footage.

Sea Shepherd has pledged an annual amount of 30 000 British pounds (about R369 000) towards job creation in sustained seal tourism if Namibia agrees to stop killing its precious seals.

For the people at the top, those fortunate few making the real killing in the trade of seal products, there is too much money at stake for them to just walk away from the industry. And animal welfare groups campaigning for an end to the cull have all vowed that they will not cease their efforts until the “unsustainable seal genocide” has ended. ★

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4 SEALS SAFE FROM CULLING

GRAMMY SEAL
Seal (musician. Married to über-babe Heidi Klum). His pelt would not be worth the R50 because of damage caused by Discoid Lupus disease.

STRIKER SEAL
David Seal (Ozzie football striker, played for Melksham Town in the UK). His pelt looks well preserved.

MILKMAN SEAL
James “Jimmy” Seal (York City’s top goal-scorer for the 1974/75 season. He’s now a milkman.) His pelt looks a bit wrinkled.

SONG SEAL
Manuel Seal Jr (hip-hop / R&B songwriter. Wrote Mariah Carey’s *We Belong Together*). His pelt would make a great handbag.




PHOTOGRAPHS: GALLO IMAGES/GETTY, SCOTT BOWMAN, INPRA