



Seal Wars

A businessman living in Sydney is facing international condemnation for his role in what has been dubbed “the biggest wildlife slaughter on earth.” An undercover team heads into Namibia with a team of antipodean animal rights activists to bring us this report

By Aaron Gekoski

NAMIBIA'S SKELETON COAST is as harsh and inhospitable a region as its ominous name would suggest. Here, the baking desert meets the full force of the Atlantic Ocean. This is a virtually untouched region of captivating beauty and mystery. It is also a land of extremities; dense fog and sea breezes prevail, yet rainfall rarely exceeds 10 millimetres per year. And despite covering an area of nearly two million hectares, the Skeleton Coast is one of the least-visited parts of Africa. However, to around 700,000 Cape fur seals, this place is home.

The fate of Namibia's Cape fur seals, *Arctocephalus pusillus*, is currently one of the most contentious wildlife issues around. This year, up to 85,000 pups and 6,000 adults are to be culled along this coastline. The pups, barely seven months old, are to be beaten over the head with a club before being stabbed in the heart and left to bleed. Death, the government insists is “instantaneous”. Opponents to the cull condemn this method, claiming the animals are beaten repeatedly, a clear breach of Namibia's anti-cruelty laws.

The culling season ran for 139 days from July to November. Taking place during one lethal hour each morning, 81 clubbers wielded their clubs, delivering indiscriminate blows. As they completed their morning's work, bulldozers scooped up the carcasses and churned up the bloody beach, throwing a sandy blanket over the grisly scene. The dead seals were driven off to be skinned, before the pup's fur is soaked in brine and sent to Turkey. Here they are turned into fur coats, which sell for up to \$30,000 USD. The bulls' penises are removed; the only part of the animal that is utilised. These are used to create an aphrodisiac and command approximately \$500 USD each on the Asian market.

Growing Anger

Back at the colony, the gates were then opened to tourists who obliviously photographed the remaining seals, as thousands of mothers' grieved for their lost pups. To many, clubbing baby seals to death is the ultimate act of barbarism; a *slaughter* of

unthinkable proportions. To the Namibian government it is a harvest, necessary to preserve dwindling fish stocks and create employment. This argument has been raging for some time now. And with every passing year, each side gets angrier, so much so that this year the government deployed their Special Forces to guard the culling site.

In an effort to divert attention away from these beaches, the government also banned all journalists from the cull site. Just two years ago, a filmmaker and a journalist were beaten by the clubbers and thrown in jail for attempting to film the harvest without a permit. This year, anyone who infiltrated the site might not be so lucky. A statement from marine conservation group Sea Shepherd warned: “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, arrested and thrown into one of the worst prisons in all of Africa. You enter at your own peril.”

Along with my friend and colleague filmmaker Chris Scarffe, I gingerly made the 4,000km trip from our home in Mozambique, through South Africa, across Botswana and towards Namibia. We'd heard reports of cars being stopped and searched for film equipment, so we packed all gear into cool boxes, under sleeping bags and seats. We navigated the border and headed to our rental house in Henties Bay, the nearest town to the cull site. Here, we stayed with a group of Kiwis who had travelled to Namibia to protest the cull.

The crew had been assembled by Earthrace Conservation Group's founder Pete Bethune. New Zealander Pete is one of the most hardcore animal rights activists on earth: just last year he was imprisoned for five months in Japan for boarding a whaling vessel and attempting a citizen's arrest on the captain. The protest group's ultimate goal was to parade a dead seal

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outside of the parliament buildings in Windhoek whilst dressed in 'death' outfits.

Cost of the Cull

With each passing year, pressure grows on Namibia's government to cease the harvest. The country's reputation, once a shining beacon amongst the darkness that surrounds it, is taking a clubbing. Countries including the US are now boycotting Namibian products. Analysts warn that continued culling may cost the country millions in lost taxes. And then there are the lost tourist dollars, as visitors are repelled by the negative publicity, plus the cost of deploying additional military units to monitor the harvesting sites.

When the cull only generates just over \$100,000 USD in revenue for the government (yet up to 300% more in the form of eco-tourism), creates so few jobs for local people, and with a backlash gathering momentum, why does it continue? The 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", said Esau.

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To some however, the Namibian government's figures don't add up. "Since independence, the government increased its annual fishing harvest...without doing any sustainability studies" said Pat Dickens, founder of Seals of Nam. "They are not doing this to protect fisheries. This is a blatant case of gross mismanagement of resources based on economic greed".

Whilst seal numbers have fallen, the cull has now become the second largest in the world, after Canada. Although the rationale for the slaughter rests largely on claims that it benefits locals, 90% of the world's seal pelts go through one foreigner: Hatem Yavuz. Yavuz is a Turkish-born businessman, currently operating out of Sydney. Paying US\$7 per pelt, he has the contract to buy every skin resulting from the seal slaughter until 2019. Describing himself as an "animal lover," Yavuz is unrepentant about his business, making fur coats commonly sold for US\$30,000 each. One of his Facebook comments read: "If humanity stops killing each other, maybe then the actions against furriers and animal killing maybe justified. You think about it. For the sake of humanity, try spending your money and time protesting Gaza."

Food Wars

We spoke to some of the local people about the cull, the majority of who supported their government's stance. One shopkeeper who specialised in seal products such as fur coats, key rings and shoes told me: "I don't see what the fuss is about. All over the world we kill animals for their skin and fur. Yet everyone has gone crazy about what happens here, it makes no sense". The fishermen seemed to agree. One former fisherman, Johannes Erasmus, said: "A lot of 'green' people protest against the culling of seals, but somewhere you need a balance between the seals and the fish.

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Culling is not a nice thing, but what is more important: feeding the people or saving the seals?"

The longer we stayed in the area, the tenser situation became. Twice, our car was thoroughly searched by police. Luckily we had ditched our film gear at a local hotel. Once we were tailed through the desert by a truck full of seal clubbers. News filtered through that a camera disguised as a rock had been found at the site. The government's response was to deploy additional army units and three military ships at Cape Cross. And then the final straw: the nationalities of the protest group and location we were staying was released to the public. It was time to leave the area.

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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. Its founder, Francois Hugo, recently commissioned his attorney to provide an opinion on the laws surrounding the cull. The findings showed the harvest to be "unlawful, unsustainable and cruel, and in violation of the constitution and the International Trade in Endangered Species Convention [sic]." The Prime Minister responded to these claims curtly: "Normally for something to be illegal, it needs to be declared by a court of law."

Cruel Quota

Hugo would argue otherwise. He claims that the sealers are clearly in breach of Namibia's Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of 1962: and now he has the footage, taken by an unidentified group to prove it. "Footage taken undercover clearly shows starving, extremely weak and thin endangered Cape fur seal pups being cruelly goaded, ill-treated, infuriated, terrified and tortured by





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- *Arctocephalus pusillus*: Cape Fur Seal
- *Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*: Australian Fur Seal



sealers in which these baby seal pups are forced to run towards seal clubbers who are then repeatedly beating them to death."

Again the government responded, this time raising the cull quota for next year. "We will continue harvesting seals...I'm going to issue new rights to people who've applied to harvest seals, and with that the quota of seals will also increase to create more direct jobs for the seal industry and indirectly for the fishing industry," said Esau.

Major protests in cities such as Brisbane and throughout the world seem to be having little impact. And regardless of threats to boycott Namibian products and regardless of the harm the cull is doing to the country's reputation, the government appears to be standing firm. To them, the harvest creates jobs and remains an essential way of controlling seal populations, which are threatening the livelihood of Namibians. Yet animal welfare organisations and individuals like Bethune and Hugo, who refer to it as "illegal seal genocide", are persistent. "One way or another, it has to stop", Hugo told me. "At this rate, soon there won't be any seals left for them to kill." [SDAA](#)

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