

InfoNorth

An Interview with Documentary Filmmaker Anne Troake: Reflecting on Anti-sealing Activism and its Impact on Rural Coastal Peoples in Canada

by Danita Catherine Burke

THE ANTI-SEALING CAUSE PIONEERED in the late 1960s, and ongoing to this day, is arguably the environmental and animal rights cause that defines the 20th century environmentalist movement (Allen, 1979; Dauvergne and Neville, 2011; Phelps Bondaroff and Burke, 2014). Decades of carefully crafted media and image events, cultivated repertoires of photos and films clips, and masterfully orchestrated and placed interviews and opinion pieces by activists all merged into a crescendo of vilification directed at rural sealers, their families, and community members to the point of a dehumanization in much of the national and international press and discourse in urban society in mainland Canada, the United States, and Western Europe (Dauvergne and Neville, 2011). The peoples and cultures caught in the crossfire between activists and their self-anointed moral cause of ending seal hunting are largely ignored, devalued, and shunned by anti-sealing activists and their supporters (Burke, 2020, 2021).

Enter Anne Troake. Troake is a Newfoundlander born in the rural northeast coast community of Twillingate. With generations of her family and fellow community members who are part of Newfoundland and Labrador's seasonal fisheries, Troake has used her talents as a filmmaker and artist to help represent those silenced and harmed by activists. Drawing upon her experiences as a Newfoundlander with direct connections to sealing, Troake is now one of the most articulate and well-recognized voices in the counter-activist movement on the sealing issue. This interview provides readers with a glimpse into Troake's point of view on what led to the substantial and ongoing experiences of cultural and economic harm stemming from the conduct and messaging of anti-sealing activists. Troake's insights also suggest that the activists may have inadvertently helped to preserve and entrench the visceral identity and cultural connection between the peoples of Newfoundland and Labrador and sealing practices and heritage by inflicting a shared, collective experience of violence and a need for survival for local peoples on a previously unknown scale.

Q: What is your connection to seal hunting in Newfoundland and Labrador and how has this influenced your career?

A: I was born in Twillingate, an island community off the northeast coast of Newfoundland. Seal hunting has been an integral part of the annual nutrition cycle that has enabled human habitation in that area for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Newfoundland has a short summer, volatile weather, and very little topsoil. There is a familiar phrase from this area: "The hungry month of March." This saying refers to the end of winter when stores of food had been depleted; a time when the likelihood of malnutrition and starvation was at its highest. This coincided with the arrival of migrating harp seals on the spring ice flows. Harp seal meat happens to have a broad enough nutritional profile that, unlike other wild meats, can sustain humans for a very long period of time in terms of survival; the hunting of seals for food comprised a sort of make or break factor for human habitation.

Further, the economics of pre-21st century outpost communities relied on a summer fishery. In many ways, those communities functioned within a cashless economy, but fishers needed to purchase supplies in late winter/early spring. The ability to sell seal pelts for money enabled them to obtain gear and supplies so they could fish. Effectively, if it were not for seal hunting, I and my family would not be here.

As a young person I was always interested in social justice and the seal hunt controversy was the impetus for my eventually becoming a documentary filmmaker. After high school I did two years at Memorial University where I got involved with the student newspaper, *The Muse*. This overtook my studies and in my second year I served as editor of the paper. There was a strong focus on activism in student journalism at the time and that was where I wrote my first feature piece on seal hunt protest tactics. I then moved to Toronto to study contemporary dance. I worked for nearly ten years as a dancer and choreographer before moving home in the early 1990s. I made a dance show called "The sinking: Stories of cold water" that centered on my grandmother's stories of the presence and influence of the North Atlantic in our lives and culture. Seal hunting figured in that show. I shot a series

of underwater sequences with dancers and shipwrecks for the show, and this became a short film that did well on the film festival circuit. This show and subsequent dance films gave me enough credit as a filmmaker for the National Film Board of Canada to contract me to make my film about seal hunting, *My Ancestors Were Rogues and Murderers*.

Q: What are you trying to achieve in your work on the history and importance of sealing practices and traditions? Who do you hope to reach with your work on sealing?

A: My impulse to enter the public conversation on seal hunting was primarily a reactive one. I grew up with the unquestioned vilification in print and on television of seal hunters as intellectually and morally deficient brutes taking out their violent impulses on innocent seals. I also witnessed a broadly held but inaccurate assumption that harp seals were endangered. There was very little public information that countered these claims. I knew that the people of Twillingate who were involved in seal hunting lived in a very self-sufficient, ecologically light-footed way. The community itself was collectively and collaboratively oriented and the sharing of labour, food, and other resources was central to its function. This is a far cry from the sort of individualism that is normalized today. As a person concerned about sustainability and about animal welfare, I wanted the world to know about this way of life, and I wanted to address the slanderous propaganda that was being produced and disseminated by wealthy urban animal rights and environmental groups.

Q: Why is sealing important to the identity and history of Newfoundland and Labrador, especially in rural coastal communities?

A: Sealing is important to the identity and history of Newfoundland and Labrador because of our aforementioned life and death dependency on the presence of seals in the ecosystem. It's also a point of pride in our ability to survive in a harsh environment. Going onto the ice floes, particularly off the northeast coast where weather and sea conditions are extremely volatile, is dangerous. You need to know your environment and its complex elements. You need to be able to read the behaviours of those elements and respond appropriately in order to succeed and to remain safe. This requires skills and knowledge. Even with those, there is still loss of life, and many families have lost loved ones to that tough environment. When something is costly, there is an inherent element of value, so not only has seal hunting been a marker of the ingenuity of the people in this place, it marks a bond to the land and sea that is inherent to our unique culture, which has been, in part, shaped by our environment.

Q: Why do you think sealing became such a controversial issue in the mid-20th century?

A: I think that sealing became controversial in the mid-20th century primarily because that is when television sets really became commonplace. The rise of the seal hunt protest industry coincided with the increasingly ubiquitous presence of moving images. Anti-sealing depends almost entirely on the visual particulars of the hunt. As we more frequently came to learn about the world through moving images on screens, the conditions for the anti-sealing industry to spin stories about rural people and our way of life were established.

Q: Who do you think the anti-sealing narratives from organizations like the International Fund for Animal Welfare, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Sea Shephard, and others over the years, such as Greenpeace, represent? And why do you think they have been so popular over the decades?

A: Those narratives represent people who do not live and work in rural areas, who are not involved directly in the harvesting or production of what is on their dinner table, and whose lives are only incidentally shaped and affected by an environment that is not human built. And I can understand the appeal of anti-sealing narratives to an imagination shaped by an urban environment.

To the uneducated eye, seal hunting looks brutal. Imagine the visual scenario in the context of villain-victim-hero narratives that have been predominant in our mythologies and particularly in Hollywood storytelling: we have pristine white ice, large-eyed animals who, due to the natural secretion of protective fluids in those big eyes, appear to be weeping. The facial morphology of seals resembles the morphology of Disney characters (the morally "good" ones), or anime characters, so there is a high likelihood of the viewer identifying with that face. Despite white coat seals not being hunted for over half a century, they still feature in much of the propaganda, so now our protagonist is also white, signaling its innocence. Then we see a comparatively large figure (the hunter), likely with their face covered against the cold, bludgeon the head of the beautiful, weeping innocent character. The instant brain death that occurs when a seal is clubbed triggers a neuro-reflex that looks as if the animal is writhing in pain. The sealer then opens the arteries under the animal's flippers in order to bleed it quickly, so there is a lot of blood pouring from our innocent victim onto that clean white background. As visually-oriented animals ourselves, we react instinctively to image. This apparent victim-villain scenario begs the presence of the hero, a role that animal rights corporations purport to fill in their propaganda. The fact that the swim reflex indicating brain death and a rapid bleed out are signs of good animal welfare is very difficult to impress upon anyone, let alone those who are unfamiliar with the process of death and dying that are inherent to any

and all ecosystems. So it's a very easy, low investment–high return position to take, standing against what, to the inexperienced and uneducated, looks like an atrocity, but is in fact ethically sound both ecologically and in terms of minimizing animal suffering.

Q: To what extent do you think anti-sealing activists and their supporters have impacted the fishing economy and cultural practices and heritage in Newfoundland and Labrador?

A: The greatest “achievement” of the anti-sealing industry has been the 2009 import ban on seal products to the European Common Market. Speaking with sealers before the EU ban, most estimated that seal hunting accounted for one third of their annual income as fishers. If you take any small community, let alone one with as precarious an economy as the small towns and villages in Newfoundland and Labrador, remove 33% of the income potential from the majority of employed persons, that can only have a detrimental effect. For many people working in the fishery, the job choices are joining a long-liner crew or going to work as a labourer in the Alberta tar sands or other extractive industries.

The negative economic impacts of undermining inshore sealing necessitates greater dependence on summer tourism, which on the surface might appear relatively benign, but it forces our communities into a dependence on global mobility and its entwinement with fossil fuel use as well as casting us and our towns in a performative role wherein we must also depend on fulfilling the curiosity and comfort requirements of vacationers. So on one hand, the loss of sealing serves up more desperate workers to big industry and on the other, it casts rural Newfoundlanders and Labradorians as the piper in the old adage “He who pays the piper calls the tune.” We lose members of our communities to migrant work and we are dependent on the interest of tourists in consuming a commoditized version of our culture.

Q: The European Union banned seal products imports into the Common Market in 2009 on the basis of moral objection to seal hunting, despite European markets being the driving force behind the demand for seal products from Newfoundland and Labrador and Canada since the 1700s. The European Union has made a narrow exception for seal products stemming from Indigenous traditional subsistence hunting, which must be applied for and guidelines followed. What do you think the implications are of the moral framing of acceptable and non-acceptable sealing on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous sealing societies?

A: The implication of an action being morally acceptable for one racial or ethnic group and not for another is both troubling and, in this case, ironic. This sort of arbitrary moral division is reminiscent of the original rationale

for colonizing what is now known as the Americas. Shepard Krech, in his (1999) book, *The Ecological Indian* identifies the way Europeans constructed “Indians” in two polarized stereotypes: the noble savage and the ignoble savage. These stereotypes, convenient tools for the colonial project, are reiterated in this distinction put forth in the exemption clause to the EU ban. The law allows northern Indigenous people to hunt seals, but only for subsistence. If an Inuit hunter sells pelts and by doing so enters the contemporary economy, they are, in the conceptual framework of this law, crossing line from noble to ignoble savage. It's a law that impairs the function of northern economies in the same way closing markets to non-Indigenous communities has done. Given the ongoing food security challenges for many Arctic dwellers and northern residents more broadly, to accept the killing of an animal for food on one hand but to disable people from selling pelts to purchase provisions on the other is both socio-economically dysfunctional and ethically incoherent.

Q: What do you think the future holds for sealing traditions and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador?

A: I think that, as long as it is legal to hunt seals for food, Newfoundlanders and Labradorians will do so. For those of us who are familiar with seal meat, it is a high quality, delicious, nutritious, and sustainable local food source. Since the EU ban, we have seen an upsurge in local production and purchasing of seal skin products. In many ways the injury of the ban has solidified the seal pelts and meat as signifiers of our unique identity. Another factor is the rampant growth of both harp and grey seal populations and their impact on fish species. Humane sealing practices, in the case of a management intervention strategy, would be key, so it's likely that skilled and knowledgeable sealers would be called upon in that context.

Q: How has your work on sealing impacted your life? What has your experience been with anti-sealing activists.

A: After my documentary *My Ancestors Were Rogues and Murderers* was released in 2005, there was pushback. The film was initially rejected by film festivals outside of Atlantic Canada. I received phone calls in the middle of the night issuing death threats and in one case a man called repeatedly and just growled. One night a car pulled up in front of my home and someone threw a brick through my window. This predates the days of social media, and doxing [publishing personal information about people with malicious intent] had not emerged as the commonplace phenomenon it is today. Paul Watson called me “inbred,” said that Newfoundlanders debased Canada when we joined the country, and compared sealers to the soldiers of

the Third Reich. I am also aware that Newfoundland sealers have been described by another leading activist as malignantly inbred, sadistic, cowardly wastes of human skin, and my film as pure fantasy.

Despite the absurdity of this hyperbole, that was a very stressful period. But I'm happy to say that the film has enjoyed a long life. It was used as an educational tool in the Canadian government's efforts to halt the passage of the EU ban and is still shown in media, cultural, and animal studies programs around the world.

As for anti-sealing activists, I have found that even with rational debate, people seem to hold to their moral stance. In one case after a three-day period of patiently debating the ethics of hunting for food with a media-maker from Montreal, he concluded "I know logically that I am wrong, but I still believe what I believe." I will never forget that. This sort of adherence to dogma in the face of evidence becomes even more frustrating in the case of Canada's Green Party and their former leader Elizabeth May (who may be their leader again at the moment) who served for some time on the advisory board for the Sea Shepherd Society. I was in Iqaluit in 2012 and learned of a meeting between May and then Mayor Madeleine Redfern. Redfern offered May a gift of some seal skin jewelry, seals being of central importance to Inuit culture and identity. May would not wear the jewelry. Beyond the bald rudeness of May's

refusal to accept the honour of wearing such a powerful emblem of Inuit culture, for the leader of a federal party that purports to promote a sustainable future for all Canadians, standing against seal hunting is not a coherent position.

Despite all of this, I still have faith in the dissemination of factual information. In other instances, I have found that people were very grateful to hear another side to the story of outport people as cartoon brutes and that for many people, coming to a conclusion beyond a simplistic good versus evil scenario is very satisfying.

Q: What are your future plans with regard to work on highlighting under-represented voices in the sealing debate?

A: I hope to make an essay-based documentary on visual imagery and anti-hunting activism. It will pivot on the problem with how humane hunting tends to read to the inexperienced viewer. I hope it will function as a sort of primer for interpreting images of animal slaughter and also offer some insight into the wider ethical questions surrounding the hunting of wild animals. I intend to underscore the position that, while nobody has to hunt if they don't want to, the hunting of wild species can be a facet of a respectful, sustainable, and ethical way of being in the world.

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