Activists Revive Canada Seal Hunt Protest

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
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NEW YORK (AP) -- Escalating a sporadic, 35-year-old protest campaign, opponents of Canada's seal hunt are advocating a travel boycott, pushing their cause in the U.S. Senate, even recruiting Paris Hilton. Canadian officials say the tactics will fail and the hunt will continue.

"There comes a point where you just have to say, 'This is what we believe,'" said Steven Outhouse of Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans. "You can't back down every time someone says it's wrong."

The new protest initiative began after Canada last year announced a quota of 975,000 seals that could be killed off Labrador and Newfoundland through 2005. Protests are likely to intensify as the peak killing period approaches in early April.

"We oppose the hunt for two main reasons -- it's not sustainable and it's cruel," said Naomi Rose, a scientist with the Humane Society of the United States. The society denounces the hunt as "the largest commercial slaughter of wildlife anywhere."

Many countries, including the United States, ban imports of seal products, but the Canadian government has steadfastly supported the hunt to show political solidarity with hard-up coastal towns. The industry earned about $15 million last year, primarily from pelt sales to Norway, Denmark and China.

The hunt was among the earliest targets of the international animal-welfare movement, with major protests starting in 1969. Brigitte Bardot was among many celebrities backing the campaign, which claimed a victory in 1983 when Canada banned the killing of "whitecoats" -- the cute baby seals prized for their snow-white fur.

Canada curtailed the hunt, then expanded it in 1996. That triggered renewed protests led by the International Fund for Animal Welfare, which distributed grisly videos of seals being slaughtered.

Canadian officials remained unswayed, saying the hunt's importance had grown because of the North Atlantic cod fishery's collapse. They also say the region's harp seals are far from endangered -- now numbering an estimated 5.2 million.

The Humane Society now has taken out full-page newspaper ads urging Americans to consider canceling trips to Canada and boycotting Canadian products. In the Senate, Carl Levin, D-Mich., introduced a resolution demanding that the hunt cease. And at this month's Sundance Film Festival, Paris Hilton posed in an anti-hunt sweatshirt -- "Club Sandwiches, Not Seals" -- and signed a protest letter to the Canadian Embassy.

Tina Fagan, who heads the Canadian Sealers Association, derided such use of celebrities. "They're just using it just to generate their own publicity," she said.

Fagan's association, which represents about 6,000 sealers and has received government funding, says it supports efforts to reduce brutality.

"The protest groups will never go away as long as they can make a few bucks off it," Fagan said. "We'll never say we've won the battle, but we say the pressure has been dropping; we want to make sure we don't give them an issue."

The level of brutality is among many disputed aspects of the hunt. Canadian authorities acknowledge the hunt is bloody -- sealers use guns and clubs -- but contend that 98 percent of harp seals are killed in "an acceptably humane manner."

Animal-rights groups, however, contend that 40 percent of the seals are skinned alive, most less than three months old and not self-sufficient.

"There are so many boats spread over vast spaces of ocean, there's no way the government could enforce its rules even if it wanted to," said Rebecca Aldworth, Montreal-based seal coordinator for the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

Protest organizer, John Grundy, said he hopes -- and indeed, expects -- the hunt will be over before there's need for activists to urge a boycott of the 2010 Olympics in British Columbia. But an end to seal season is far from certain.

Canada last month got its first new prime minister in 10 years when Paul Martin succeeded Jean Chretien, but no top officials in their governing Liberal Party have spoken out against the hunt.

Protesters "can advertise until they're blue in the face, and its not going to change the government's opinion," said Outhouse, the fisheries spokesman.

Jasmine Panthaky, a Canadian Embassy spokeswoman in Washington, said Canada has attempted, as yet unsuccessfully, to ease the U.S. ban on seal products.

"For many people, the idea of a seal hunt is abhorrent," she said. "For us, for many Canadian communities, it's a way of life."