CHAPTER 3

The Narrated ‘Other’ – Challenging Inuit Sustainability through the European Discourse on the Seal Hunt

Nikolas Sellheim*

Abstract

With the adoption of EU Regulation 1007/2009 on trade in seal products in September 2009 the EU effectively shut down its markets for products from commercial seal hunts. Products from Inuit and other indigenous hunts are exempt from this ban. Given the ineffectiveness of this ‘indigenous exemption’ Inuit organizations and others launched several unsuccessful legal proceedings before the EU Courts to overturn the ban.

The indigenous exemption is built on the discursive notion of ‘good’ indigenous versus ‘bad’ commercial seal hunts. This paper examines what narratives prevail in the discourse surrounding the seal hunt and how far they are built on knowledge of hunting and living conditions of Inuit communities. It further examines how far these narratives are built on stereotypes and clichés, and constitute a paternalistic paradigm. Parallels are drawn between Inuit seal hunts and commercial seal hunts in Newfoundland where non-indigenous hunters engage in seal hunts discursively labelled as ‘bad’. While both hunts contribute to community sustainability, only selected elements are considered, are narrated, by the discourse on the seal hunt.

1 Introduction

For many decades the hunt for seals has led to numerous campaigns, which aim to expose its perceived cruelty. Further, a lack of necessity has underscored a need for its cessation. While in the early years no clear-cut distinction was drawn between the commercial hunts in Atlantic Canada and the hunts in

* Nikolas Sellheim holds a PhD in law from the University of Lapland. His research examines the interconnection between the EU seal products trade ban and living conditions in seal hunting communities. He works furthermore as Editor for Polar Record, the journal of the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, UK. Nikolas holds a master’s degree in Polar Law from the University of Akureyri, Iceland. He has been working for the CAFF Working Group and the University of the Arctic International Secretariat and has been involved in several Arctic research projects.
Inuit communities, more recent campaigns have explicitly excluded the Inuit, or ‘subsistence’, hunt from any desired goals to shut down the trade.

In September 2009 the European Union, adopted Regulation 1007/2009 on trade in seal products (Basic Regulation),1 followed by Commission Regulation 737/2010 on implementing measures (Implementing Regulation)2 for the Basic Regulation. This occurred also due to the influence of animal welfare organizations.3 This EU seal regime has barred the European internal market from all products stemming from the commercial seal hunts. It nevertheless holds an exemption for Inuit and other indigenous communities, aiming at not affecting indigenous hunts by this trade measure.

This paper discusses the indigenous exemption taking into account some narratives that this exemption is based on. It argues that the implementation has not created a regime which benefits the Inuit people due to economic circumstances that go beyond the notion of pure ‘subsistence’. To the contrary. The understanding of the Inuit as being economically distinct from the commercial seal hunts has created a trade environment which negatively affects all trade in seal products, irrespective of its origin.

2 The EU Seal Regime

The current EU seal regime was preceded by the Council Directive 83/129/EEC of 1983, the ‘Seal Pups Directive’,4 which prohibited the trade in products stemming from harp and hooded seal pups. While initially drafted to be in force for two years, in 1989 the Directive was extended indefinitely.5 Legally it is still in force today, but has since 2009 been effectively replaced by Regulation