HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

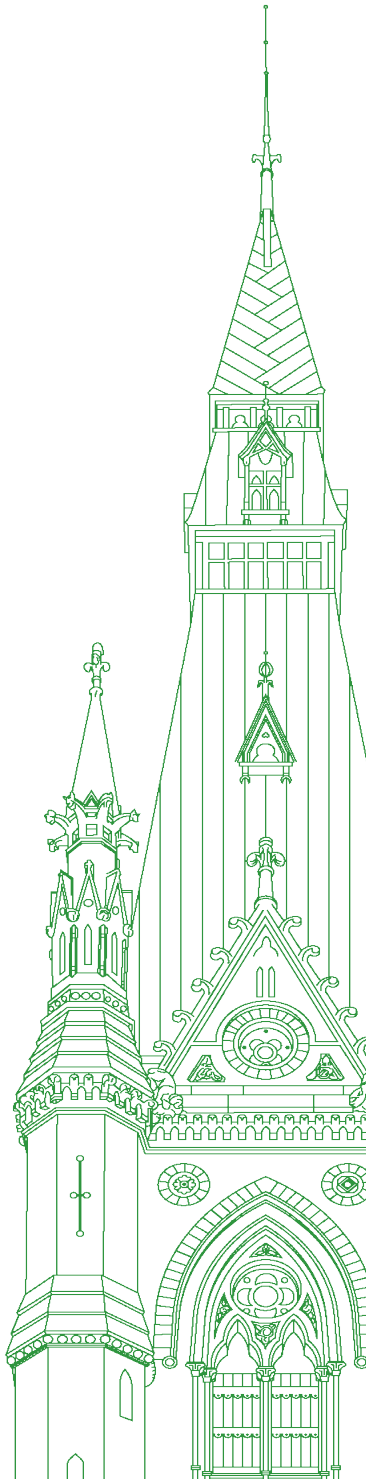
44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 056

Thursday, March 9, 2023



Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Thursday, March 9, 2023

● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 56 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans. This meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022.

Before we proceed, I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of witnesses and members. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. There is interpretation for those on Zoom. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. Please address all comments through the chair. Taking screenshots or photos of your screen is not permitted. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website.

Finally, I remind everyone that the use of a House-approved headset is mandatory for remote participation in parliamentary proceedings. If a virtual participant is not wearing an appropriate headset, interpretation cannot be provided and therefore the person will not be able to participate in the committee proceedings.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I'm informing the committee that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on January 18, 2022, the committee is commencing its study of the ecosystem impacts and the management of pinniped populations.

I would like to welcome our first panel of witnesses, from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. We have Jennifer Buie, acting director general, fisheries resource management; Mike Hammill, scientist emeritus, Quebec region; Bernard Vigneault, director general, ecosystem science directorate; Dr. Mansour, regional director, science, Newfoundland and Labrador region, by video conference; and Andrew Thomson, regional director, science, Pacific region, by video conference.

Thank you all for taking the time to appear today. You have five minutes for an opening statement and I believe Mr. Vigneault is going to provide that opening statement.

Go ahead whenever you're ready.

Dr. Bernard Vigneault (Director General, Ecosystem Science Directorate, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. It's a pleasure to be joining you here in Ottawa on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people to discuss with you the work Fisheries and Oceans is conducting on pinnipeds.

My name is Bernard Vigneault. I'm the director general responsible for ecosystem science. I'm joined today by Jennifer Buie, acting director general for the national fisheries resource management program; and Andrew Thomson on the line, the regional director for the Pacific region, for science. Atef Mansour, regional director for science for the Newfoundland region is also on the line; and here with us is Mike Hammill, scientist emeritus, who recently retired as the lead seal scientist for the Quebec region.

The department has qualified, dedicated scientists across the country, and we are continuously improving our understanding of pinniped populations and their roles in marine ecosystems. Our pinniped researchers are widely recognized, both nationally and internationally, for their expertise and leadership in the use of innovative methods to study pinnipeds' ecology.

The department currently has ongoing pinniped science activity across Canada. These surveys and assessments are conducted for the purpose of understanding the abundance, population trends and distribution. We also lead ecological studies needed to provide a better understanding of the role of pinnipeds in the ecosystem, which includes their diet.

The department is aware of the concern from the commercial fish harvesters about the impact of seals and sea lions on the fishery, recognizing that there are many factors that could contribute to the decline or lack of recovery of fish stocks. To address these concerns, the department established the Atlantic seal science task team in 2019 to gather inputs on scientific activity and programs related to seals and their role in the ecosystem in Atlantic Canada and Quebec.

The task team provided a number of recommendations in May 2022, one of which resulted in the seal summit hosted by the department and held in St. John's, Newfoundland, in November 2022.

In light of recommendations from the task team for the department to enhance the collaborative efforts with stakeholders at the summit, the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard announced funding available for scientific proposals that will improve our understanding of the role of seals in the ecosystem. These proposals are currently being reviewed. Successful applicants will be notified in the near future.

Efforts will continue to be made to advance other task team recommendations. On the west coast DFO science continues to address the recommendations from two international workshops, held in 2019, to identify the research gaps with the University of British Columbia and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Work is under way in a number of areas. There is a plan in place, in the coming year, to provide the first-ever assessment of harbour seals in Atlantic Canada and to survey Pacific harbour seals.

The department is also implementing new biological methods to study the geographic and temporal variability in the diets of pinnipeds. The department used satellite tagging to study the distribution and movement patterns and foraging behaviours of pinnipeds. The department also used animal-borne cameras to study the dietary and foraging behaviours of grey seals. In addition, the department is continuing to develop and test methods to incorporate mortality by predation from pinnipeds and other predators into the assessment of other prey species.

● (1535)

[*Translation*]

Scientific advice generated by these activities will continue to be used to inform the sustainable harvest of seals. The department recognizes the importance of a sustainable, humane, well-regulated harvest of seals, given that it supports Canada's Indigenous, rural and coastal communities and is an important economic and cultural activity in Atlantic Canada, Quebec and the Arctic.

The Department bases its management decisions using the precautionary approach. This utilizes the best available information, including peer-reviewed science and Indigenous knowledge. The ongoing harvest of seals in Atlantic Canada is not intended to be used as a population control tool, but to manage seal populations sustainably.

There are currently no commercial fisheries for seals on the west coast. Any proposals for a potential commercial pinniped fishery are assessed under the New Emerging Fisheries Policy.

So to summarize, DFO is committed to managing the seal harvest using the best available information to ensure management decisions are founded in science and evidence-based. Fisheries and Oceans Canada has a robust science program and the department's scientists are continuously improving our understanding of seal and sea lion populations and roles in marine ecosystems. The department will continue to advance its scientific research on seals and we will look at ways to further collaborate with stakeholders in science activities.

Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members for the opportunity to discuss pinnipeds with you.

My colleagues and I would be happy to take your questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. That was right on the mark for five minutes.

We'll now go to our rounds of questioning.

We will start off with Mr. Small for six minutes or less.

Mr. Clifford Small (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for coming out today and being part of our important study.

My first question is for Mr. Vigneault.

There seems to be a huge discrepancy between the estimates of what seals consume done by Norwegian scientists and those done by Canadian scientists. Basically, the Norwegians estimate seals consume double what our scientists estimate.

What are your thoughts on that?

● (1540)

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: There are several uncertainties, overall, in terms of estimating the consumption of prey by seals. This is one of many uncertainties associated with differences in season, time of sampling, specific age and relationship. We concur with the Norwegians in the overall scope. The seals are one of the key predators in the marine ecosystems, along with other groundfish, cetaceans and seabirds. The fundamental—

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Vigneault.

How much fish, in total tonnage, is consumed annually by the 10 million seals of all combined species in Atlantic Canada?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: I don't have an exact number for the tonnage, but it's a large number. It's in the order of tens of thousands of—

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Vigneault. We would take that in writing, once you get the information, if you don't mind.

Looking back at the Senate committee, Mr. Chair, Mr. Vigneault gave testimony that priority seal populations are surveyed every five years.

My question, again, is for Mr. Vigneault.

What's the current population of hooded seals?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: The hooded seal is one of the species we haven't been able to assess regularly.

We have an estimate from, if I recall correctly, more than five years ago. We are currently allocating resources to do the survey, including doing research work and using our recent harp seal survey as a source of data for hooded seals.

Mr. Clifford Small: It's been quite a while, going by the information I have here.

Do you think not having a survey of hooded seals—which are basically twice the size of harps and eat twice as much—since 2006 pays justice to conservation? Is that responsible practice, Mr. Vigneault?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: I agree that it's a significant gap in our knowledge. We are working on that.

To put things into context, there is very little harvesting of the hooded seal. Our estimate of the population is smaller than the major population of harp seals.

I agree with the member. The work is ongoing to address that gap.

Mr. Clifford Small: Again to Mr. Vigneault, what's the current population of bearded seals?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: The bearded seal population is one for which there is no commercial harvest in the Atlantic. We don't have a full estimate of—

Mr. Clifford Small: You have no idea.

What do you think the impacts of bearded seals are on the recovery of crab stocks off the Labrador coast, considering they eat mostly shellfish and are known to be big consumers of crab? Do you think it would be important to know how many bearded seals are out there?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Again, that's a gap we will address through the years.

In terms of impacts on the health of crab stocks off the Labrador coast, the stock is healthy in that area. Again, the bearded seal is one of the other predators in the marine ecosystem we have to look at when we compare the predation.

Mr. Clifford Small: That's wonderful. Thank you for your response, sir.

Andrew Thomson, the euthanizing of nuisance seals was banned by the current government in 2020 because of the fear of sanctions over non-compliance with the Marine Mammal Protection Act in the U.S.A.

Why is this the case, when Norway removes nuisance seals with no fear of similar sanctions?

● (1545)

Mr. Andrew Thomson (Regional Director, Science, Pacific Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Mr. Chair, I would respectfully suggest that it might be a better question for the fisheries management representative, Jennifer Buie.

Mr. Clifford Small: Okay.

Ms. Jennifer Buie (Acting Director General, Fisheries Resource Management, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): I think that in terms of Norway versus Canada and our approach to nuisance seals, the MMPA certainly is a driver on why we had determined that we could no longer support the reduction of nuisance seals. I think there's concern about impacts to very important species that are exported to the U.S., such as lobster and crab. I think that's a policy decision that we took as a department in terms of nuisance seals.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small. You're a little bit over time, but not much.

We'll now go to Mr. Morrissey for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll direct my questions to Mr. Vigneault. He can direct them to whoever can begin.

Candidly, what do you know today and what does DFO know today that it didn't know 10 years ago as it relates to the east coast seal herd?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: I would ask Dr. Hammill to comment on that.

Dr. Mike Hammill (Scientist Emeritus, Quebec Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We know a fair amount. One of the things that we've improved our information on is diet. It's on movement through telemetry. It's through the assessments. We now have a time series of abundance estimates for the two main herds: the grey seals and the harp seals. We've moved a long way since the last decade and even the last two decades.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Mr. Chair, could you then focus Mr. Hammill on what he knows about diet?

Dr. Mike Hammill: My expertise is basically in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The grey seals are consumers primarily of fish. They feed on capelin in the spring and cod in the summer, fall and winter. They feed on other species. You could find up to 30-plus species, but basically there are five mainstays.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: They are a significant predator of those species that the east coast fishery depends on. Would that be correct?

Dr. Mike Hammill: Yes, they are, and we have shown that is the case.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Again, Mr. Chair, I go back to Mr. Vigneault.

In your opening statement, you talked about continuously improving our science to understand the role of pinnipeds on habitat species. Again, in appearing before this committee today—this initiative has been around for 20 years—what's your science telling you today that it was not telling you 10 years ago or 20?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Yes, the science has evolved. We have new tools that didn't exist 20 years ago in looking at the DNA and looking at the fatty acid analyses that help us have a very good measurement understanding of the prey relationship across the entire marine ecosystem. That has helped us to start documenting the key prey-predator relationships between the stocks.

We look at the entire marine ecosystem: yes, the seals and other pinnipeds, but also the other predators that are in the ocean. Dr. Hammill referred to the telemetry work. Now we have it with satellite tied in and so on. We have much more precise and a much greater amount of data available in the movement of seals and their distribution.

Also, the modelling we do to forecast the population abundance has evolved greatly. It's still evolving with the research. We're refining our understanding of these populations through the years of monitoring and research.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you.

Again, Mr. Chair, for Mr. Vigneault, because you referenced it in your answers to a number of questions, could you tell the committee why there is a gap in DFO's science as it relates to the east coast seal herd globally? There were questions that you could not answer about certain populations. Why does the department have gaps in its scientific modelling and scientific information as it relates to the east coast seal herd?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Yes, it's a question of evolving environment science and capacity as well. We focus our efforts—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: What has your capacity been? What was your capacity in the past versus your capacity today?

● (1550)

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Over the last five years, for example, we have dedicated about $1 million to seal science annually—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Is that $1 million to seal science new money that wasn't there before?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: It's money that we allocate internally within the science budget—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: But it's new money to seal science: Is that what you're telling me?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: It's money from our ongoing budget for marine mammals, for example, that we allocate to seal studies. We focus on supporting the science advice for decisions on the seal harvest. We focus on supporting the science advice for the fish stocks as well—for example, when we develop the rebuilding plans for the stocks, looking at all the information that's available to be able to assist with what the role of predation is, among other causes of natural mortalities, in the forecast for the stocks.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you.

In my time left, could you provide to the committee—in writing, if you don't have it here—what trend lines you are seeing and what trend lines the department may be seeing that are disturbing or that are causing concern to the department relating to the viability of other fish stocks in the Atlantic region?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Yes, we can provide that information. If I understood well, the question is—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: It's about any trend lines your science is showing, or your data on any trend line that's alarming to the department as a potential impact on those fisheries on the east coast that are vital to the east coast fishery—lobster, crab, the rebuilding of the cod stocks in Newfoundland that hasn't occurred, and all those other fisheries that we know pinnipeds live on and that east coast fisheries depend on. We have not established a viable seal fishery that's sustainable and supportable using regular economics.

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: All our projections and estimates of natural mortality are in the public domain. We publish all our science assessments. In most cases, we don't have specific information on seals, except a few stocks in the southern gulf, where we have been able to establish a cause and effect relationship with the grey seal. In general, that is documented through our public science assessment of each stock in terms of what the future trend is and the probability of growth under different fishing scenarios. We always discuss and account for mortality, including predation, in our assessments.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Morrissey.

We'll now go to Madame Desbiens.

[*Translation*]

The floor is yours for six minutes.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens (Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here to answer our questions. We are very grateful to them.

At the outset, I would like to say that about 25 years ago I went cod fishing on the St. Lawrence River with my father. All of a sudden, an announcement was made that sounded the death knell for the cod fishery: there was to be no more seal hunt. My father didn't miss a beat in telling me that seals were the primary predators of cod and that seals only ate the viscera. A few years later, my father told me cod was finished. He told me he was not going to see the cod disappear in the river in his lifetime, but that I was going to witness before very long. A few years later, I married a diver. He dove at Les Escoumins and he saw a lot of gutted and eviscerated cod carcasses at the bottom of the St. Lawrence. Obviously, we were told that it was the seals that were eating the cod viscera.

That was a pretty long time ago. Today, we are seeing an extreme decline in the resource, exactly as my father said. I am sure he was not the only one who foresaw the situation.

To what extent has scientific research done in the field been taken into account in the last 25 years? Is that research integral to your thinking and your actions?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Yes, it is the very essence of stock assessments: they are based on work done in the field, inventories taken, and research done. In our stock assessment processes, we also invite fishers and people who are on the water to provide us with information and tell us what they have observed, to help us interpret the data collected.

Is there cod predation by seals? That is certainly the case. However, our work shows that in most cases, there are a lot of other factors that explain the weak re-establishment of cod populations. There are factors associated with food sources, such as the absence of capelin, their preferred prey. There are also factors associated with temperature. In other words, there are many factors other than just seals. We also notice that a number of other predators in the food chain in the marine environment have seen their populations grow at the same time as the seal population. So there is predation, but it is not necessarily exclusively by seals.

● (1555)

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Yes, I imagine that seals are not the only factor. Thank you for reminding me of that detail.

There is another idea, about the work done in the field. Everyone can see that there is probably a huge amount of work to do, in terms of acceptance, before being able to restore the seal hunt in some fashion.

Do your budgets and activities provide for a team that works on restoring a degree of acceptance, a team that looks at the kinds of hunts that could be reactivated in a way that would be much more acceptable on the international scene?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Yes, in the sciences sector, we make sure we are doing all the studies and all the necessary stock assessments to show that it is a sustainable hunt and that it is an available resource.

We are also doing certain scientific studies so we can be confident of the humane aspect of the hunt. For example, we recently produced a scientific opinion about how to bleed the animals in a way that ensures animal welfare while preserving the quality of the meat.

Essentially, in science, we make sure that our research is documented, to show that the stocks have returned to their historic levels, that they are healthy, and that there can be a much larger harvest than there is at present.

I don't know whether my colleague Jennifer Buie might have some information to add.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Where are you in terms of international acceptance? Are there conclusive efforts?

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer Buie: In terms of international acceptance, as Dr. Vigneault stated, we are always promoting the sustainability of our hunt, which is well regulated and humane. Of course, we have very strong marine mammal regulations that prescribe a three-step process to ensure that the seals are humanely harvested. These are examples of how we reach out to our international communities to say that this is a sustainable, well-regulated and humane hunt. It's through our actions, and it's also through our support of our sealing industry.

As was mentioned earlier, we had a seal summit in November, and coming out of that was an opportunity for us to have a very open and honest dialogue about the state of the seal fishery and about the innovation that the industry is promoting.

It's always an opportunity, when we have dialogue with our industry, to assess how we can facilitate that innovation and showcase seal products on the world stage. It's not really within the realm of my work as a fishery manager, but I think that our actions in the management of our fishery demonstrate that we have a well-managed harvest that produces excellent quality products.

The Chair: You're six minutes are up, Madam Desbiens.

We'll now go to Ms. Barron for six minutes or less.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

My first question is for Mr. Thomson because it's specific to the Pacific. The report that we received with some background information spoke specifically to the consumption of salmon by pinnipeds. It quoted some research that was done by Andrew Trites and David Rosen in 2019.

I can just quickly tell you what it says. It says that the causes for the decline in marine survival of chinook, coho salmon and steelhead trout populations in the Salish Sea are complex and may include bottom-up processes that drive prey availability, top-down processes, including increasing abundance of predators such as harbour seals that may be exacerbating mortality as well as a multitude of anthropogenic factors such as habitat loss, contaminants and hatchery management practices that may contribute to disease, reduced fish condition and ultimately increased mortality. The cumulative effects of these factors are unknown.

Mr. Thomson, is there any further understanding around this piece of information that we were provided with?

● (1600)

Mr. Andrew Thomson: It is certainly true that, in trying to understand the multitude of factors that affect Pacific salmon populations, it is a complex picture, and we know that there are multiple factors that positively influence the returning populations of Pacific salmon. Certainly, that's one reason we conduct the diet composition studies for pinniped populations, but it's also why we invest time and energy into pathogen studies, habitat studies, monitoring the returns throughout the north Pacific climate change study, etc. We have such diverse Pacific salmon research programs to try to understand the multiple factors that affect their survival.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I'm not sure, Mr. Thomson, if you're the best person to answer these questions, but how does the research and funding that's being allocated on the coast differ? What impacts do those differences have on the capacity to take on science in the Pacific, Atlantic and Arctic?

Mr. Andrew Thomson: I can certainly speak in terms of Pacific funding, and maybe my colleague, Dr. Vigneault, can speak to other funding. We have a very healthy research program within the fishery on the west coast. The research program for Pacific regions has approximately $100 million with about 540 researchers who are involved in all aspects of our scientific research program. It's a very significant program that allows us, thankfully, to investigate the myriad of factors, and the myriad of questions, that come to us to better understand our environment.

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: I would add that the resource assessment, including the funding and expertise, is allocated nationally. It's a team that works collectively. We have the benefit of collaborating with a number of other stakeholders to help us in our endeavour. For example, the Arctic work was a recent survey that we're analyzing right now for walruses. It was done in collaboration with the Inuit communities.

There are harvesters in the Atlantic who are providing samples for our study, as well. As I mentioned earlier, we are taking steps in addressing more data regarding poor species. We're going to do the first ever harp seals assessment. The data collection is now complete. We'll do the assessment and publication later this year. We also make full use of new technologies available to us to advance the work we're doing.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Building off the response that you just provided, Dr. Vigneault, I have a follow-up question. You just referenced an example around the collaboration with stakeholders and finding ways to build upon that. I was recently in Nunavut, and out on the waters with some indigenous local harvesters. They were talking about the importance of them being part of these decisions, and being part of providing vital information. They were talking about how when they're out on the water, they know, based on their relationship with the water, when they need to pull back, and when they can fish. They have a wealth of information and traditional knowledge to provide.

How are we working alongside indigenous harvesters, as well as all fish harvesters out on the water, and bridging that information throughout our process of deciding the science we're going to use in our decisions moving forward?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Yes, there is ongoing collaboration, as I mentioned, especially in the Arctic. We collaborate for science and decision-making with the wildlife board. It helps us design the sampling, contributes to the analysis and then helps make a recommendation for the harvest decision.

Similarly, we invite indigenous traditional knowledge elders for collaboration when possible. Regarding the assessment, the Atlantic seal science test team recommended collaboration with harvesters and looking at opportunities in the collection of the sample, in addition to the analysis of the results of the stock assessment.

● (1605)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

We'll now go to Mr. Perkins, first, and he's going to share his time with Mr. Arnold. I will leave it up to him when he does that. I know the last time he did, he wasn't very sharing, but we'll try and keep an eye on him this time.

For five minutes or less, sir, when you're ready.

Mr. Rick Perkins (South Shore—St. Margarets, CPC): Dr. Vigneault and witnesses, thank you for coming here.

Dr. Vigneault, you'll recall that at the seal summit in Newfoundland in November I raised the issue of my order paper question on seal stomach content. At that time, you pledged to provide the details of what was in the stomachs, a response that was not provided by DFO.

Will you table with this committee, please, the information for the last 10 years that the department has?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: I'm not clear on the question. As I mentioned at the seal summit, the analysis is ongoing. What was provided for the parliamentary question was a list of ongoing analysis. We have taken measures to accelerate the pace of the—

Mr. Rick Perkins: I'm seeing here it goes back to 2017. You must have analyzed it since then and can provide us the details. I would ask that you table that.

I'll move on to my next question. Seals eat somewhere between 10 pounds and 30 pounds of food a day, on average. By DFO's number, there are roughly about 11 million seals in Atlantic Canada. That puts the consumption in the tens of millions of tonnes, roughly. We catch about 180,000 metric tonnes of finfish in the commercial fishery, so you'll agree the primary predator of finfish in the waters in Atlantic Canada is seals, not fishermen.

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Mr. Chair, I agree that predation in general is very significant orders of magnitude compared to harvesting. As I mentioned earlier, there are many other predators. Some predators have more impact in terms of consumption, from our estimates.

Mr. Rick Perkins: My question was about seals versus commercial fishermen.

You had mentioned at the seal summit, and the minister has mentioned recently, the revelation that seals eat fish. She did that in May last year. I'm curious because in 2021 DFO scientists publicly stated that grey seals have no effect on the cod population and again in 2019 they said the same thing.

So how is it that you have seal stomach contents, yet you say they don't have an impact and now you say they do?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: What we're saying is it's different to be consuming versus having a predictable effect on the growth of the population.

My colleague, Atef Mansour, could provide more information on these assessments.

Mr. Rick Perkins: I'm sorry, I'll have to go Mr. Arnold now.

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you. If that information could be provided in writing, we'd appreciate it.

Thank you for being here.

Mr. Thomson, are you aware that DFO personnel intervened in the drafting of science advice to remove conclusions submitted by scientists for DFO's 2018 process that produced a report meant to provide advice to inform a ministerial opinion on the imminent threat to the survival of Chilcotin and Thompson steelhead?

Mr. Andrew Thomson: I'm sorry, I did not follow all that. I don't believe we have a process that removes advice, but we have a CSAS process that provides advice and I know that particular report is on our website.

Mr. Mel Arnold: That process was apparently manipulated to exclude information. Why did DFO scrub the Korman statements from the science advice provided to the minister?

Mr. Andrew Thomson: I don't have knowledge as to what you're speaking of, Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Mel Arnold: This has been in the news, in reports. I'm surprised that you are not aware of it.

Mr. Andrew Thomson: I'm aware of the issue, Mr. Arnold, but I'm not aware of the statements you're reading to me from your paper there.

Mr. Mel Arnold: The steelhead report written by Messrs. Korman, Bison and Decker has been buried by DFO. Will you make it available so Canadians can read the science for themselves that was provided by Korman, Bison and Decker?

Mr. Andrew Thomson: The agreed-to science advisory board is on the website.

Mr. Mel Arnold: No. Will you release the Korman, Bison and Decker science, not the report that was released on the website, the actual science that went into DFO to produce—

Mr. Andrew Thomson: As I understand it, the consensus on science advice is on the website.

● (1610)

Mr. Mel Arnold: That information apparently is not. So the answer is you will not provide the information that was provided to that CSAS process?

Mr. Andrew Thomson: As I understand it, the scientific consensus report is available on our website.

Mr. Mel Arnold: We're looking for the scientific evidence, not the scientific consensus report. Why isn't that being made available—

Mr. Andrew Thomson: The scientific consensus report is what's arrived at through the CSAS process.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Why aren't you releasing the science that actually was done—

Mr. Andrew Thomson: It is the science, Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Mel Arnold: I believe my time's up.

The Chair: Yes. Thanks, Mel.

We'll now go to Mr. Cormier for five minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

For the last three years, right in front of my house on the edge of Caraquet Bay and Chaleur Bay, there have been hundreds or even thousands of seals every year, something we have never seen before.

I don't know whether this was clarified earlier, but do you think the seals are eating lobster and crab?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Seals are opportunistic predators, so they eat a lot of other species. By our estimates, crab and lobster are not seals' main prey.

Again, there is a lot of uncertainty in this type of analysis. It must be noted that a number of other predators have seen their populations rise over the same period, including tuna and gannets.

If you would like more information, I can ask my colleague Mr. Hammill to provide it.

Mr. Serge Cormier: When I read the mandate and role of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, I see that it has several components. One of them is that the department must work "with fishers, coastal and Indigenous communities to enable their continued prosperity from fish and seafood".

As was mentioned earlier, seals consume huge amounts of fish and all sorts of seafood.

What solution do you see for reducing the seal population? There was reference to a clearly defined fishery earlier. Ms. Buie, you said something.

[*English*]

You said something about defining a well-managed hunt. Can you define for us what a well-managed hunt is?

Ms. Jennifer Buie: A well-managed hunt is one that is first of all underpinned with science to ensure that it's sustainable and that we're keeping the population above a certain limit reference point, a healthy population of seals. A well-managed hunt is is done humanely. As I mentioned earlier, we have a three-step process to ensure that our seals are dispatched in a way that does not let them suffer.

Mr. Serge Cormier: How does a well-managed hunt reduce the population of seals in Atlantic Canada?

Ms. Jennifer Buie: As a resource manager, our objective is to keep the seal population healthy. Our objective is not to reduce the seal population. Just like other fisheries where we try to keep our fish at very high and heavy levels, our objective for seals is to keep—

Mr. Serge Cormier: You're saying that you want to keep the seal population in a healthy situation, but what about crab, lobster, mackerel and herring? What about those species? It seems like seals are one of the problems that these species are having some difficulty with, maybe not all of them but some of them. We want to keep the seal population healthy, but not the other resources. Is that what you're saying?

Ms. Jennifer Buie: What I'm saying is that, as a resource manager, we try to keep our stocks healthy. When they are not in a healthy state, if they're in a critical state, then we have rebuilding plans that prescribe the way we are going to rebuild those stocks to healthy levels.

Mr. Serge Cormier: If your rebuilding plan of some of the stock is reducing some of the seal population...? For example, if seals are eating too much mackerel, can we reduce the seal population?

Ms. Jennifer Buie: Part of the rebuilding plan is working with science to develop the mechanisms to rebuild that stock, looking at all the interconnected web of the ecosystem and putting in place the measures required to rebuild that stock. I think that's looking at predation, fishing pressure and other environmental factors that might be impacting the stock. All of those are considered as part of the rebuilding plan.

● (1615)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cormier: I am very aware that it may have repercussions on our markets and that is certainly not what we want. However, if the seal population rises to the point of having an impact on our crab, lobster, mackerel and herring stocks, there won't be enough of them on the market.

I am just making observations. I am 47 years old. We have been talking about this issue for 25 years and we might say it is getting nowhere.

What are your solutions?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Thank you for your question, Mr. Cormier.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. If there's an answer to that question, could you please provide it in writing?

We'll now go to Madam Desbiens for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to let Mr. Vigneault answer Mr. Cormier's question. I was going to ask exactly the same question.

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Thank you.

To be clear, I would say that this is where we see how important it is to have good scientific data and to clearly understand the specific impacts of predation on the management of commercial fish stocks.

We have no proof that seals have an effect on certain stocks in particular. For example, lobster stocks are in very good health. There is no problem in that regard.

A scientific assessment of mackerel stocks has just been done. Agin, we observed an increase in numerous other predators, including gannets. In rough numbers, we estimated that mackerel consumption by gannets is much higher than by seals.

If we focused our efforts on eliminating seals, there would probably be no major impact, because there are so many other predators, and this adds to the complexity of the environment.

It can't be guaranteed that just reducing the seal population would have a direct and significant impact on fish stocks in general.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: If I am summarizing correctly, other predators play an important role, and altogether it means that all of the resource in the sea is declining generally, except for lobster and crab.

You are saying that other predators have more effect on the resource than seals have.

There are all sorts of data circulating. We are kind of left to form our own opinion, today.

Would you be able to give us the proportions, based on your most recent measurements?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Thank you for your question.

In some cases, we do have estimates. That said, there are a lot of uncertainties. These are rough estimates.

In the case of mackerel, the information is found in the stock assessments we are in the process of publishing. Similar studies have been done in Newfoundland and Labrador.

If I may, I would like to add that there is obviously predation, as we have discussed, but there are also a lot of other environmental factors that have a fundamental effect on the re-establishment of stocks, climate change, in particular, being among them.

In the Gulf of St. Lawrence, every year, we see warming and acidification of the water, conditions that limit the habitat for several species and have a direct impact on re-establishment.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Ms. Barron for two and a half minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Buie, I'm just trying to follow the chain of what you were talking about before. You were talking about the rebuilding plans and, I believe—and correct me if I'm wrong—you were talking about how your job is not to reduce the numbers but to have healthy stocks.

Just following that thought, if, for example, you were looking at the numbers of cod or salmon needing to have a rebuilding plan, you mentioned that you looked at all the other factors. Let's say you found that pinnipeds were one of the factors influencing that decline. Would part of that plan include looking at, for example, a sustainable seal harvest?

You work alongside other levels of government as well and you know that livelihoods, communities and so on are all impacted by these decisions. I'm wondering if there's any work that happens alongside that of other departments when we're looking at a really holistic rebuilding plan and stock management.

● (1620)

Ms. Jennifer Buie: Yes, rebuilding plans are actually integrated into part of the Fisheries Act now. Since 2019, the fish stock provisions, as part of the Fisheries Act, require us to put in place a rebuilding plan when stocks fall below a certain reference point and they're in their critical zone.

For a stock like mackerel, for example, we are developing a rebuilding plan to ensure that the stock grows over time. We look at a number of factors to help regrow that stock. We work hand in hand with our science colleagues to look at those factors because, as I mentioned earlier, there's a very complex web in the ecosystem, so there could be a number of different elements that would go into that rebuilding plan. Of course, we also work with our stakeholders to ensure that they understand that we are rebuilding the stocks back up to healthy levels to ensure that we can have productive fisheries once again.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I'm out of time. Thank you.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Bragdon for five minutes or less.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Richard Bragdon (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Mr. Chair, I'll ask one question, then I'm yielding the rest of my time to Mr. Perkins and Mr. Arnold.

My question is for whoever feels best able to answer.

Has there been any meaningful consultation with the harvesters as to what they are seeing on the waters where they harvest fish, what they are witnessing and what they are experiencing? Has there been direct consultation and direct feedback from the harvesters who are most impacted by these types of decisions?

Ms. Jennifer Buie: We have an Atlantic seal advisory meeting annually. The purpose of that meeting is to get feedback from our stakeholders about what they're seeing on the water and to have an exchange of information.

I wasn't there, but the seal summit certainly also provided a forum with a diverse group of stakeholders to exchange information as well, so we are in constant communication with sealers across Atlantic Canada.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Thank you.

I'm still a little baffled about this issue that as late as 2021, and in 2019, DFO was saying publicly that seals don't have an impact on northern cod.

Dr. Vigneault, you said basically that you don't think they have a major impact because there other predators, but I think that tens of millions of tonnes of food, of fish consumed, has an impact. In fact you're probably aware of the witness who is next, Dr. McAllister. In his peer-reviewed science that was released in 2018 on the collapse of the northern cod, he said that “grey seals are major predators of Atlantic cod”. They are the major reason why it's not recovering, even though it's only 15% of the diet of a grey seal.

How do you mesh the fact that independent scientists have been saying for years that this is a major factor preventing northern cod from recovering, yet DFO continues to maintain that it's not?

Dr. Bernard Vigneault: Let me clarify that we have reached the same conclusion in our previous work. In the southern gulf, we have established that the grey seal has an impact on the recovery of groundfish. I think where there's confusion is for harp seal off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador and the impact on northern cod. Again, we're doing additional work to expand a number of samples as recommended by the seal science task team and so on.

Today, our conclusion is that the main factor limiting the growth of northern cod is the availability of their prey, capelin. It's not predation by seal.

Mr. Rick Perkins: I doubt that 7.6 million harp seals are eating Alberta beef and aren't impacting fish.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

I'll go back to Mr. Thomson, if I could, on this question about this science report on the recovery potential of steelhead. Mr. Korman's recovery potential assessment said that reducing pinniped predation was the best way to support recovery of endangered steelhead populations. But after DFO folks got their hands on the science, the science advice report from the minister stated there's “no consensus” that the growing pinniped population in the Pacific was a factor in steelhead declines.

Why did DFO scrub those statements by Mr. Korman from the science advice provided to the minister?

● (1625)

Mr. Andrew Thomson: I wasn't there at the time, Mr. Arnold. I think, from the statements you're making, the advice provided by the minister was the consensus opinion through the CSAS process.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Or his science advice was ignored.... If predation is established as a factor for DFO's ecosystem-based fishery management, why do they insist on ignoring factors of pinniped predation on wild fish stocks?

Mr. Andrew Thomson: I don't think we're ignoring factors at all, Mr. Arnold. We have a rather robust research program to try to understand exactly the predation rates of pinnipeds on salmon. We're looking at the diets of salmon both through DNA technology and hard-part analysis of their scat samples to try to understand the species variation across the diets, but also where they are found geographically. Obviously there's a greater preponderance of salmon found in seal stomachs in the estuary than there is out in the non-estuarine areas of the marine environment. That's part of the ongoing research to help inform our management colleagues.

Mr. Mel Arnold: What is the objective of the ministry to have that science information available to make science-informed decisions on pinniped management?

Mr. Andrew Thomson: We publish on a regular basis aerial surveys data for numbers of seals. There's a report coming out on the scat analysis in a relatively short period of time, and there's of course collaborations with other researchers, like in Washington state, on diet research as well. There's a fairly regular publication of data as the research has concluded.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

We'll go to Mr. Hardie now for one question to finish out this first hour of our committee.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for being here.

I have a question for Mr. Thomson. This committee and our chair just tabled a report on DFO science. From what we heard today, this consensus model for landing on science advice to the minister has once again left gaps that really don't pass the sniff test.

If we were to ask Josh Korman to provide this committee with the material that was not included in the report, would he be permitted to give it to us?

Mr. Andrew Thomson: I think he would be. I don't have any way of controlling Mr. Korman, nor would I attempt to.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Okay. That's fair enough. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to say thank you to our witnesses for appearing today. The department is always very co-operative with this committee, and officials are here when we need them. I'm sure we'll be calling you back before this study is over. We look forward to seeing you again soon.

We'll take a couple of moments to suspend, while we switch over to another set of witnesses.

● (1625)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1630)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I'll make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, and please mute it when you are not speaking.

For interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice, at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

All comments should be addressed through the chair.

Finally, as a reminder, the use of a House-approved headset is mandatory for all virtual participants in parliamentary proceedings.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. Appearing as an individual by video conference, we have Murdoch McAllister, associate professor at the University of British Columbia. Representing the Reconseal Inuksiuti, we have Ruben Komangapik, co-chief executive officer, and Yoanis Menge, co-chief executive officer.

Thank you for taking the time to appear today. You each have five minutes for an opening statement.

We'll go to Mr. McAllister first, please.

● (1635)

Dr. Murdoch McAllister (Associate Professor, University of British Columbia, As an Individual): Good afternoon. Thanks for inviting me as a witness.

I'd like to start with a study on B.C. harbour seals. They've increased about tenfold in abundance since the 1970s, and are at approximately 100,000 animals. Their dietary requirements are approximately two kilograms per day, leading to about 70,000 tonnes eaten per year. Diet studies show the consumption of numerous different fish species, including salmon and other valuable fish stocks, and the consumption of species at different life stages, let's say, including juveniles.

My research team has looked at predation rates on chinook and coho in southern B.C. Numerous of these stocks have collapsed to very low levels. Despite very low fishing rates since the early nineties, these stocks have not recovered or shown signs of recovery. Our study, which looked in detail at predation on juvenile chinook and coho salmon by harbour seals, indicates that those predation rates have increased about tenfold. They're up to about 40% of all juvenile chinook salmon entering salt water and about 60% of all juvenile coho salmon entering salt water. That's in southern B.C.

What are the population effects? We've done a meta-analysis of 20 different chinook salmon stocks, looking at the productivity. We found a significant negative association between stock productivity and local harbour seal abundance for 14 out of 20 of these chinook salmon stocks. With the increase in harbour seals, our study has shown that the sustainable harvest rates on average have dropped by about 44%. Sustainable yields have dropped, in association with harbour seal predation, by about 74% since the 1970s.

In another study, we investigated hypotheses about Steller's sea lion predation on sockeye salmon. This is the Fraser River sockeye salmon. There's been about a sixfold increase in abundance of Steller's sea lions, up to about 48,000 animals, at least up until 2017. That's species-wide. They eat on average about 18 kilograms of fish a day. This leads to about 300,000 tonnes eaten per year, more than the combined fisheries and aquaculture tonnage in B.C. per year.

We found that with the low-abundance sockeye salmon runs, harvest rates have dropped, and these stocks are continuing to decline. Our analysis of predation around the northern end of Vancouver Island by Steller's sea lions suggests that the predation rates are up about 60% per year, and they're highest in the years when the abundance of sockeye is lowest. Our study indicates that these low-abundance sockeye salmon stocks could be stuck in a predator pit caused by predation.

I'll move along to another study, which was just previously mentioned, on the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence cod and predation by Atlantic grey seals. This was an intensive modelling study, where we found that the predation rates on cod in this stock have increased perhaps tenfold since the 1970s. The stock, despite low fishing rates, has not recovered and is continuing to decline. Quite alarmingly, we see negative rates of production at the lowest stock sizes. Our modelling suggests that it is due to predation by grey seals, which are still feeding on a mixture of cod of this stock. Diet studies show that there's enough cod eaten in their diet to account for this continuing decline. It's so pronounced that it could potentially lead to extinction pockets.

In summary, on both coasts since the 1990s we've seen that numerous depleted fish stocks in Canada have not recovered. This is despite markedly reduced fishing rates. We've seen increased predation rates on numerous fish stocks, with up to tenfold increases in predation rates. In some cases, our studies show, those predation rates have exceeded natural productive capacity.

● (1640)

Our studies show that these increases in predation have reduced sustainable yields and sustainable harvest rates, and many of the low-abundance stocks could be trapped in predator pits, kept low by intensive predation rates by different pinniped populations.

I'll finish there. Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll now go to Mr. Lansbergen for five minutes.

Mr. Paul Lansbergen (President, Fisheries Council of Canada): Thank you very much.

Good afternoon, and thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. I apologize for not being there in person, but I had a prior commitment that has to be in person.

As many of you know, the Fisheries Council of Canada is the national association representing wild capture processors across the country, all of whom also harvest.

I wish to applaud the committee for undertaking such an important study. Canada has a robust fisheries management regulatory regime that is supposed to maintain sustainable commercial fisheries. Having the understanding of the interrelationship between fish stocks and seals needs to be an integral part of the process.

FCC is in general agreement with the science recommendations of the Atlantic seal science task team. In its report, the task team highlighted the data available on the food, feeding and migration of seals to be woefully lacking and, in some regions, not studied at all. Not having this information causes a serious issue when trying to develop management plans for fish stocks and the rebuilding plans for fish stocks listed in the cautious or critical zone. In particular, FCC supports recommendations 1 to 3 in the seal science task team report as they address the need for more science to fill in the gaps of the existing scientific body of knowledge.

I am pleased that the scope of this study includes both the east and west coasts. Most of the focus until now, including the task team, as per its terms of reference, has been only on Atlantic Canada. It is important to acknowledge and better understand the extent of the overpopulation of seals and sea lions and their subsequent impact on the marine ecosystem on all Canadian coasts. When you make recommendations to the government, I would urge you to be inclusive of all three of Canada’s coasts.

It is also important to note that it is not just the direct impact seals have on their prey species that needs to be studied but also the indirect impact they may have on the entirety of the marine food chain and ecosystem. An example of this would be the impact that seals and sea lions have on chinook salmon and, as a result, the impact on the southern resident killer whales.

While the need to gather more science on the impact of seals is greatly important, FCC stresses that it should not be at the expense of core fisheries science. We understand that DFO has a finite amount of resources; however, fisheries science and management are paramount to Canada's maintaining a sustainable resource. FCC is hopeful that the call for proposals announced at the end of the seal summit will fill some of the science gaps. Beyond that, DFO should consider external and in-house options over the longer-term science need, particularly so core fisheries science work is not undermined.

My last and perhaps most important comment relates to seafood markets. There are two aspects to this: market access as defined by government regulations in the destination jurisdiction and market acceptance, which is the private sector's willingness to buy our products. It is immensely important that, as the government considers potential steps moving forward, its actions do not disrupt either the market access or acceptance of Canadian fish and seafood products both internationally and domestically. I cannot stress this enough. This could have serious impacts on coastal communities that depend on our sector.

Foreign jurisdictions to which Canada exports have regulations that could impede our sector’s market access. Most notably, both the U.S. and the EU currently have near if not complete bans on importing seal products. They also have very strict rules regarding the harming of marine mammals that, if deemed violated, could limit or eliminate the market access of our fish and seafood products. For the U.S., NOAA is still reviewing Canada’s submissions for comparability findings for our fisheries under its Marine Mammal Protection Act. NOAA is scheduled to release its findings by the end of this year.

In terms of market acceptance, some importers and domestic buyers do not want to be linked with companies and/or countries associated with the sealing industry, so there must be extreme caution by the government to not jeopardize existing customers of Canadian seafood companies. We are working hard to improve the public trust of our sector and strengthen our market brand. These efforts could easily be undermined by government actions that are not well informed and communicated.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to your questions.

● (1645)

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll now go to our witnesses in the room. I don't know if both of you are sharing the five minutes, or if one of you is doing the five-minute opening statement.

When you're ready, you can start.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yoanis Menge (Co-Chief Executive Officer, Reconseal Inuksiuti): Good afternoon.

We are really very happy to have been invited by Ms. Desbiens and to be here today. I am very pleased to be able to speak in French, and I am eager for the day when I or my friend Ruben Komangapik will be able to speak in Inuktitut.

My name is Yoanis Menge and I come from the Magdalen Islands. I am a photographer and president of the Association des chasseurs de phoques intra-Québec, and, with my associate Ruben Komangapik, who comes from Pond Inlet, Nunavut, co-founder of Reconseal Inuksiuti.

In the fall of 2021, Ruben Komangapik and I founded the company called Reconseal Inuksiuti, which is based in the Magdalen Islands. "Reconseal" is a play on words, combining "reconciliation" and "seal", the English word for the French word "*phoque*". The word "inuksiuti" means "food for humans" in Inuktitut.

Our innovative project proposes to give breathe new life into the seal industry, while changing the image of the hunt through reconciliation of our various cultures of hunters, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Reconseal Inuksiuti is made up of Magdalen Islanders and Inuit who work together, hunt grey seals on the Magdalen Islands, and then distribute the meat and skins to urban Inuit through organizations such as Tungasuvvingat Inuit, or TI, Isaruit Inuit Arts, which is based in Ottawa, and Makivvik, which is based in Montreal.

A number of studies show that when an Inuk is cut off from their traditional food, such as seal, their mental health and sense of identity suffer. While Inuit history is undeniably marked by the consequences of colonialism, it is also shaped by the efforts of Inuit today to reappropriate their sociocultural, economic and political destiny. As a vector for intergenerational transmission, seal is an opportunity to absorb the traditions while acquiring know-how and developing self-esteem.

In addition to tackling the food insecurity experienced by Inuit living in urban environments and providing them with a basic food that is important for their physical and mental health, our initiative advances knowledge, culture and traditions, through the complete use of the animal. When I say "complete", that really is accurate. The only parts that are discarded are the genitals and stomach. To give you an idea, I can tell you that the intestines, all of the organs, the brain, the eyes and the tongue are consumed. Even the skins are used in sewing and tanning programs.

The seal hunt represents an essential aspect of the living culture, for both Inuit and Magdalen Islanders. That is why our project aims to encourage the reappropriation of traditional practices, and to restore the value of those practices for our communities, which are distinct in many regards but are united by this common tradition. We love it with all our hearts. With our own funds, so far, we are feeding human beings. Reconseal Inuksiuti is proof that it is possible for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, Magdalen Islanders, even Newfoundlanders, to work together. We aren't just talking about reconciliation; we are doing reconciliation.

If we have managed this on a small scale and with our own resources, imagine what we could accomplish with the financial support of the government.

I will now yield the floor to Mr. Komangapik

Thank you.

● (1650)

[*English*]

Mr. Ruben Komangapik (Co-Chief Executive Officer, Reconseal Inuksiuti): [*Witness spoke in Inuktitut*]

[*English*]

First of all, I'd like to say thank you, Chairman, for having me here.

My name is Ruben Komangapik. I'm from Pond Inlet, Nunavut. The first time I ever killed a seal, I was three years old, and it was a baby, too—a whitecoat. My father brought it back to teach me how to see the animal whole.

For the past three years I have been living in Ottawa and working to feed my relatives in the city. With Yoanis, we founded Reconseal to address the problem of constant access to seal meat while living in the cities.

It's time to take care and protect nature by hunting seals. By not just taking the seals, we're actually feeding the oceans too. It goes right back to the very small creatures. We need the government to help us change the image of the seal hunt, and reconcile with all of the different seal hunting cultures in this country. We need to educate Canadians through electronic billboards or commercials to show Canadians that the seal is not a bad thing. It's a great resource that we can utilize.

Effects on the body and the mind are renewed in abundance when you are fed with the right nutrition. We must regain our nourishment and economic freedom by hunting seals. Food insecurity is really a problem, both in the south and in the north, so do not rely on science alone. You should rely on Inuit and aboriginals—I don't know what you call us these days—and the fishermen out there who are doing the actual work in front of what's going on around them.

The Chair: I'm sorry. I have to stop it there. We've gone about a minute over the five-minute opening statement. If you have it in writing, you can submit it, and we'll make sure that's included. However, I have to get to some rounds of questioning.

We'll go to Mr. Arnold first, for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to split my time with Mr. Perkins. I'll start off with Mr. McAllister.

Thank you for providing your document to us. There are a few things in here I see. I'll talk in some other language that I've heard in other fish and wildlife management channels. Basically, that's "predator swamping" and "predator pit".

Some of your charts seem to indicate that some of the west coast salmon populations are now so low that the high number of seals is having a compound effect on those salmon. It is to the point where they're in a predator pit, and they're having difficulty getting out of it. When we have a high abundance of salmon populations, it's called predator swamping. There's so much feed going out that the predators are swamped, and they have very little effect on the prey species.

Would you be able to elaborate a little bit on that?

Dr. Murdoch McAllister: Yes. Fraser River sockeye is a good example of that. Once every four years, there is a very large return. That's been consistently large, once every four years, since the 1940s or thereabouts, after the Hell's Gate fishway went in. That's been consistently strong in the order of approximately five million to 30 million salmon coming back.

Those juvenile salmon go out to sea, en masse, and the analyses suggest that there are so many salmon and so relatively few predators per prey item—like the seal population, for example—that they just get swamped. They can't actually have as big of an impact on those migrating sockeye salmon. As well, the Steller's sea lion population—the adults—would get swamped in terms of the short time they come by.

The much smaller populations of sockeye salmon, between those dominant years—the three subdominant lines—were actually quite abundant, up until the 1980s. Then we saw subsequent declines, and those off-cycle lines have been decreasing progressively. The abundance of Steller's sea lions, for example, is high enough, such that when there are only a couple of million salmon coming back, they could easily eat 6% of them. That's what our study has suggested.

What happens is that you get a much lower stable equilibrium. Even with no fishing at all, you might get 10 million salmon coming back, but with seals and sea lions, it's like another fleet. It's holding those sockeye salmon at a very low level, maybe one to two million; we don't know. Those trends are worrying because they're going down and down. It could be either a stable or an unstable equilibrium, such that it's maybe stable at a low level, or unstable and maybe going to extinction. We can't distinguish at this point.

● (1655)

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you very much.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Perkins.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Thank you.

Thank you, witnesses.

For my friends at Reconseal, it's nice to see you again.

Dr. McAllister, I wanted to talk to you a bit about the study from 2017 that you released with regard to seals and northern cod.

In the abstract part of it, it says that the collapse of the northern cod 31 years ago, which started before then—in 1991—does not appear to have been caused by seals, but mainly by other factors. I'm assuming that one of the reasons for that conclusion is that the numbers of seals were a lot lower then than they are today.

Dr. Murdoch McAllister: Yes, that's correct. Stock assessments suggest the fishing mortality rates were high, but the data are good enough. We have so much data that we can estimate the natural mortality rates as they vary from year to year. With northern cod, it appears that there's a consistent finding that in the natural mortality rate there was a really big spike. We don't know why. There's no explanation. There may be some correlation with oceanographic variables, but back in 1990 there was a very big spike.

This paper that you're looking at is focused on the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence cod stocks. I don't believe that we actually made much reference to the northern cod stocks. We haven't studied that so we can't make a statement.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Thank you.

You go on to discuss that grey seals, starting in the late 1990s, were clearly the number one issue in terms of predation. You referenced growth as the reason, in terms of the seals growing “over 60 years”, I think it says, “from 8,000 animals in 1960 to 500,000 by 2014”. That number just for that area seems a lot higher than what we hear from DFO on its official counts overall of the grey seal population.

Dr. Murdoch McAllister: Yes, that's an estimate, I think, for the entire east coast. Our study focused just on the localized population of grey seals in the area, I believe, where the Gulf of St. Lawrence cod southern stock is known to overwinter. We weren't using a big number. We were using a much smaller number. It's in the paper. We had collaboration with Mike Hammill and Doug Swain, who helped to focus our analysis on just the right components of the grey seal population.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Hardie for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be splitting some time with Mr. Kelloway.

Mr. McAllister, was the research, the work you did, subject to the CSAS process or was this totally independent of DFO science?

Dr. Murdoch McAllister: Which work are you referring to? Is this the Gulf of St. Lawrence...?

Mr. Ken Hardie: The one that you cited off the top and some of the work that you have done.

Dr. Murdoch McAllister: This peer-reviewed published paper for the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences was separate from CSAS, and let's say that the harbour seal work was also separate from CSAS, although I did collaborate in a CSAS process on stock assessment of yelloweye rockfish, where we actually included pinniped predation from three different pinniped species inside the waters of the yelloweye rockfish. That analysis suggested exactly the same thing as we'd been finding. For example, with the Gulf of St. Lawrence cod, with no fishing at all, abundance of this rockfish would continue. That was a CSAS process, and it was peer-reviewed and accepted, yes.

● (1700)

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you for that.

A couple of years ago, we had a witness from Norway. We happened to ask him about the fact the seal population in Norway seems to have been managed down. He kind of smiled and just said, “They went away.” Do you have any insight as to what actually may have happened to make them just go away?

Dr. Murdoch McAllister: I'm not familiar with that study. I'm sorry.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Okay. Well, we're trying to get to the bottom of that one.

We were looking at some of the issues with fish stocks, etc., and I'm sure you're familiar with Alexandra Morton. We asked her about seal predation. She issued the caution that seals eat hake and hake eat salmon, so in fact, other than the killer whales, obviously, are there competitors that also have an impact on our salmon population?

Dr. Murdoch McAllister: Yes, of course there are. It is known that Pacific hake do eat salmon.

I'm familiar with an ecosystem modelling study that investigated the potential interactions between the abundance of seals, the predation on hake and so on. If seals are reduced in abundance, could that lead to an increased abundance of Pacific hake? My colleague, Carl Walters, has done that analysis and basically found that in this ecosystem model of the Strait of Georgia, absolutely not. If you reduce the abundance of harbour seals, Pacific hake would not increase enough to have any effect on the Pacific salmon species that he had included in his model, which I believe were coho salmon and chinook salmon.

Yes, of course there are some other species. Salmon sharks are perhaps increasing. They're known predators on salmon in the Pacific Ocean, but the data are quite sparse.

Of course, northern resident killer whales have increased in abundance. We do know that they're major predators of chinook salmon, but that's just one species out of many. There are some negative correlations between them and chinook salmon stock productivity, as well.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Have we seen an increase in the population of the transient killer whales? They do eat seal?

Dr. Murdoch McAllister: We see an increase in local abundance of transient killer whales. The range is known to be very wide, so it could be just a localized response to increased harbour seal abundance. We do know that a favourite prey item in the Strait of Georgia is harbour seals, so there are a lot of observations of those predation events.

The harbour seal increased up until the late 1990s and then levelled out. The most recent stock assessment of harbour seals, which was just released a week ago, suggests that the abundance of harbour seals has just plateaued. It has not decreased or increased; it's stayed approximately the same since the late 1990s. That could be a result of, let's say, transient killer whale predation and a numerical response in terms of attracting them from other parts of the range.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Mr. McAllister, I'll turn the rest of time over to Mr. Kelloway.

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

Hello to the witnesses.

My questions are for Reconseal Inuksiuti.

First of all, thank you for coming today. It's great to see you. The last time we saw each other was at the seal conference.

I wonder if you could tell the folks who are here today and the folks who are watching what a return to a successful sea harvest would mean for coastal indigenous communities for whom sealing has been a way of life and an important part of livelihood and culture. That's the first part of the question.

For the second part, can you speak to the importance—you alluded to it—of using the full seal?

Thank you.

● (1705)

The Chair: You have 20 seconds to answer the question.

Mr. Ruben Komangapik: Infrastructure's always the main focus. Infrastructure to make one animal into a lot of pieces and then utilize it is one big factor that we need to address in Canada.

The resources really.... If we do it the right way, this country could have a really successful seal hunt as we do in fisheries.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll now go to Madam Desbiens for six minutes or less, please

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am extremely grateful to all the witnesses who are here today.

Obviously, I am going to address the people from the Magdalen Islands and the north.

Why does your project deal specifically with grey seals?

[*English*]

Mr. Ruben Komangapik: We do grey seal because traditionally the harp seal, for us, is dog food.

The grey seal is really a new product. We're very picky. Inuit are very picky about what we eat. Therefore, if these Inuit are willing and welcoming the meat at this level, I'll bet you the rest of the country and the rest of the world will follow.

We should really concentrate on the seal industry in this country, I believe.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yoanis Menge: I can give you another reason. In the Magdalen Islands, grey seals are very abundant. There are 44,000 seals that stay around the islands year-round and a population of 430,000 seals in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where there were only 5,000 in the 1960s. That is a huge increase and it puts immense pressure on the fish populations. An adult seal eats two tonnes of fish a year and can live for 40 years. This is an abundant resource and it is accessible year-round on the Magdalen Islands.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Earlier, there was discussion of the connection between predation and prey, and the idea of balance. Balance is also a concept that applies to food. There is food insecurity in both north and south, for example for northern residents who are living in Ottawa.

Do you need more tools to conduct a larger hunt in order to alleviate this food insecurity in the north and to meet the needs in the south?

Mr. Yoanis Menge: For the moment, we are focusing on food insecurity among Inuit and their need for access to seals. There is food insecurity everywhere in Canada and the world. There are people everywhere who need food. For the moment, however, we are trying first to respond to the needs of Inuit. Out of a population of 65,000 Inuit, 30% live in the south and we might not see them.

Six thousand Inuit residents have been counted in Ottawa. So there are 6,000 Inuit who live in Ottawa in addition to all of those who are passing through, who come for treatment in hospital, or who may be in prison or living on the street. Those situations especially are what is most visible.

Our project seeks to provide a solution to the problems of access to food, but in a positive way. As I said, this food is not just for the belly, it is also for spirit, body and identity.

So yes, if we can receive more assistance to develop our project, the solutions will be more substantial.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Mr. Komangapik, you want to add something. Go ahead.

[*English*]

Mr. Ruben Komangapik: I'd like to add that it's not just food, it's our culture. Many Inuit who are born in the cities don't have the same knowledge as I do. Therefore, when we bring seal into their lives, they're able to learn about what parts are utilized in different ways, and the names of the body parts. There is also teaching on how to care for the sealskin, and all of the tools that come with utilizing the skin. It keeps the culture alive, even though we're so far away from Nunavut, wherever Inuit are located.

● (1710)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: You mentioned transmission of know-how.

Since I have some time left, I would like us to realize that your effort is not just a material one, because it meets an imminent, important and urgent need to give Inuit back the very essence of their diet, their culture and their knowledge, but it also brings a promise of reconciliation. The play on words in your company's name is interesting on that point. It carries the promise of international reconciliation.

Can you comment on what I just said?

Mr. Yoanis Menge: We work on reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, but also between hunters and non-hunters, while taking public opinion into account. We work with people who may not know how the hunt works, how seal is consumed, or how this resource is used. Working together is an opportunity to change and improve that image and show that it is possible to reconcile on every level.

[*English*]

Do you have something to add?

The Chair: Actually, the time has expired for Madame Desbiens.

We'll go to Ms. Barron now for six minutes or less, please.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here from Inuksiuti.

Do you prefer to be called Mr. Ruben?

Mr. Ruben Komangapik: I have lots of names, so you can call me anything you want.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Through the chair, what is your preferred name?

Mr. Yoanis Menge: I call him *Kiniqtuks*.

It means when you stir something and it becomes muddy or cloudy. That's him.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I want to provide an opportunity for you to be able to finish your testimony, if you want to pick up where you left off.

Mr. Ruben Komangapik: Thank you, Lisa.

[*Witness spoke in Inuktitut*]

[*English*]

Each of the cultural seal hunters is really awesome in this country, and we should respect all of them, from Newfoundland, the Magdalen Islands and Nunavut, plus the territories and, hopefully, B.C. soon.

Seal meat should be available everywhere in restaurants in Canada and in all the stores. We need the infrastructure. As I said, that is what will bring it.

We need the same support as the Canadian government has for the fishing industry to make the seal hunting industry a success.

What do I think of seal? It shouldn't be demonized. It's a very beautiful creature.

If you really want to reconcile with the Inuit, remember the time when they killed off all of our dogs. I think this will be a nice way, if the federal government can provide seal meat that is caught to the sled dogs in the future. Imagine.

If we take care of this, we talk about real reconciliation. Although Reconseal Inuksiuti is a small player in this industry, we have big ideas for change. We started this company all by ourselves, with our own money. Now we have shown the world what we can do. Now we need help. We need people to show us the way.

Thank you.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: *Qujannamiik*.

My recent visit to Nunavut—I brought my daughter up as well—changed so much. It opened my eyes. It was a really positive experience while I was there.

One thing that came up in my conversations in Pangnirtung and Iqaluit was around the impacts of the market, and that there are many people who are under the assumption that due to indigenous rights, indigenous people can harvest. The problem is that without the market to be able to sell the seals and to be able to utilize this renewable resource, many Inuit are left without the means to make a livelihood.

I am wondering if you can speak a bit about how important it is that there is a market in place for Inuit to be able to sell this beautiful natural resource you're talking about.

● (1715)

Mr. Ruben Komangapik: There is a market. Which country are we in? Canada. We have to educate the rest of our fellow Canadians to show them what seals are really about.

Everybody has been demonizing both the animal and the human conducting the harvesting. We have to start really showing Canada, first and foremost. Because we don't have borders, we can send seal meat from here all the way to B.C. and to everywhere in between, and all the way to Newfoundland from our capital here.

I think the federal government needs to start promoting it—maybe in educational situations, too, and maybe in schools. Start them young. Maybe have a food program in every elementary school in every province and territory.

I think it's not just an Inuit problem. It's a Canadian problem that Canada can actually fix itself, and not look to the outside world for a yes or no, or more stuff like that.

Thank you.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yoanis Menge: We often try to export our products outside Canada, to develop markets at the international level. In our country, however, consumers would be prepared to buy seal meat.

If we make the necessary efforts to develop seal products and markets inside Canada itself, we are going to be able to sell our products here, domestically, without being afraid of borders closing later on. We have experienced this with the United States and Europe. Are we going to experience this situation with China soon? Why send products to China when we could be proud of eating our own products right here at home?

People who come to visit Canada might want to try the national product. Canada's product could be seal. I can go to the IGA and find kangaroo meat. Kangaroos are a major problem in Australia. Why could I not find seal meat at the IGA?

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to Mr. Small for five minutes or less.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will be splitting my time with MP Epp.

I have a couple of brief questions for Mr. Lansbergen. I have about two minutes. These will only need quick answers.

To your knowledge, are Norway, Iceland and Japan currently harvesting whales?

Mr. Paul Lansbergen: I don't know for sure, but Japan certainly is.

Mr. Clifford Small: Are whales subject to the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which protects whales in the U.S.?

Mr. Paul Lansbergen: I believe so, yes.

Mr. Clifford Small: Have we seen any sanctions levied against seafood entering the U.S. from any of the countries hunting whales, because of their whale harvest? Have you had any knowledge of that in your travels in the markets?

Mr. Paul Lansbergen: I don't have any information on that. I'm sorry.

It's a good question, though.

Mr. Clifford Small: Yes, I figured you might have some knowledge about that.

I don't think there has been any sanctioning of these countries for hunting whales, seals, puffins or whatever. How real can the threat of sanctions be, against our seafood, when other NAFO countries are hunting whales and not being sanctioned?

● (1720)

Mr. Paul Lansbergen: One important distinction would be this: The intent is to protect marine mammals while you're harvesting other fish and seafood, for example, or conducting other marine activities. If we can clearly articulate that, as we harvest fish and seafood, we're not harming other marine mammals in the process, we will still be in line with the MMPA. In that sense, we should be insulated, but it all depends on the interpretation by the Americans.

Mr. Clifford Small: Do you think that same policy would apply to Iceland, Norway and Japan, in the same sense as it does to Canada?

Mr. Paul Lansbergen: I assume so.

Mr. Clifford Small: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Lansbergen.

Thanks to all the other witnesses.

I will turn my time over to Mr. Epp, now.

Mr. Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC): Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I would like to move the following motion, which Mr. Bragdon did, earlier this week:

> That, given the factual inaccuracy provided by Mr. Richard Goodyear, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans' Chief Financial Officer and Assistant Deputy Minister, in his testimony to the committee on December 2, 2022, and raised in correspondence to the committee dated December 14, 2022, from Mr. Gregory McClinchey, Policy and Legislative Affairs Director of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission; and that considering the harm done to Canada's relationship with the United States through Canada's continued lack of fiscal accountability toward the Great Lakes Fishery Commission and the numerous bi-lateral initiatives that would be jeopardized by the termination of the Great Lakes Fisheries Convention, that the committee report to the House on this inaccuracy, and recall Mr. Goodyear to committee to rectify his testimony.

May I suggest, Mr. Chair, that the official, Mr. Goodyear, be scheduled to appear in the second hour, when the minister is scheduled to appear later this month, I believe?

The Chair: Mr. Morrissey.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Mr. Chair, is the motion valid to be debated at the current time?

The Chair: We're in committee business, so yes. There was a notice that went to everyone earlier, so it's within the timeline.

Is there any further discussion on the motion?

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Mr. Chair, I would like to suspend.

The Chair: We can suspend for a few minutes. We have six minutes left in the meeting time, so we'll give you some time.

● (1720)

(Pause)

● (1725)

The Chair: Madame Desbiens, did you want to say something?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I simply wanted to let all my colleagues around the table know that we are in the process of doing a study. We have had witnesses travel here from very far away. We also have experts present via Zoom. Our committee's time for the study is precious. I oppose this process, which is taking up all the committee's time.

I think this kind of thing should be planned in the calendar or some other way, but I strongly suggest it.

The Chair: Fine.

[*English*]

Mr. Morrissey.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: I agree with Madame Desbiens. It is valid. I cannot comment on the term given the factual inaccuracy that's subject to discussion, but we have witnesses here who we should be dealing with, and this could be brought up at another time.

The Chair: Mr. Epp, you have your hand up.

Mr. Dave Epp: Yes. The factual inaccuracy has been substantiated by the commission, not by any other portion. It's related to the testimony that was provided as to the status of the Great Lakes fishery budget for the 2023 season.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: That's valid.

Mr. Dave Epp: Right, and the purpose of bringing this up at this time was simply for the efficient operation of the committee, for when the officials are coming at the end of the month. That's the reason for the timing.

The Chair: Ms. Barron.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I want to reiterate that, moving forward, I would really love for us to be able to work collaboratively when there's something like this that needs to come forward that's timely. We should have a discussion around how we want to redistribute our time to ensure that those who speak and ask questions at the end are not inadvertently impacted as a result.

I do appreciate that this is important and needs to come forward. I'm not arguing that, but this could have been done differently, so that's a little disappointing. I appreciate the information, and I will vote when it comes up.

The Chair: We'll call for a vote.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I want to say a big thank you to our witnesses for appearing today, especially the Reconseal group. To listen to you, it's amazing what you're trying to do. I wish you nothing but success.

I want to say a big thank you to Mr. Lansbergen and Mr. McAllister who joined by Zoom. We are sorry for the interruption we had, but that's part of committee business. It can happen at any time.

Thank you for sharing your knowledge with us.

Everybody, enjoy the rest of of your day.

The meeting is adjourned.