



"Sustainable Hunting, Biodiversity & Countryside Activities" Intergroup discuss the EU position on Seals

Brussels, 25.09.2008

The "Sustainable Hunting, Biodiversity & Countryside Activities" Intergroup held its first meeting after the summer recess at the European Parliament (EP), this time in Brussels, on the topic of "The EU position on Seals: wider implications for wildlife conservation & management".

After a clarification of the future of the Intergroups in the EP, MEP Michl EBNER (Italy), President of the "Sustainable Hunting" Intergroup, passed the chair to MEP Lasse LEHTINEN (Finland) who first made a brief statement of the tragic shooting event that occurred in Finland the previous day, which he felt should not be misused to push for additional restrictions on the possession of sporting firearms by hunters. He then introduced the panel of experts to the assembled audience of MEPs, guests and observers.

In the absence of "Environment" Commissioner Stavros DIMAS, or anybody from his Cabinet, MEP Elisabeth JEGGLE (Germany) of the EP "Agriculture" Committee, opened the debate with the announcement that Intergroup Co-President MEP Véronique MATHIEU (France) will be the *Rapporteur* in this Committee for the Proposal from the European Commission. She then proceeded to outline past legislation on the seals issue since it first appeared some twenty years ago, stating that "it is not new that the EP discuss this topic". She agreed that so far, the European Union has no competence in the area of welfare for wild animals but that they can act only to attend to distortions among Member States. She said that in the EP, they "want to address this unbalance".

Addressing the scientific and technical aspects of seal hunting in northern Europe, Dr. Torsten MÖRNER, a veterinarian specialised in wild animal welfare and President of the Swedish Hunters' Association, drew attention to the significant differences between the Canadian commercial seal harvest and the small-scale Nordic seal hunting. He argued that for seal hunting to be sustainable, seal products other than the skins should also be used, something that the Proposal will destroy and lead to seals becoming seen as "pest animals". He pointed out that if a seal population needs to be stabilised (e.g. in order to avoid increased damage to fisheries), the harvest should be 8 to 10% of that population. As for animal welfare, he stated that "it is something which has to be decided at a local level."

Speaking on behalf of the Humane Society International, an animal rights' organisation that claims to represent over 10 Million people, Rebecca ALDWORTH tried to demonstrate how the Canadian seal "hunt" is inhumane and incompatible with the principles of ethical hunting. According to her, there was no "fair chase" as the seals are too young, seals are not killed humanely and they are not fully utilised as the primary use is the fur. She stated that only an "unconditional prohibition" will end this seal hunt as it would eliminate all markets for products taken from seals, also because it would be impossible to certify whether products came from seals that were killed humanely.

Pierre de BOISGUILBERT, French expert on communication and animal welfare matters, demonstrated how this seal topic is the vanguard of a wider philosophical and ideological change on behalf of an increasingly "urban" society. He felt that banning seal products is the first step towards a "meat-less and pet-less world" and expanded upon the three strategies of the animal rights' movement, namely legislative (the passing of rules and laws), behavioural (putting humans and animals on equal footing) and radical, which he called eco-terrorism. He concluded by asking "why should man extract himself from nature and try to achieve moral perfection?" and by stating that humans should have the right to use animals in a reasonable way.

In his concluding remarks, L. LEHTINEN expressed the view that "despite sometimes very polarised positions, the debate has been constructive" but he also recognised "that we have all been raised with Disney's view of animals". M. EBNER was also pleased with the outcome of the meeting and stressed that "a distinction has to be made between the commercial harvest of seals that takes place outside the EU and the small scale hunting practised in Europe".

Since 1985, the Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation of the EU has provided the Secretariat for the Sustainable Hunting, Biodiversity & Countryside Activities" Intergroup at the European Parliament. FACE works closely with MEPs from different political groups, who have a common interest in promoting wildlife conservation, sustainable hunting and fishing, and sustainable management of the countryside and its traditions.

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