

**Seal webinar 15 November 2023**

**Welcome address by Markus Norrback, Chair of the Board/Ostrobothnian Fisheries Association**

I am very pleased to see that today's seminar have gathered people from all around the Baltic Sea. I would like to wish you all welcome to this webinar!

Seal hunting is a cultural inheritance in Finland, Sweden and the Åland islands. There are historical records of seal bones in human settlement in our region Ostrobothnia, that date back to 5000-6000 years ago.

For example, in my hometown of Närpes a harp seal was found in 1935 and within the remains was a 21cm long harpoon made of elk bone. The seal has probably been harpooned in winter in its breathing hole in the Gulf of Bothnia. It is likely that the seal was mortally wounded and sunk to the bottom around 6000 years ago. Due to the land uplift the seal was found in a field approximately 17 km from the coastline. The remains and the harpoon are now on exhibition in our national museum in Helsinki.

This is clear evidence that for thousands of years seals were used by coastal communities. And still today we have a small-scale ethical hunting, where the hunters use the meat, fur, leather, and oil.

Seal populations in the Baltic Sea are today very viable and both the grey seals and Baltic ringed seals along our region of the Baltic Sea are growing annually in numbers.

During the 1990: s the Baltic seal populations grew rapidly, and in the beginning of this millennium they started to become a problem to fishermen. In 2003-2006, before the trade ban in 2009, my organization, the Ostrobothnian Fisheries association, took part in EU funded projects to develop new products and information on seal hunting and utilizing seals as a valuable resource. The projects resulted in books on ethical hunting, books on cooking and tanning seal pelts.

Hunting courses produced highly educated hunters. A couple of exclusive restaurants in Vaasa had seal meat on their menu and seal meat and luxury items, like gloves and hats of seal fur, was sold on some small coastal fisher's markets. There was a growing interest in the products regionally.

All this ended with the EU trade ban in 2009. Hunting seals requires a lot of special equipment and skills and the interest in hunting started to decrease. After the hunter's freezer is full, there is no need to hunt any more. There was never a cull, it was always about using the animal, just as any other game species.

Today, fishing communities and small-scale fisheries are struggling in the presence of increasing seal populations. The losses caused by seals seriously affect job satisfaction among coastal fishers by adding to a feeling of powerlessness regarding the future of the fishery.

There is a great concern that without measures to improve the management of seals, the small-scale fishery will be uneconomic and that we won't have any new fishermen in the future.

In our region in Ostrobothnia the growing seal population causes damages of around 200 000 euros yearly to fishing gear alone. In comparison, the elk population in our region causes yearly losses to forestry of approximately 20 000 euros.

As a result of the trade ban only about 25 % of the yearly quota on grey seals in Finland is filled, and the damages to fisheries increase each year.

One must ask why do we have a trade ban on seal products? It is clearly not for biological reasons; in fact, the seals are doing really well.

The small-scale hunting of seals in the Baltic Sea is not less ethical than any other hunting, in fact, the seal hunting is one of the most regulated kinds of hunting in Finland.

Both conservationists and fishermen are concerned about declining fish stocks, but at the same time, they are anything but in agreement about the causes. But there should be no doubt that the increased seal populations are causing greater and greater challenges for coastal fishery.

The current management of seals in the Baltic Sea is biased towards the preservation of seal populations and it is failing to adequately consider socio-economic impacts of seal population. There is a clear need to strike a balance between seal conservation and the viability of coastal fisheries, taking into consideration local circumstances.

A sustainable solution also requires taking into consideration and balancing the views and perceptions of the fishing sector, coastal communities, and the conservation sector.

The EU trade ban on seal products remains problematic. Since seals cannot be utilized in any other way than in the hunter's own household, the ban is effectively limiting all the potential socioeconomic benefits of hunting and contributes to the underutilization of hunting quotas.

Allowing a small scale and regulated trade on seal products within each of the countries in the Baltic Sea would be an important step going forward to restore the status of seals from a considerable problem for fisheries to a resource, and to enable local communities in our coastal areas to generate a local green economy based on sustainable resource use.

The conflict between seal conservation and coastal fishery in the Baltic Sea is complex and there are no easy solutions, but nonetheless, solutions must be found.

I would once again like to welcome you all to this webinar and I hope that through increased cooperation and information exchange, we can find solutions that enable us to strengthen coastal fishing.

I wish you all a positive and constructive webinar!