

# Should the EU ban on the import of seal products stand?

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Next month, following an appeal by Canada and Norway to overturn the EU ban on the import of seal products, the World Trade Organization (WTO) is expected to announce whether the 2013 decision will be upheld. In an editorial article, a University of Bristol academic, whose research on the animal welfare of the seal hunt has been used in the case, explains why the ban should stand.

The article by Dr Andy Butterworth, Senior Lecturer in Animal Sciences at the University of Bristol's School of Veterinary Sciences and an official observer of the seal hunt is published in the journal *Nature*.

EU legislation, in place since 2009, intended to ban the import of seal products. However, the implementation of this has been slowed pending a decision by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on whether the ban would be permitted under WTO rules, which must reconcile contrasting statements from international agreements that are almost 70 years old. One forbids "arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination" between countries. Another says that nations can act in a way that is "necessary to protect public morals".

Last November, the WTO agreed that the ban on marketing of seal products could be legitimately implemented on the basis of protection of 'public morals'. This was a historic decision, the first time that public morals combined with [animal welfare](#) concerns had been used to create a marketing restriction for a specific animal product.

The EU ban was introduced on the grounds of public morals, and science and scientific evidence was used to inform the judgements made on the moral questions raised by the seal hunt. The scientific evidence, by researchers including Dr Butterworth, indicated that some shot seals took a considerable period of time to die, and that some injured animals were 'unchecked' for periods of several minutes before being finally killed by clubbing. The post mortems that the researchers carried out on the ice indicated that some seals had multiple shooting, clubbing and hooking injuries—and that some had swallowed their own fresh blood—suggesting that they were alive for a period following the first contact with the hunter.

Dr Butterworth in his article argues the appeal from Canada and Norway does not challenge the "poor welfare outcomes" of the seals, which the WTO last year judged sufficient to justify the European [ban](#). Instead, the appeal concentrates on trade issues and restrictions.

Dr Andy Butterworth said: "As a veterinary scientist, I consider the hunt to present real and significant welfare concerns. The available [scientific evidence](#) supports that opinion. But science, of course, is only one of the factors at play. If what I have witnessed being done to a young seal was done to a horse or a dog, there is little doubt that it would be labelled as cruel."

The annual Canadian commercial seal hunt is the world's largest hunt of marine mammals and by the end of the 2014 hunt, a quota of some 400,000 young seals could have been taken. The seal pups, which are only a few weeks old, are prized for their skins and for the omega-3-rich oil used in food supplements: products that are shipped around the world.

**More information:** The moral problems with the commercial seal hunt, Andy Butterworth, *Nature*, Volume 509, 1 May 2014.

Provided by University of Bristol

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