

Political animals

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European politicians are breathtakingly hypocritical about sealskins

ROUGHLY handled, and incompetently stunned, terrified animals may awaken several times before they are slaughtered. Some have their throats slit fully conscious. Europe's industrial farms dispatch 1m sheep, cattle and pigs every day. You cannot cater to the welfare of a large animal like a pig when the line must kill five in a minute.

If the European Parliament were really interested in animal welfare, then it might look rather more closely at the farming industry that the European Union so lavishly rewards with subsidies. But it has more pressing business. On May 5th MEPs, suddenly disgusted by the cruelty of people far away hunting seals, voted to endorse a ban on the trade of seal products, most of which come from Canada. Their hypocritical recommendation, which still has to be approved by the European Commission and Council, isn't even much good for the seals.

Bash it on the head, quick

Every year, 300,000 seals meet their end not by mauling from a polar bear, but instantaneously from gunshot or a blow from a club. Four years ago the WWF, an environmental organisation, commissioned an independent vet's report which concluded that seal clubbing is not cruel if it is properly done by competent and trained professionals. The report judged that the Canadian hunt was professional and highly regulated. And the vets said that popular horror of the seal hunt seemed to be based largely on emotion and on images that are difficult even for experienced observers to interpret.

By the grim standards of Europe's farrowing sheds, millions of seals enjoy a blissful life fishing and breeding on the Canadian ice. At least Canadian seals have the luxury of being stunned before they die. Compassion in World Farming, a lobby group, says that half the sheep killed in France are conscious when their throats are slit. Such treatment is possible through a loophole that allows for religious slaughter—a loophole that the same champions of animal welfare in the European Parliament voted to avoid closing on May 7th.

A few seals are killed to protect fish, others as a source of blubber or food. Most are indeed killed for their fur. That may not be to everyone's taste, but it is hardly unEuropean. Europe's fur farms produce over 30m mink and fox pelts a year. Every four or five days Europe kills more animals for their fur than the entire annual Canadian hunt does in a year. Seal hunting sounds unfair; but Europeans are reluctant to ban the hunting of similarly defenceless game birds, deer or wild boar.

A ban on the seal hunt would spare individual seals, but it may not do much for the seal population as a whole. When wildlife cannot be traded, it loses its value and thus the incentive for people to conserve it. Today the hunters exploiting the seals have an excellent reason to maintain a healthy and growing population. A trade ban would mean that the management or maintenance of a wild population becomes just another drain on resources. Sometimes ecotourism pays the bills, but it works only in places that are easy for tourists to get to.

Why did the European Parliament overlook all this? Seal-murdering foreigners are a soft target and animal-welfare groups have been lobbying MEPs for years. It may not be a coincidence that they finally voted for a ban just a month before they face elections. Having been invisible to their constituents for the past five years, what better way for MEPs to save their own skins than to fight valiantly for those of baby seals?