



SEAL HUNTING

Historically, seal hunting has been a very significant means of livelihood for the people living in the Kvarken archipelago. When the Gulf of Bothnia coast was populated, seal hunting and fishing provided a lifeline for the first permanent inhabitants. Along with fishing, seal hunting played an important economic role.



SEALNET. PHOTO: TUIJA WAREN
LICENCE: KVARKEN'S BOAT MUSEUM - MALAX MUSEIFÖRENING R.F.

During the era of self-sufficiency, the islanders turned their backs on the mainland and dedicated themselves to the bounty of the sea. In his book on the history of Northern peoples, Olaus Magnus wrote in the 16th century about the “sea calves” that were found in great numbers in the Gulf of Bothnia and the Gulf of Finland. His description is interesting as it is clear it refers to the grey seal; the hunter is stalking the seal with his seal spear or is “calling the sea calf by mooing the same way as it does”. Magnus goes on to describe how the sea calves gather in large droves to rest and make noise.

In addition to fishing and farming, active seal hunting was another reason for the population growth in the 16th century. In 1551, the tithes of the clergy were taken as train oil and seal and pup skins to the bailiff in Korsholm, i.e. to the Crown. The records show the number of boats, the

shares and the size of the catch. It can be seen in the bailiff records from 1560 that the seal rifle had not yet been introduced. In the 16th century, seal hunting was pursued almost all round the year – in open water in the autumn and spring, by various means under the ice until the Annunciation (the 25th of March) and after that on the ice. Autumnal net hunting was especially common in the Korsholm parish and produced as much as 10,000 kg of train oil per year. In the autumn and late winter the seals had a thick layer of fat, whereas in the late spring and summer they lost weight and shed hair, which affected the times for hunting in order to get the most out of them.

The views and regulations on hunting varied. According to a royal decree from 1590, all seal pups were protected and all hunting trips forbidden until the Annun-

ciation. The decree met with opposition in Kvarken, as the best seal hunting season was considered to fall between the name day of Matti (the 24th of February) and the Annunciation. Attitudes towards seals have alternated over the centuries. In the 18th century, the seal was classified as vermin, and people were even encouraged to kill them.

Seal hunting from rowing boats, on ice and on long-distance hunting trips were methods that partly focused on faraway areas, but seals were also hunted in shallow areas near the shore, on the outer edge of the fast ice, and close to the floating blocks of ice.

The importance of seal hunting on ice increased in the 17th century, as you could use firearms on these shorter trips. In 1815 it was written down that, after Baltic herring fishing, seal hunting is the second most profitable livelihood for the fishing population and that the dangerous long-distance hunting trips had largely been stopped, excluding the Malax parish.

As many as 15,000 seals were caught each year in Ostrobothnia, and even 90 per cent of the male population subject to taxation participated in it. Seal hunting waned in the 18th century, which is thought to be due to the climate getting colder and the fact that the grey seal enjoyed staying in the Baltic Sea in late winter. Seal hunting became more common again at the end of the 19th century and in the 20th century, as the seal was increasingly considered vermin and a bounty was introduced, reviving the seal hunting culture.

Seals provided food, income and clothes. Seal meat that was not used in the household was salted, smoked and sold. In the Catholic era, seal meat was especially important as it was allowed to be eaten during Lent.





Seal Hunting from Rowing Boats: Net Hunting

Hunting seals with nets utilised a wide-meshed net that used to be made from hemp. Tengström lists four different seal nets: long net, barrage net, cross net and a pole-long net combination. The long nets were set next to steep seaside cliffs, one end towards the land and the other towards the sea. The barrage net was set in a half-circle around the seal shallows at the edge of the sea. The shorter and deeper cross net was used in wintertime in cracks and holes in the ice, as the seals stayed near these. The pole-long net combination consisted of several nets attached to a pole and was used in inlets and gulfs where there were ringed seals. The nets were mainly used for catching ringed seals.

The hemp yarn for the seal nets was still being spun at home at the beginning of the 20th century. You needed about 17 kg of hemp for three nets. Washed and cleaned, it made 9 kg of yarn – i.e. 3 kg of yarn per net. Hemp yarn was boiled for 4 hours before it was made into a net. You alternately put ash and yarn in the pot.

The net was not supposed to be visible in the water so it was dyed by smoking or boiling it with a mixture of spruce and alder chips together with ash.

The length of the seal net was 14 fathoms (1 fathom = 1.78 m) and its depth varied from 20–24 to 30 mesh loops. The mesh size was 12–14 inches. The hemp yarn was replaced by 27-ply cotton yarn in the 20th century. The bottom layer was made from a thinner material so that the net would tear at the weakest part if it got stuck on the sea bed. The net had no bottom cord. The floats were made of 60-cm spade-like pellets, 18 per net. At the end of the net there was a fourfold cord that ended with a 20-cm loop to which the anchor rope was fastened. The anchor rope was made



SEAL BOAT. PHOTO: TUJJA WAREN
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of horse hair as it endures dampness without rotting. The anchor was a stone weighing about 35 kg, and the net was only anchored at one side.

The seal hunters were divided into teams of six men. They headed for the hunting locations at the beginning of October, and hunting continued until the sea froze. On arriving at the net setting locations, the men sounded the depth to get the net at the right depth: 7 fathoms for a net with 30 loops, 6 fathoms for 24 loops and 4 fathoms for 20 loops. The nets were set in a line, one after the other.

At Mickelsörarna and Storskär, net hunting was practised in the autumn. Seal hunting from rowing boats took place in the spring. The seals were killed with a spear or seal rifle.

The cross net was used under the ice, but net hunting was primarily practised in open water in the autumn; in Kvarken, from the name day of Mikael (the 29th of September) until the sea froze.

Seal Hunting on Ice

In late winter, seals were mainly hunted on the ice in Kvarken. The ice hunting developed from long-distance hunting trips. The trek to the edge of the fast ice was made on foot, taking along small boats and other equipment. The prerequisite for this type of hunting was that the drift ice was pressing against the eastern shore of the Gulf of Bothnia, which made it possible to get near the breeding grey seals. Two or three men went to the edge of the ice in a small boat, where the grey seals were clubbed to death and the ringed seals were shot. Ice hunting was practised between the name day of Matti (24.2.) and the Annunciation (25.3.) After the Annunciation, hunting was only carried out by shooting. Long-distance hunting trips became rarer in the 19th century, whereas ice hunting increased. While nets usually gave ringed seals, it was the grey seals and, especially, their pups that were pursued on the ice hunting trips.





Long-Distance Hunting Trips

The Kvarken seal hunters' hunting grounds extended from the southern islands in the Sea of Åland to the Bay of Bothnia in the north. In his open letter in 1551, Gustav Vasa wrote that the Ostrobothnians had the right to pursue seal hunting throughout the Gulf of Bothnia, including its western parts. Thanks to the long-distance option, the hunters were not dependent on local or regional ice conditions; they would go and find the areas where the seals stayed. In normal winters, hunting started from the south and proceeded along the coast of Sweden northwards towards the Bay of Bothnia, where hunting continued until the ice melted completely. If the catch was good early on, the hunters could return home and prepare for another trip later in the season.

Cneiff differentiated between the earlier trip (from the beginning of February to the end of May), when mainly grey seals were hunted, and the later trip (from the end of March to the beginning of June), when mainly ringed seals were hunted.

The long-distance hunting trip could last as long as 3 months without the hunters having any contact with land, which meant they needed versatile and sufficient provisions and equipment. Each crew had a large hunting boat that was used for sailing in the open waters and pulled onto the fast ice. All the equipment and provisions, and the catch, was kept in the boat, which also served as the hunters' dwelling. The crew included 7–8 men, and the boat was 34–36 feet long and 30 feet wide. To make it easy to haul the boat onto the ice, the stern was built steep and high, whereas the bow was low and broad. Earlier it was common to use a square sail, but this was later replaced by a gaff sail, which functioned better in crosswinds and storms. There was a change in the size of the large hunting boat: the 20th century boats were smaller than the earlier ones.

Pundardagen was the day preceding the departure, when the boat was loaded with all the equipment and food supplies. Raitandag was the following day, when the hunters set off to the outer shallows. The boat was taken to the outer archipelago in advance, and the long-distance hunting trip started on 5 February, or slightly later if there was a lot of snow. Horses were also taken along. On smooth ice it was possible to move the boat with the help of a sail, otherwise it had to be pushed or pulled.

The boat was covered with a tent that used to be made from a square sail; later, a protective cover specifically made for this purpose was used. The equipment also included small boats that were built in the same way as the large hunting boat. The small boats were 4 metres long and 1.5 metres wide, and they had a low keel and two brass-covered runners. The main vehicle was the "seal ski", a kind of hybrid between a ski and a sledge, which enabled the seal hunter to approach his target in a lying position and move across weak ice, cracks and open water. As the hunting boat departed, as many gunshots were fired as there were men in the boat. When it returned, the families held a celebration with seal pup meat, blood pancakes made from seal blood, and the seal's front fins on the menu.

The blubber was scraped off the skin with a 21 cm curved knife made from an old scythe and then cooked in large pots outdoors. The oil was sold and the money shared out. Most of the skins were sold too.

Other Hunting Methods

A trap was mainly used in the autumn and spring, when the catch included both grey seals and Saimaa ringed seals. The grey seals were easier to catch as they were more eager for the bait. The hunting was usually carried out by 2 or 3

men, each equipped with 1–2 traps. The trap had two functions: to catch seals in the autumn and winter, and to protect the fishing equipment. The traps were made by the village blacksmith and provided the best catches in November and December. A seal trap weighed at least 12 kg and was a metre long.

Vekarin was a type of spear, a general-purpose tool that served both as a weapon and a utility article. It consisted of a 30 cm-long iron rod with 12 cm-long barbs, which was attached to the end of a 160 cm-long wooden handle. When the hunter moved on the ice, he tested the ice's weight-bearing capacity with the spear, and when the seal was shot, it was killed with one spear strike. The spear could also be used for making a hole in the ice.



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