



Seal Meat

Seal meat was used as food and the skin and fat were utilised for various purposes. It was mostly the seal pups that were used as food; adult seals were eaten too, but their meat was not considered as delicious as that of the young animals. Compared to other food at the end of the Middle Ages, seal meat was extremely rich in energy, which was important for man's thermal balance in the cold climate. Seal meat has also been used for medicinal purposes. The seal was an important supplement to the diet in the archipelago as late as the beginning of the 20th century when few other sources of protein were available.

In the Middle Ages, a conflict arose between the people and the Catholic church because the church did not permit the use of meat during Lent, which happened to coincide with the best seal hunting season in late winter. The church compromised by giving seal meat the same status as fish, which resulted in seal meat becoming especially sought-after in the Catholic era.

Seal meat was stored and sold in large barrels. A 19th-century tradition in Björköby was to eat seal meat soup once a week all round the year.

The seals were brought home whole, as the meat turned rancid within 24 hours of opening the carcass and separating the skin and fat from the meat unless it was immersed in water.

Seal meat found its way back onto the islanders' tables during the wars in the 20th century. Even the seal blood was used: hunters drank it fresh, and it was a basic ingredient in many dishes. Fresh blood was said to taste like freshly milked milk. Even the internal organs were used, especially the liver.

Blubber and Train Oil

The seal's layer of blubber, as thick as 10 cm, was valuable. One seal could provide 30–100 kg of blubber, or even 160 kg from the largest grey seals. In the Korsholm parish, seal hunting could produce as much as 10,000 kg of blubber in the 16th century. Blubber was processed into train oil (seal oil) and used in cooking, both fresh and salted, as well as for tanning the skins, as a base for paints, and as medicine. The blubber was boiled in large pots to turn it into train oil. As late as the beginning of the 20th century, the Björköby seal hunters ate raw seal meat sprinkled with salt on their hunting trips. Before paraffin lamps, train oil lamps were used for lighting. The growing European population needed train oil for their lamps at least until the 17th century, and it was imported from the Kvarken area. Blubber was also used for making soap. The blubber in dead seals drifting ashore started to ferment, and this fermented fat was used for washing clothes as the people believed it would stave off vermin. Blubber was also used as an anti-inflammatory medicine and sold far inland; thin slices of blubber were placed on the wound.

Train oil was used to impregnate the outer house walls, new boats, masts and sails. It was also mixed with red ochre or tar. Linen cloth impregnated with train oil became a waterproof material for sails or tents. Train oil was also used in the manufacturing industry for tanning leather and fur. In the 19th century, the growing industry used train oil as a lubricant, among other things, and in cosmetics production its heyday was the 1920s. Train oil has also been used as an anti-rusting agent for tools: brushed with train oil and dried in the sun, iron remains rust-free for about ten years. The people who controlled the quality of the train oil were called trantoppare.

Skin

Seal skin was used for making blankets and sleeping mats, as well as covers for carriage seats, saddles, chairs, trunks and boxes. In the villages, seal skin was mainly used for bags, shoes and water-tight seal skin trousers, which were warm in the winter and cool in the summer thanks to the hay insulation.

Seal skin shoes were used well into the 1950s because they were water-resistant. Made from untreated skin, the shoes were hard and stiff. They were filled with tar water when not in use to keep them supple and usable; this also improved their durability. Carefully sewn shoes could be filled to the brim with tar water. Bags and pouches made of seal skin had a variety of uses, but were primarily used as food bags. Working gloves and waistcoats made of seal skin were used in fishing and hunting.

White seal pup skin was highly valued and made into hats, cushion covers and backpacks.



BAGS MADE OF SEAL SKIN.
PHOTO: TUIJA WAREN
LICENCE: KVARKEN'S BOATMUSEUM
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