



SUMMARY REPORT

How can we support indigenous people's sustainable hunt in the Arctic? The initiative of a QR Code for Seal Skin

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In 2009, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a regulation on banning the trade in seal products in the European Union. The seal hunt is however part of the socio-economy, culture and identity of the Inuit and other indigenous communities and it contributes greatly to their subsistence and development. For this reason the Regulation provides for an Inuit exemption, which allows the placing on the Union market of seal products, which result from hunts traditionally conducted by Inuit and other indigenous communities. Two years ago, the European Parliament debated further the trade in seal products and the conditions for the placing on the market. The conditions contain further restriction, which have not helped the decreasing trade on seal product originated from Inuit hunting to the market in the EU. As a result, a new QR-Code for seal products has been developed by stakeholders. The code will be able to effectively indicate that the seal product originates from Inuit hunting and complies with the conditions for the placing on the market in the EU. This event gathered policy-makers, members of the indigenous community, industry, NGOs and stakeholders to exchange views on the QR Code information initiative.

MEP Jørn Dohrmann welcomed participants by highlighting his great interest in the topic as the seal skin issue has been one of great concern. Through travel to Greenland he found that this issue to be of great importance to local politicians, hunters and communities. Even though the EU has an Inuit exemption many products are still met with restriction, and questions remain regarding the compatibility of Inuit products with EU law. It was said that such products are aligned with EU law and MEP Dohrmann noted his happiness at the opportunity to bring this discussion to Brussels, to promote new initiatives, such as the QR code, to improve understanding.

Karl-Kristian Kruse, Minister for Fisheries and Hunting, Government of Greenland, stated his appreciation for the opportunity to shed light on seal skin issues and on the QR code initiative. Greenland is a coastal country to the Arctic Ocean and the people of Greenland are very much dependent on marine resources. The government aims to continue to base Greenland's economy on sustainable management of the various species on land and in the surrounding waters. Greenland finds that it has become necessary to make additional efforts to secure financial income among Greenlandic hunters. The income deriving from the sale of seal skins constitutes a major part of the incomes of many families and this is particularly the case in remote areas. The income level of these families has dropped sharply due to the declining price of seal skin on the international market. Based on the Inuit exemption, seal skin from these regions is legal to export into the EU if they are properly certified by an authorised certifying body. Despite this, in recent years it has been demonstrated that even



with this exemption, the implementation process of the seal skin ban has been devastating for Greenland's economy. It is an economy based on sustainable utilisation of abundant resources yet citizens in EU Member States have no knowledge of the legality or of the sustainability of the product. Europe once constituted an important market for Greenland. However, with the EU ban on the skins in 1983 and 2010 the popularity of Inuit products have significantly declined. Various efforts have been made to disseminate information about Inuit culture and sustainable hunting practices. However, lack of knowledge both within the political system and among ordinary citizens remains. The Ministry supports the QR code to help communicate information about seal skin products. Greenland wants to support Inuit hunters and producers of seal products so that they can support themselves while utilising animals in a sustainable way. The importance of the QR code was reiterated and it was noted that Greenland supports efforts of the EU to become a permanent observer to the Arctic Council to further address issues relating to the region.

Aaju Peter, Inuit Livelihood Advocate, Nunavut (Canada), remarked on Inuit knowledge of survival which far trumps that of people in the modern world. Inuit people hunt for their food and they utilise the whole animal and are very skilled and able to survive out on the land. The process of making the seal skins was discussed; the skin is the by-product of the hunted seal, and after it is skinned it is dried and sewed to make a product producing zero waste. Such opportunity to participate in a global economy is rare in the Arctic, and the seal ban greatly disadvantages the people by creating more inequality between the indigenous people and the rest of the world. It was said that the Inuit exemption on seal products has given hunters, women and youth more opportunity, but a lot has been lost in the time since the ban. Youth is losing the culture and the skills that go with hunting and now intergenerational inequality must be addressed. Renewed engagement must go hand and hand with reconciliation and equality for all indigenous populations. It was said that indigenous people have to prove their authenticity, and this relates to their seal skin products. The QR code is not an ask for self-promotion, but an ask for the opportunity to strengthen understanding, authenticity and validity of their products. Indigenous people want to share their history, culture and traditions with the rest of the world to promote understanding of each other. An anecdote was provided from **Hovak Johnston from the North West Territories of Canada**, who shared the story of a seal skin parka she had made for her son. Growing up as a seamstress in the Arctic, living off the land, she possessed the knowledge of making parkas. She made one as a gift for her son, however when he shared an image of it online, he received a backlash on social media. This negative feedback from people on the internet, particularly directed towards young people is damaging for the continuation of indigenous culture.

Ditte Sorknæs, Great Greenland and Mette Lykke Nielsen, Fur Europe presented the idea and details behind the QR code. **Ditte Sorknæs** highlighted a map of trading stations, noting that 37 stations are present in Greenland, which is a lot for a small country to manage. It was highlighted that these trading areas are critical for rural areas, because the people who utilise them do not have the opportunity to travel to any other places. There are many areas, primarily in the north and east, where seal hunting is the primary source of income and food. Regarding the impact of the EU seal ban, from the time period of 2006 to 2010, the losses that were experienced then will never be regained. In the years following 2010, the



ban has kept seal prices at an unnatural low; the complex nature of implementing the exemption has made it virtually impossible for manufacturers, and consumers to sell seal products. To take steps to mitigate this problem, Great Greenland has proposed a QR code; a simple woven textile label that can be attached to clothing and accessories. It can be scanned to access an EU website that explains the product and the Inuit exemption, giving security to consumers. It was said that this is necessary, because although the exemption exists, it has not been well communicated to consumers in the EU, such that today seven years after the implementation, people still don't realise that they can purchase seal skin products. **Mette Lykke Nielsen** continued by presenting further details on the code. It was reiterated that the QR code will not be enough stating that actors must maintain pressure on the European Commission to inform citizens about the Inuit exemption, so that they understand that it is legal in the EU to buy seal products from indigenous communities. It was stated that an information campaign from the Commission could improve awareness. There is a lot of interest in seal skins, particularly among designers and retailers and there are a lot of uses for the fur, but many questions remain concerning the legality of using the products. There are also a lot of complaints from customs authorities who are holding back the products, so there is a clear need for information. It was said that the QR code is a good step forward, but that it needs to be followed up with information from the EU side.

Marc Richir, Senior Expert Ocean governance, Marine Biodiversity, Whaling, Trade in Seal Products, DG ENV, European Commission stated that the Commission is aware of the significance of the seal hunt in Greenland and of the importance for Inuit communities of exporting seal products to the EU market. In 2015, the EU had to review its seal products legislation with a view to bring it in compliance with the WTO rules. It has been a politically sensitive and emotional process for many involved but a compromise has been reached. It is important to stress that, as a result of those discussions, the EU seal regime still consists of a general ban on the placing of seal products on the EU market. The WTO indeed found the ban to be justified (the EU is not alone to apply a ban on seal products; the US and Russia do it too). Nevertheless, the EU succeeded in maintaining a meaningful "indigenous communities" exception also known as the "Inuit" exception, which fully recognises the importance of the seal hunt for indigenous communities' subsistence and would not interfere with their traditional way of leaving. The Commission is fully committed to implementing this exception. Taking into account the request of the previous speaker for an communication campaign to promote European seal products, it was remarked that EU legislation only request the Commission to inform EU citizens about the Inuit exemption; the Commission cannot carry out a campaign to promote commercial products. With a view to give a concrete expression to its information commitment, the Commission has undertaken a number of steps including the publication of the regulations and the conditions under which seal products are accepted on the EU market, the publication of the decisions on the recognised bodies that can certify the Inuit origin of seal products. The Commission published a brochure, available in all EU languages, that can be printed and distributed by everyone who wish to inform people about the indigenous communities' exemption. Furthermore there have been several meetings with Member States customs officials to sensitise them to the existence of the exemption. The Commission however recognises that, despite those measures, the lack of information might still remain among customs officers and consumers. The Commission is therefore ready to explore further ways to inform



relevant audiences about the EU seal regime, in accordance with EU legislation and within the limits of its prerogatives. It is in this spirit that it has accepted to consider constructively the idea of the QR code on seal products that meet the conditions for being placed on the EU market under the indigenous communities' exemption. It was said that the Commission is now satisfied with the look of the QR code label and would be ready to further improve the visual aspect of the webpage linked to it, within the conditions imposed by the Commission for the use of visual identities and disseminating information. Concluding with a personal anecdote, M. Richir stressed the need for building a common understanding of what seal products mean for both Inuit communities and European citizens. The QR code, by helping to visualise the certification of the Inuit origin of the seal products and by providing information on the EU seal regime, will certainly contribute to build this common understanding.

Agqalu Rosing-Asvid, Greenland Institute for Natural Resources, provided an overview of the sustainable use of the Greenland seal hunt. It was informed that there are five or six species of seals in Greenland. Harbor Seals and Grey Seals are quite rare and both species are protected. Most hunters focus on ringed seals and harp seals. There are nine to ten million harp seals, and 8-9 million of them are from the two populations that are hunted in Greenland. Every spring they concentrate around two breeding areas, where the pups are born. They have long white hair, and are called white coats initially. After a month they have shed all the white hair and are now called beaters. The majority of Canadian and Greenlandic hunt are on beaters from the West Atlantic population where white coats now are protected. Historically the population have been reduced by hunting, but the population showed rapid increases in periods when the catch was lowered. In recent years however, there have been low catches but little or no increase in population size, indicating that the population is about to or has reached the carrying capacity. The pregnancy rate of the adult females is linked to population size and in the past when the population was considerably smaller, almost all adult females gave birth every year. The birth rate now fluctuate significantly and this parameter has become one of the principal regulators of the population size (since 2004 the pup production have fluctuated between 800.000 and 1.6 million). From 1996 to 2008 the catches were around 350,000 per year on average and the population was still increasing with close to 200,000/yr., indicating that the maximum sustainable yield for that period would have been close to half a million. In 1970 there were a little more than one million harp seals in the population, and since then catches have remained sustainable, because populations have risen. Today it is around 7.5 million, and IUCN has listed Harp seals at the lowest level of concern. Ringed seals do not concentrate in breeding areas like the Harp seals, and their widespread distribution, makes them more difficult to monitor, but also difficult to over explore. Published estimates of the world population is around five million or more. The argument for the sustainability of the ringed seal hunt in Greenland relates to the fact that ringed seals occupy very large areas of which only a tiny fraction is used for hunting. Additionally, the hunt is mainly on young seals because the adult ringed seals become more stationary and remain in the large areas where there is no hunting. So the reproductive part of the population is almost free from being hunted. Also, catches of ringed seals in Northwest Greenland where most ringed seals are caught have remained on roughly the same level for almost a century, indicating that the hunt is sustainable. This



informs the IUCN's decision to list ringed seals as well as harp seals as species regarded with the lowest level of concern for endangerment.

Bjarne Lyberth, KNAPK (Association of Fishers & Hunters in Greenland), which is an organisation of 2,400 members including everyone from traditional hunters to commercial companies ensuring that a vast array of interests are represented. It was noted that the members who are most dependent on seal, are those who, live in the most remote and least accessible areas. This means that the processing of seal skin is very expensive because of the logistics and the infrastructure that the process requires. Even if the infrastructure was developed and production was modernised, there would never be mass production of seal skin. Currently, subsidies of roughly 3.6 million Euros annually have to be set aside in the national budgets to support seal skin production in Greenland. This is a measurable portion of the roughly 1 billion euro overall budget and therefore the government has a vested interest in ensuring that the seal industry grows so that it becomes self-sufficient. In January of 2017 KNAPK wrote a letter to the Ministry of Fisheries asking for the support of the QR Code labelling initiative, believing that this would help the industry by providing more information to consumers. It was concluded that seals are amazing successful animals highlighting their abilities to hunt and live under the ice.

Gert Polet, WWF noted on his role as part of an international team working on a common strategy for the Arctic. It was remarked that it is important to consider all the issues, and options with regards to the management of wild populations. It was outlined that the WWF respects the rights of indigenous peoples and to locally manage and utilise the natural resources that traditionally are a part of their cultures. Still, the WWF reserves the right to question whether such hunting and harvesting is sustainable, and to promote sustainability where it is not. It was noted that it is important to track population sizes to know the facts so that it is possible to fully understand the status of a wildlife populations. The WWF has flagged the population of Greenland hooded seals and ringed seals because of climate change. The organisation works with science institutes to encourage governments to take responsibility to make sure that they have comprehensive and up to date information on populations. WWF support for co-management regimes was also highlighted, an example was provided from a case in the Arctic where governments and indigenous people get together to set the management regime. Additionally the WWF is working with local authorities to safeguard seascapes in parts of the Arctic. The WWF will pose questions if there is a concern of unsustainable management. It was further noted that in the conversation of seal management it is important to consider all the threats to seals in a broader context, including the impacts of new economic developments, and the possible effects of climate change. It was said that caution is needed because it is difficult to predict the future of the habitat of these animals. It was highlighted that it is the authorities, sometimes in co-management regimes, which make the decisions on harvest and management regimes of the different species. The WWF's concern is the survival of populations in the wild, and ensuring that if there is a harvest regime in place it is legal, sustainable, regulated, and based on up to date population assessments. These concerns should be balanced with the way people live with the land and the rights of indigenous people. As previously mentioned the co-management regimes that are in place in some parts of the Arctic are important for incorporating all perspectives with different



stakeholders working together to come to the best solution. It was stressed that in such regimes, there needs to be transparency and openness, particularly with customers on the other end of the value chain so they can ensure that they are not entering into an illegal or unsustainable practice. The initiative of the QR Code is an important part of creating this transparency, by providing information to consumers. It was concluded that it is essential to look at multiple threats with regards to developing management regimes, and to have a forward looking approach, acknowledging that conditions in the Arctic are dynamic and that caution is needed to ensure that there is a sustainable policy in place.

Geneviève Desportes, General Secretary, North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission

examines Arctic sealing and the ban on seal product in the perspective of the blue economy. Blue economy is a recently emerged concept for ocean governance that the EU is advocated for. Alike the green economy but focussing on the marine sector, the blue economy also intends to improve human wellbeing and social equity while significantly reducing environmental risk. It promotes the use of local raw materials, sustainability, low carbon and low energy options, resource efficiency and optimisation, the creation of benefits and social inclusion. To qualify as a component of a blue economy, an activity must provide social and economic benefits, restore, protect and maintain the diversity of the environment, be based on clean technology and promote waste reduction. Can Arctic sealing qualify as a blue activity? Arctic sealing is primarily the production of food for local human consumption in places where there are little or no alternative local meat or greens. It was said that seals are a natural local resource, with a short cycle of food production, there is no confinement nor transport of live animals, and the human intrusiveness is only associated with the killing, prior to that the animal have lived a natural undisturbed life. It is a selective resource extraction, with the possibility of selective management measures and for example the protection of white coats and mother-pup pairs. There are two sides to the blue growth concept, the human side where a high societal footprint is expected, and the environmental side where at the contrary a low ecological footprint is desired, i.e., as little disturbance of the environment as possible. To assess the ecological footprint, the global impact on the environment must be considered, throughout the process from extraction to production, distribution, and disposal of the product. The ecological footprint relates to the sustainability of the resources, the carbon footprint, the collateral environmental costs, and the resource efficiency. The seal hunt in the Arctic is estimated sustainable (see above A. Rosing-Asvid). Because this is a locally extracted and consumed product there is little energy consumption and the carbon footprint is much lower than that of any alternative food product, flown to the Arctic, where the carbon cost of the transport adds to the product initial carbon footprint. Collateral environmental impacts, which typically relate to pollution, habitat destruction, or non-selective extraction (by-catch and discard), are not an issue with Arctic sealing; there is little pollution, no habitat destruction and very selective extraction. The resource is very efficient, as most of it is used and very little waste is generated – as long as one uses the skins. Arctic sealing has therefore a low ecological footprint, much lower than any alternative, and should therefore be promoted as part of the blue economy. The seal bans was then addressed through the lens of a blue economy. Skins are not fully used anymore because of the bans, with only one third of the Greenlandic skins presently traded. The seals are still killed because the meat is used for human consumption, but now the skin, a by-product, is wasted. As evoked by other speakers, the seal ban is decreasing human



wellbeing and social equity. It is not reducing ecological scarcity, because the seals are still killed and because the resource is plentiful and managed sustainably. Additionally, it is not reducing environmental costs because alternative fabric products are far more environmentally costly. The ban on seal skin imports has made hunting non affordable for many, as the cost are not covered by selling of the skins. This reduces the general use of hunted local low carbon food resource while increasing the import of high carbon flown in products, and overall increasing the household carbon footprint in Greenland. Additionally, there is a loss of jobs, skills and culture, when traditional hunting practices are no longer performed and transmitted through generations and the global ecosystem is getting poorer. It seems therefore difficult to qualify the ban on seal products as a blue initiative.

The discussion with the audience touched upon how to best work together to promote seal skin products and disseminate information. There was some debate as to the role and responsibilities of institutions like the Commission and the WWF in the promoting of products, but there was widespread support for the QR code initiative. The importance of cooperation between all stakeholders was stressed, but it was noted that a duplication of roles between the industry, the government, and civil society activists should be avoided. It was however noted that the Commission can only inform EU citizens about the regime, it cannot promote commercial products. It was reiterated that the hunting way of life has been hurt by this ban, calling for collaboration and the need to share information in order to understand each other's way of life. It was also noted that the Commission banned seal products initially because there were two Member States that had enforced a ban and it was essential to take the necessary steps to protect the single market. This was not an initiative taken on morality; it was an initiative to protect the market. It was said that the Commission has always been a champion of indigenous rights, and this is a position they want to maintain by taking steps to rectify the problems the ban has created for the Inuit people. It was outlined that the Commission is obliged to report by the end of 2019 on the implementation of the rules from 2015 paying particular attention to their impact on the Inuit community. As the revised regulation was only adopted in 2015 it was said that the Commission needs time to see its implementation. It was said that Member states will have to present their perspectives, and the voices of the indigenous communities will also need to be incorporated into the report.

Jørn Dohrmann MEP and Chair concluded that this meeting provided the opportunity to cooperate and to find new solutions. Sealing in the Arctic is an important issue, and although the topic is complex, the hunt of seals is determined to be sustainable in this region. It was said that it is necessary to support the culture and livelihoods of the indigenous people and that he is committed to working further on this matter and raising awareness within the Parliament.