

History of World Fur Sealing

The first known occurrence of seals being hunted and killed by humans dates back to the Stone Age. Without fur seals the Eskimos or Inuits of North America and Siberia would not have been able to survive. There is also evidence that the people living on the islands and shores of north west Europe and the Baltic Sea were using clubs to kill seals and made implements from seal bones in the Stone Age (more than 10,000 years ago).



Fur seal on Macquarie Island. Photo: G Copson

The killing of seals for commercial purposes can be dated back to the Spanish in 1515 when a cargo of fur seal skins was sent from Uruguay to the markets in Seville, Spain. There is also some evidence that fur seal skins were being traded in South Africa over 300 years ago.

But these activities were on a very small scale. As W. N. Bonner says “the real onslaught began in about 1775 when the South Sea Whalers roamed the oceans of the Southern Hemisphere” and discovered the lands where fur seals had been living oblivious to man.

From an American point of view, the first large commercial cargo of 13,000 seal skins from the Falkland Islands were sold in Canton, China for US\$5.00 each in 1775. Once the news of the fur seals in the Southern Oceans reached other ship owners and ship captains many more ships set off in search of fur seals.

The commercial activity in sealing had by now become a mixture of killing fur seals to collect their skins and killing the larger elephant seals and reducing the blubber of this animal into oil. The seal oil was used for lighting, lubrication and manufacturing.

According to Dr H. R. Mill, English sealers brought back from the Isle of Georgia and Magellan Strait as many as 40,000 seal skins and 2,800 tons of elephant oil in 1778. In 1791, no less than 102 vessels, averaging 200 tons burden and manned by 3000 sealers, were engaged in securing fur seals and oil in the southern ocean. Dr Mill’s statements has not been verified by more recent research.



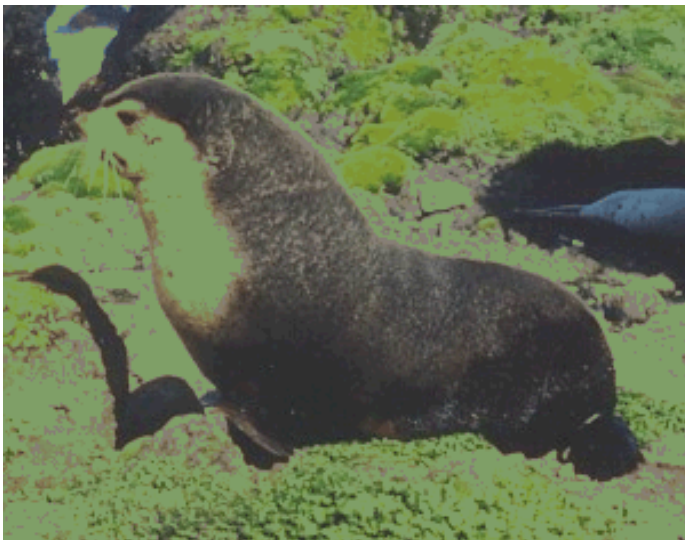
New Zealand fur seal near Dunedin.

Photo: G Roberts

In 1798, Capt Edmund Fanning of the ship *Betsy* sold 100,000 fur skins in Canton, nearly all of which came from Mas-a-Fuera, the main island of the Juan Fernandez Group in the Pacific Ocean.

By 1800, ships were gathering seal skins from Brazil, South Georgia, Isles de Kerguelen, Crozet Islands, Bass Strait, Tasmania, New Zealand, Galapagos and Patagonia. Some skins were taken to China to be sold and the ship's Captain then bought cargoes of tea, porcelain and other Chinese goods which were purchased and sold in North America and Europe. Other skins were taken to Europe and sold for use as material for hats, coats, waistcoats and boots.

In London in 1812, the invention of a means of dressing the seal skins so that a fur of much higher quality could be produced caused another surge in the search for new seal colonies as the skins would now be worth so much more.



Subantarctic fur seal on Macquarie Is., 2000

Photo: T Potts

In 1815, sealing hunting was occurring at 35 different places around the world including Macquarie Island. In 1821 the industry reached its peak when, according to Lloyds Register, there were 48,000 tons of shipping (about 164 ships) engaged in sealing and whaling activities from Great Britain alone. There are records of another 27 ships from USA also sailing the southern oceans at this time looking for fur seals. As an example, there were 47 British and American sealing ships working the beaches at the New South Shetland Islands in 1820-

21. It has been estimated that over 250,000 seals were taken from these islands in that season.

By 1830, most of the easily accessible sealing grounds had been worked out and the trade was declining and by 1859, there was just one ship on Lloyds Shipping Register wholly engaged in the search for fur seals. The sealing journeys were taking longer (3 or more years) and the rewards in number of seal skins acquired were getting fewer as only the farthest and least accessible beaches had any seals.

In the 1850's fur sealing and elephant seal oiling were considered to be some of the dirtiest, difficult and dangerous jobs for sailors. Ship owners and captains were making more profit from other forms of ship trade. So owners were only sending their older ships on this type of work when there was no other more rewarding work available for a ship and its crew. However, there was one ship, *Seringapatam*, of 335 tons built in Bombay in 1790 or 1799, which was continuously employed in

sealing and whaling for 46 years from 1801 to 1847.

Fur sealing has continued in the southern ocean to a limit degree, usually under government controlled harvesting, even to this day. Based upon unreliable data, it is conservative estimated that over twenty five million fur seals have been slaughtered for their skins in the 125 years from 1775 to 1900.

For more information about the history of sealing, particularly on Macquarie Island, go to:-

www.parks.tas.gov.au/wildlife/mammals/seals.html

There is an excellent list of publications about seals at the Seal Conservation Society's web site:-

www.greenchannel.com/tec/library.html

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