

# Of Seals and Souls

Changes in the Position of Seals in the World View of Icelandic Small-Scale Fishermen

Niels Einarsson

University of Uppsala

**ABSTRACT** This article is concerned with the changes in attitudes towards seals among Icelandic small-scale fishermen. The material on which the study is based comes from recent fieldwork in an Icelandic east-coast fishing village, but also on the experience of the author as a native participant in small-scale fishing. It is argued that in order to understand the particular cultural change one has to see how it is "externally induced yet indigenously orchestrated" (Sahlins 1985:viii). Here the external influence is provided by the campaigns of environmental and animal welfare organizations against the killing of marine mammals.

## Introduction

Why is it that an animal that has in general held a positive position, or at least a neutral one, can in a short span of time become loaded with negative feelings? I started asking myself this question some years ago after listening to a conversation between two fishermen who were discussing the technical possibility of exterminating seals that live along the coastline. The seals, for these men, were like rats in the sea with no right to exist.<sup>1</sup>

These extremely negative attitudes towards seals struck me as somewhat odd. I did not recollect such feelings some 14 years ago, when I started participating in small-scale fishing. Something had happened in the meantime. But what, why and how? This essay is an attempt to approach these questions.

At first it seemed to me that practical reasons provided straightforward answers. Seals had always been a source of food and income for Icelanders (Kristjánsson 1980). But as a result of the anti-sealing protest campaigns sponsored by animal welfare and environmental organizations, mostly against Canadian (Newfoundland) hunting, sealskins and other products have become almost worthless. Although the anti-sealing campaigns had mainly been directed against the Newfoundlanders' taking of young harp seals, the generalized nature of the protest made all seal products almost unsalable for Newfoundlanders, Icelanders, or Inuits. The effects were thus felt everywhere seal hunting had provided a source of subsistence and income. The economic benefit of having seals around had disappeared.

But there were also other "practical reasons" for the seals falling from grace in the Icelandic setting. In the beginning of the seventies there was a growing concern about the role seals play as a link in the life-cycle of the codworm, a worm which matures in the guts of seals and then spreads with its faeces (Bonner

1982; Pedersen et al. 1985). Cod and some other types of fish become contaminated by these worms which have to be picked out of the fish-fillets in the process of cleaning the fish, before it is exported to non-wormliking consumers in Europe and the United States. Getting rid of the worms costs the Icelandic fish industry, and thereby the Icelandic national economy, large sums of money.<sup>2</sup> Seals are also accused of taking a large share of the increasingly scarce resources of fish (Hauksson 1989) and scaring away fish from the local fishing grounds. Seals are no longer a contribution to economic resources. They have become the rivals of humans. One informant, a small-scale fisherman, sums up the feelings of those I talked to, saying:

Seals around here are a pest. It is bad enough that they eat all that fish, but they also scare away fish from the fishing spots near to land. And there are not as many fishworms in the fish since they (the authorities) began paying bounties for killing seals.<sup>3</sup>

This is all very well and easily understandable in the sense that the attitudes have their material grounds. But I still had difficulties grasping why the fishermen of my village had these strong hostile feelings towards seals. Was there something more to it?

### The Meaning of an Animal

Claude Lévi-Strauss has said with reference to the use of history in anthropology that if one wanted to understand the role of the aperitif in French social life it would be necessary to know about its history (1979:12). I do not know why he used the aperitif as an example, but it might be that it is good to drink and think. Seals have been living round the coast of Iceland since the island was first inhabited by Norsemen in the ninth century (cf. Byock 1988; Hastrup 1985a and 1985b). It is difficult to estimate the importance of seals for the subsistence of the early Icelanders but at least in some places it may have been considerable (Amorosi 1989:213), sometimes enough to evoke land disputes (Byock 1988:178).

Seals seem to have been a common theme in Icelandic folktales. They also occur in tales from Scandinavia and the British Isles (cf. Kvideland and Sehmsdorf 1988). In a manuscript written in 1641 an Icelandic scholar, Jón Gudmundsson "the learned," tells the following folktale:

A man was on his way to celebrate Christmas and late at night walked along by the sea. He then heard the sounds of festivities, dance and enjoyment. He also saw that on the beach there lay many sealskins. He took the smallest one and put it inside his clothes. Then the elves ran wildly to their skins and plunged into the sea. All except one girl who was without her skin and although she tried to get it she could not. The man then got his hands on her, took her to his home and married her. She did not love him. They lived together for twelve years and had two children, a son and a daughter. But all this time it is said that a seal was seen swimming near to the shore where they lived. It was the elf-husband. Finally the woman retrieved her skin while her husband was away. She disappeared and was never seen again (Arnason in Kristjánsson 1981:436)

There are different versions of this story but they all have in common narratives about seals who, at certain times of the year, take off their skins under which they are like human beings. The version above is unusual in that Gudmundsson talks about elves instead of people. It is always a female that is caught by (most often) a farmer's son.

Another Icelandic scholar, writing in the eighteenth century, is perplexed over the curious confusion of seals and humans. Describing the commoner's ideas about seals he writes, in the spirit of an enlightened scholar:

It is quite extraordinary how common Icelanders have a strange and mixed feeling of disgust and respect towards the seals. The causes of this are in the first place the ignorant view that seals are more man-like than other animals. The curiosity of seals and their intelligence strengthens this opinion. Then there is the folktale told here about Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and his army, who drowned in the Red Sea and the story tells how they all became seals. Another folktale with as little grounding but which claims respect for the seals, relates that seals are a group of people called sea-people (*sæfólk*). These people live in their dwellings at the bottom of the sea and wear sealskins on their human bodies. Sometimes they take them off and, in fair weather, walk on the beach for leisure. Sometimes men have women belonging to this people and married them (Olafsson in Kristjánsson 1980:434).<sup>4</sup>

This account becomes especially interesting when read in the light of "liminality theory" (see, for instance, Leach 1972, 1976; Douglas 1975, 1984; Jacobson-Widding 1979; Perin 1988). Seals are liminal in two ways: first they cross the boundaries between animals and humans which is universally important (Leach 1982:118). Secondly they are "betwixt and between" in the land/sea dichotomy which is held to be especially important in the cognitive classification of space in the Icelandic context (Hastrup 1985a, 1985b; Pálsson 1986, 1990) and as seems to be the case in many fishing societies (van Ginkel 1987; Löfgren 1981; Sahlins 1976:41; Cove 1978).

It seems clear that seals cross the classificatory boundaries between human beings and animals, being Pharaoh's soldiers who have turned into seals.<sup>5</sup> But neither do they belong entirely to the categories of land or sea. Icelandic seals whelp their pups on land, they rest there and for a certain period of the year they have to stay on land in order to renew their pelt. But they hunt for food in the sea and spend much time there. They are marine mammals who cross the boundaries of animals belonging to the sea, such as whales of fish, or animals belonging to land, such as foxes.<sup>6</sup>

So far so good. It seems that we may be dealing with a typical example of a classificatory monster with all the ritual foci, sacredness, disgust and special value and interest packed away in its rucksack. But it is best to be careful and also listen to skeptical voices:

... it is important to distinguish genuine anomalies from those produced by careless use of the taxonomic method. Repeatedly, "anomalies," have been shown either to be spurious or culturally irrelevant... We must be careful not to invent anomalies where they do not exist... Whereas the inbuilt, rigorous logic of ethnographic method easily gives rise to

anomalies, the informal logics of folk systems permits its avoidance (Ellen and Reason 1979:14).

Only a few of the fishermen I talked to actually know about the existence of these folktales. Some of the older men remembered these stories being told when they were children but said they were not taken seriously or believed to be true.<sup>7</sup> It could be said that we are dealing with some kind of a hidden cultural grammar, manifested both in these old folktale as well as in modern Icelandic culture. Speakers do not have to be aware of the structure of the language they speak. Thus it is up to the grammarians (the anthropologists) to find out and describe the grammar (*langue*) of the cultural talk (*parole*). The question is: "Can anthropological interpretations be valid if they imply meanings that actors do not know?" (Crick 1982:299). I think they can in many cases and it does not necessarily have to be an arrogant (the natives being "imprisoned by culture") view (Durrenberger and Pálsson 1989; Ingold 1986).

Up to now I have discussed the anomalous and boundary breaking attributes of seals in Iceland in the context of classification and cognition. But that is not enough. The symbolic content of seals is to be found in other factors, namely in the animal's wider cultural context, just as Jew's abhorrence of pork cannot be understood simply as a function of the animals anomalous position in the dietary rules in Leviticus xi (Douglas 1978). Pigs were singled out as particularly revolting after the Jews' oppressors had committed terrible acts of cruelty on the leaders of the Jews who would not give in and eat pork as a sign of their submission. Therefore:

... after such historic acts of heroism, no wonder the avoidance of pork became a specially powerful symbol of allegiance for the Jewish people and so attracted the later hellenizing exegesis that looked to the moral attributes of the pig. Whereas this symbol in origin owed its meaning only to its place in a total pattern of symbols, for which it came to stand, as a result of its prominence in persecution (Douglas 1978:62).

But what does this have to do with Icelandic fishermen's attitudes towards seals? Most of them feel that foreign animal welfare and environmental movements have attacked their way of life and basic assumptions about nature as a resource. "Greenpeacers" of any kind are very unpopular in Iceland. That has a complex history which I will only sketch briefly here. Icelandic whaling has been met by environmental organizations such as Greenpeace International and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society with action which includes campaigns for the boycott of Icelandic fish products, costing Icelanders large sums of money, and more drastic activities like the sinking of Icelandic whaling boats.<sup>8</sup>

The general view that fishermen have of environmental organizations is that they consist of vegetarian fanatics who earn their living in a protest industry. They have no understanding of the importance of sea mammals for nations such as Iceland and they do not care. These animal friends are doing their best to make life in the North impossible. The only thing they think about is getting

more money from ignorant and useful foreigners in order to kill off Icelanders, Inuits and other people who live off what nature has to give. To surrender and to give in to fanatical eco-warriors (who soon might get the idea to forbidding us to kill the cod we live off) is impossible for a proud nation. Foreigners have no right to meddle in our affairs.<sup>9</sup> One fisherman put it like this:

These greenpeacers think that all people can live by eating grass. But they are wrong. Man has always had to kill to survive. They will forbid us to kill the seals and whales they love so much and they will not stop at that. Why shouldn't a cod also enjoy it's civil rights!

The response of Icelanders to the pressure of anti-whaling campaigns is very much like that of Newfoundlanders with regard to the protest against sealing:

Newfoundlanders, on the other hand, do not perceive the protest in light of environmental degradation, but as a direct threat to their traditional way of life and economic welfare ... whereas only a few hundred men engage in the ship-based hunt each year, the conflict is perceived as a threat to all Newfoundlanders (Lamson 1979:6-7).

The central issue here is the clash or difference in that part of world view that has to do with basic assumptions about nature. The attitude of Icelandic fishermen towards animals is basically anthropocentric and utilitarian. Animals and nature in general exist to be a benefit to man.<sup>10</sup> The following quote sums up this view:

The fundamental concern of the utilitarian attitude is the practical and material value of animals. A basic presumption is that animals should serve some human purpose and, thus, be sources of personal gain. This attitude is largely people oriented; animals are desirable only insofar as they produce some tangible advantage or reward. This attitude does not necessarily result in indifference or lack of affection for animals, but emotional considerations are usually subordinate to more practical concerns (Kellert 1988:143).<sup>11</sup>

Organizations such as Greenpeace challenge such basic assumptions about nature. They demand a biocentric perspective, an ecological and moralistic view where man is only one part of the global ecological system. It is the utilitarian view of nature which has brought about devastating pollution and near extinction of some animal species. Greenpeace has a tough and uncompromising policy towards all those who are classified as "rapers of the earth," be they factories that release dangerous chemicals, nuclear waste at sea or whalers and sealers.<sup>12</sup> The whaling issue has been very important for Greenpeace, whales being one of the main symbols of the environmental movement. About that John Gulland, one of the advisors for the International Whaling Commission, has the following to say:

Among the reasons are the sheer size of the whales themselves and the apparent simplicity of the issue itself - if we cannot preserve the whales what can we save? Whales, for these same reasons, make excellent fund raisers, probably behind only giant pandas and baby seals.

There may no longer be urgent reasons of conservation for continued pressure to strengthen the controls on whaling, but there are sound financial reasons for groups that depend on public subscription to be seen to be active in "saving the whale" (Gulland 1988:45).

In a CBS interview in 1978, Paul Watson, who had until then recently been one of the leaders of Greenpeace, had the following to say about the profitability of the campaign against the harp seal hunt in Newfoundland:

There are over a thousand animals on the endangered species list ... and the harp seal isn't one of them. You see, the seal is very easy to exploit as an image. We have posters, we have buttons, we have shirts ... all of which portray the head of the baby seal with tears coming out of its eyes. Baby seals are always crying because the salt tears keep their eyes from freezing. But they have this image ... they are baby animals, they are beautiful. And because of that, coupled with the horror of the sealer hitting them over the head with a club, it is an image which just goes right to the heart of animal lovers all over North America (quoted in Henke 1985:125)

Seals are certainly a very strong, effective and much used symbol for environmental, animal welfare and other such groups.<sup>13</sup> They have come to be symbols for nature as a whole. Save the seals, save nature.<sup>14</sup>

Seals have not only become symbols *for* environmentalists, but also *of* their organizations. As animals they are "good to think" as they are animals that have "provided man with a model on the basis of which he could reflect on his social universe" (Ovesen 1983:7). I would like to argue that seals in Iceland are the victims of their metaphorical role. Seals are good to think with as they, by their metaphorical role as symbols for environmental organizations, are concrete "things" which allow people to think about much more abstract concepts or processes, such as foreign intrusion into the local society. They fulfil the role of projections which:

... are in a sense metaphors of reality. Like metaphors, they make that which is relatively intangible, abstract, or poorly apprehended appear more concrete by likening it to something that is more directly experienced or otherwise more salient, e.g. time *flows*, love is *sweet* ... (Kearney 1984:117).

Seals are very salient for the small-scale fishermen I have worked with. They are seen almost every day. Greenpeace International, on the other hand, is an organization that they learn about through the media. It is an abstract phenomenon with ways and means that are hard to understand and affect.<sup>15</sup> But Greenpeace although powerful and impossible to get at, is an enemy. But it is at least possible to curse the enemy's *totem* (i.e., the seal)<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

For some readers this essay will probably seem strange. But that is what symbolic studies in anthropology very often are concerned with, namely behaviour and

ideas that can not be understood as rational or instrumental. In fact, as Barley has pointed out: "The simplest and most pervasive viewpoint in anthropology can be summed up as: 'this looks crazy. It must be symbolism'" (Barley 1983:10).

I would like to conclude with a tentative hypothesis: in ordinary life we all tend to go the easy way when thinking about abstract phenomena (Piaget 1972) by using metaphors and other tools to make them more concrete and comprehensible (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:109; see also Fernandez 1972:42-43).<sup>17</sup> In the case of Icelandic "scapeseals," an animal, a natural symbol, has been used as metaphor. The use of the seal as metaphor may be called "a strategy for dealing with a situation" (Burke in Fernandez 1972:43). The choice of metaphor was not random but grounded in the special position of the animal in the world view and economy of the people involved.

As symbols seals have many meanings. They are polysemous and thereby are like ritual symbols that "... generally derive their potency from their multivocal or polysemous nature, that is, from the fact that they combine meanings" (Levine 1984:77).

There are many questions that have been left unanswered in this essay. An important one concerns the nature of ambiguous categories. Can they, like bears in winter, lie in their cultural caves, waiting to be awakened by the spring of the right circumstances.<sup>18</sup> In the case of the seals it seems that environmentalists far away from this island in the North have played the role of spring.

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## Notes

1. This essay is based on fieldwork in Iceland during the summer of 1989, along with my experience as a native, having grown up in the cultural house that is the stage for this study (Levine 1984). The group I concentrated on are the small-scale fishermen of an east coast fishing village consisting of some 1700 souls. The fifty or so full-time artisanal fishermen work their boats on nearby inshore fishing grounds. The boats are powered by diesel engines and range from 6 to 12 metres in length. Most are equipped with sophisticated electronic equipment to facilitate finding fish, positioning and steering. The gear consists of long lines, handlines, gillnets and bottom-seines and the fish caught is mostly cod but also catfish, haddock, flounder and other species.

2. Fishworm causes problems for many other fisheries around the North Atlantic, such as in Canada, Norway, and in the North Sea. This problem has been one of the rationales for culling seals in these areas. According to Summers (1978:95) "In Canada this process (of cleaning the fish) costs \$2 million per year and in Norway it is so costly that in the worst affected areas fisheries have closed down altogether." Seal may, however, have been used by fishermen as scapegoats; at least this seems to have been the case with the Grey Seals around Britain where "there appears to be no direct relationship between the number of seals and infestations of cod worm" (Harris 1989:51). Interestingly enough, scapegoat in Icelandic would translate as *scapeseal* (*syndaselur*).

3. Small-scale fishermen have their own reasons for worrying about worm infected fish. The fact

that fish factories lose money is serious as that means they have an excuse for holding the price of fish down. But of greater concern may be the accusations on behalf of the fish buyers that the fish that is caught close to land, on traditional artisanal grounds, has a much higher frequency of worms and therefore, because of extra costs for the factories, cannot fetch a better price than it does.

4. According to Davies and Porter (1979) English fishermen thought that seals were the souls of drowned fishermen.

5. There is a logical inconsistency here. Where did the seal-women come from when presumably, and according to my biblical experts, Pharaoh's soldiers were males. It may be quite irrelevant, but according to F.E. Hulme in his book *Natural History Lore and Legend*, the Ancient Greeks also linked the seal with womankind. They had the idea that "beneath the visible exterior of the seal was concealed a woman. . . This belief was still current in nineteenth-century Greece" (Hulme in Benwell and Waugh 1961:16). Benwell and Waugh, seeking the origin of the mermaid myth, find it plausible that seals with their gestures and "astonishingly human expression" (ibid.:15) may well have given rise to speculations about the existence of mermaids. According to Faris (1989), writing about a Newfoundland fishing community, seals (and porpoise) are (or were when they did fieldwork 25 years ago) considered more man-like than other sea creatures and killing them inhumanely was regarded as "murder;" "... a term normally reserved for homicide and not applied to the killing of other sea creatures" (ibid.:27).

6. Whales and foxes are not spatially ambiguous but that does not mean that they may not have boundary-crossing attributes. For some people whales have intelligence superior to that of humans, a complex "culture" and social life and a language. In the future, according to those who hold those beliefs, we will be able to communicate with them. Killing such animals therefore amounts to homicide or even deicide (Lyng 1988:18). Unfortunately, in recent years the high intelligence of whales has been shown to be a myth. While the intelligence of toothed whales lies between that of a dog and a monkey (not reaching that of primates), the intelligence of baleen whales lies somewhere between that of a cow and a horse. (For a discussion about the smartness of whales and how the myth came about see Klinowska 1988). Foxes also have some human attributes connected to them as they have been and still are (by Icelandic fox hunters) considered very intelligent and capable of mental operations resembling those of humans (cf. Olafsson 1989).

7. One informant told me about Norwegians who lived in the village in the forties. They would not eat catfish, saying that catfish were the soldiers of Pharaoh. This was considered very funny by the local villagers. One Norwegian lady considered eating catfish pure barbarism. In Icelandic folktales catfish are said to be the dogs of Pharaoh's army (Sigfússon 1982:187; Arnason 1961).

8. For an excellent analysis of the meaning of the whaling issue for Icelanders see Brydon (1990) and for a description written by an environmentalist in favour of anti-whaling see Day (1987).

9. In some aspects the response of Icelanders to the interference of outsiders, "Coming here and telling us what to do and what not to do" reminds one of the case of a Swedish Scanian community, Sjöbo. Sjöbo has refused to receive refugees and immigrants and the name of the community has become a synonym for racist attitudes. Before the voting for or against taking immigrants there was a great pressure from government specialists, newspaper reporters and many others who wanted to tell the people of Sjöbo how they should think and behave. Are the Sjöboians really more racist than Swedes in general (statistics about the high proportion of people with negative attitudes towards issues such as giving asylum to foreigners are not well publicized, maybe because they are somewhat embarrassing for the ideology creating elite) or was it that the campaign which was meant to set them right which had the opposite effect. (The structural similarity between these two cases, Icelanders and Sjöboians was pointed out to me by Anita Jacobson-Widding and Alf Hornborg). Icelandic whale hunting has been compared to the atrocities of Americans during the Vietnam war, something Icelanders regard as a very far fetched and unfair comparison.

10. American sociologist Kellert has found in a study of Americans' attitudes to wildlife that: "Among animal-activity groups, livestock producers, meat hunters, and fishermen displayed an es-

pecially strong utilitarian orientation, in contrast to members of humane, wildlife protection and environmental protection organizations. . ." (1988:150). I may in this article have given the reader the impression that fishermen are in general harsh and cruel to animals. This is by no means the case. One fisherman (and he was not the only one) worried about the welfare of an eider dam and her young ones. The bird turned up every day with her flock for feeding in the harbour. "I'm afraid that the seagulls will get them," he commented after the feeding. A couple of days later I met this man when he was feeding his clients but now the dam had only one of her offsprings with her. "The bloody vultures have taken the rest, and there isn't a damn thing you can do," he said. He looked genuinely sad.

11. Attitudes towards nature and animals in Sweden have changed, with the changes that the society has undergone in the wake of industrialization. In the farming society "Animals, both wild and tame, were primarily an economic resource for the benefit of man, and as it is said in the Bible, they were soulless creatures and should be treated accordingly" (Frykman and Löfgren 1987:76). But in a recent study of Swedish attitudes towards the relative value of humans and animals 66 percent of those asked chose the position that "Humans and animals have the same value" (*Människor och djur har samma värde*). As an argument for this standpoint 89 percent of these 66 percent chose the proposition that "Humans are animals among other animals and are a part of the large ecological system." Sixty-five to 77 percent chose such reactions as: Animals have also souls (*själ*), animals can also be social and cultural beings like humans, they have morals, their emotions can be as rich as that of humans, they are self-conscious like humans, etc. Ninety-three percent agreed that all life has the same value. It is somewhat problematic to interpret such answers, for example what do people mean by the word *animals*? Are they talking about insects, which I think is unlikely, or are they talking about their dogs and cats? These results still raise serious philosophical problems. Can we now begin to talk about the superior moral status of mammals instead of that of Man? (Jeffner 1988:6) When a car hits a moose should the moose be taken to hospital and the people left waiting? (Bergström 1989). Only some 14 percent of those who participated found it self-evident that humans have a special value. In the light of these results it is amazing that animal welfare and environmental organizations do not have even more followers. However, the numbers are rising as can be seen by the fact that Greenpeace had already in 1987 some 95 thousand paying members in Sweden (Eyerman and Jamison 1987:32) and in 1989 had around 200 thousand members. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud mentions the tendency of children and "primitive" people to regard animals as their equals, "showing no trace of the arrogance which urges adult civilized men to draw a hard and fast line between their own nature and that of all other animals" (1983:126-127). He forgets that the Cartesian divide between humans and animals is not merely a question of maturation but is deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian philosophical tradition (cf. Serpell 1988:122).

12. It is ironic that Greenpeace as an organization that fights against the use of nuclear energy (Greenpeace 1986) has with its campaign against seal hunting had similar catastrophic consequences for the Inuits as the Chernobyl accident has had for the Sami people. (For literature on the Chernobyl accident and the Sami see Beach 1989; Paine 1987. On the harp-seal controversy and Inuits see Brody 1987; Lyng 1988; Fægteborg 1986; Wenzel 1978; Smith and Wright 1989; Henke 1985 and Ingold 1988. On the consequences for Newfoundlanders see Andersen 1990; Wright 1984; Henke 1985 and Busch 1985).

13. In a recent *Time* article about David McTaggart, the leader and personification of Greenpeace International, McTaggart is pictured on a full-page photograph lying in a very seal-like position on a beach. But it might of course be a coincidence. Being a poor communicator, according to himself, he gives a short outline of his activist philosophy: "I really don't have any morals. . . . You've got to be prepared to keep No.1 thing in mind: you're fighting to get your children into the 21st century, and to hell with the rules" (Brand 1989:44). According to McTaggart "there is a global war going on, and if you can't fight, you're not going to have much of a negotiation" (ibid.:46). McTag-

gart's use of metaphor is noteworthy (environmentalism as WAR), especially if that is a metaphor he lives by (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and perceives the world through. But wars most often consist not only of heroic deeds but also of pain and destruction (see footnote 12).

14. In the 1988 general elections held in Sweden seals played a major role as a symbol for environmental issues. Politicians, especially the Green environmentalists, who turned out to be the relative winners of the elections, spent much time discussing the deteriorating milieu of these animals. The Baltic Sea, which makes most of Sweden's coastline, has the most polluted sea water in the world and most of the seals on the coastline will not whelp as they are infertile as a consequence of the pollution. For a nation with impotent and dying seals who have become a symbol of nature it must be unacceptable that a nearby nation actually kills seals for the purpose of gain. Incidentally, in 1988 there was considerable debate about the Norwegian seal hunt off Jan Mayen. In Swedish media the hunt was pictured as inhumane and the seal hunters presumably subhuman monsters, skinning the seals alive. That scene had been shown on Swedish TV, appearing in a film about the Norwegian seal hunt. However, the same scene seems to have been used 10 years ago in a film about Canadian subhuman methods of killing seals. The Swedish King participated in the debate, condemning any brutal methods being used to kill seals. This debate escalated somewhat with various insinuations about the humanness of Norwegians and the competence of the Swedish royalty. This media furore may well reflect an underlying tension or value difference between Sweden and Norway. But that is another story.

15. As is common with fishermen (Acheson 1981:277) Icelandic small-scale fishermen are outsiders in the political arena, both at the local level of community council and also national politics. They are simply away when meetings are held and decisions taken. This fact gives many of them a sense of powerlessness when it comes to fighting for their interests.

16. Seals are totemic in the sense that they are "sacred, protected, cherished, and most significantly, even viewed as ancestors. They can be worshipped as gods" (Midgley 1984:110). It might be said that seals are synecdochial gods. Nature is the God to be worshipped and seals are the symbols by which Nature is represented.

17. "... the less clearly delineated (and usually less concrete) concepts are partially understood in terms of the more clearly delineated (and usually more concrete) concepts, which are directly grounded in our experience ... the tendency (is) to understand the less concrete in the terms of the more concrete" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:109).

18. These are important questions but little discussed within anthropology (see, however, Jacobson-Widding 1978 and 1984).

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