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Chile’s Fishing Industry, Greens Square Off on South American Sea Lions

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Under pressure from both artisan fishers and lobbyists with the powerful farmed-salmon industry, Chilean authorities are revisiting a 17-year hunting ban on one of the country’s most iconic species: the South American sea lion.

The ban, in place since 1994, is set to expire at the end of 2012. But rather than renew it, as previous administrations have done, the government of President Sebastián Piñera is hinting that it may start issuing hunting and live-capture quotas. The Ministerio de Economía has included the kill-and-capture options in its South American Sea Lion Population Control Plan, which echoes complaints by fishers that sea lions have become "overpopulated" in some of Chile’s coastal areas.

Authorities could lift the ban on a case-by-case basis even before its official expiration date thanks to loopholes in the law that allow hunting and/or capture under exceptional circumstances. Sea lions can be legally killed, for example, if their population in a particular area is shown to be excessive or if the animals are too aggressive in their interactions with humans.

The government does not need "a law to authorize their capture," Guillermo Rivera, the Servicio Nacional de Pesca (SERNAPESCA) regional director in Puerto Montt, explained in a recent interview with Radio Bio Bio. "What we need is information that allows us to establish that there is a surplus population."

Authorities are already considering one request to lift the hunting ban along the coast of Chile’s northernmost regions. The request, filed by Arica resident Kenny Monsalve, is outlined in a technical study carried out by the Subsecretaría de Pesca (SUBPESCA), which recommends that Monsalve be granted a one-year quota of 300 sea lions (200 females and 100 males) on the grounds that the area in question has a "high rate of interaction" between sea lions and fishers. Monsalves plans to process the animals for their meat, oil, hides, internal organs, and—in the case of the males—their genitals, which can be sold in some Asian countries as an expensive aphrodisiac.

In a separate report, SUBPESCA makes detailed recommendations about how authorized sea lion hunters should go about catching and killing their prey. Specifically, hunters should use 12-gage shotguns, which are powerful enough to kill large animals but, because shotgun ammunition travels relatively short distances, are less likely than other firearms to endanger nearby residents or fishers.

Sending out an SOS
Pressure to lift Chile’s sea lion hunting ban has been building for years. Artisan fishers say the animals compete with them for fish and thus threaten their livelihoods. "For the good of artisan fishing, we demand that the government implement its 'integral-sea-lion-management program,' not just in the north but also in regions XIV, X, and XI in the south," the Federación de Pescadores del Sur (FIPASUR) urged last year.
Several members of Congress, including Dep. Gabriel Ascencio of the centrist Democracia Cristiana (DC) and Camilo Escalona, a veteran of the center-left Partido Socialista (PS), back the fishers' calls for government action on the sea lion problem. "Society has become aware that ecologically an imbalance has been developing with an overpopulation of sea lions. It's up to the government to come up with a solution. Otherwise, what's the government for?" Escalona told reporters in August 2010.

Environmental groups and their political allies sharply disagree, saying the government’s sea-lion-population-control plan is based both on a false premise—that sea lions are somehow responsible for the lack of fish available for artisan fishers—and bad science. The so-called population surplus, they say, is a myth.

"It's absurd to suggest that sea lions are responsible for the overexploitation of [Chile’s fish stocks]," Senate President Guido Girardi of the leftist Partido por la Democracia (PPD) told reporters in late October. "Before trying to justify the widespread killing of this species with the idea that it’s to protect a resource, it’s worth pointing out that [sea lions] lived here for millions of years without ever depleting the resource, ever. The depletion is absolutely attributable to human beings."

Girardi, a trained physician with a strong pro-environment track record, made his comments during the launch of the sea-lion-protection campaign "SOS Lobos Marinos Chile." The campaign has the backing of several environmental groups, including Santiago-based Centro Ecocéanos, the Centro de Conservación Cetácea, the Comité Nacional Pro Defensa de la Fauna y Flora (CODEFF), and the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA). Several of the same organizations were involved in a successful campaign to ban whale hunting in Chilean waters. Former President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010) officially signed the ban into law in late 2008.

"Just as we did with the whales, we want to call on the adults, youth, and children of this country to defend these living beings, which are victims, once again, of the predatory vision of some people who have no respect for life," said Girardi. "We say to President Sebastián Piñera that allowing [sea lions] to be killed is unacceptable, just as what Japan does with whales is unacceptable."

**Clandestine killings**
Backers of the SOS campaign insist there is ample reason to continue protecting South American sea lions, which according to SUBPESCA number about 135,000 nationwide. Even with the hunting ban in place, argue environmentalists, the animals are often at risk, particularly when they come in contact with humans.

Two years ago, international attention briefly turned to a macabre scene along Chile’s northernmost coast, where hundreds of dead and dying sea lions littered beaches near the city of Iquique. Some experts blamed El Niño for the bizarre die-off, saying the sea lions starved to death because changing Pacific Ocean temperatures caused the fish they normally prey on to move too far off shore. Others cast a suspicious eye on a nearby molybdenum plant.

Sea lions in southern Chile face hazards as well. Evidence suggests that salmon-farm operators, for whom the hungry marine mammals are costly pests, sometimes ignore the hunting ban. Sea lion carcasses with obvious bullet holes occasionally wash ashore in Chile’s principal salmon-farming regions. An untold number of additional dead sea lions, their carcasses fastened with weights to make them sink, never surface.
"The salmon industry is constantly eliminating sea lions. It’s illegal, but they do it habitually," said Ecocéanos director Juan Carlos Cárdenas. "[Industry] divers have told us that the sea lions that break into salmon farms are shot and later removed. Also, when producers set up a salmon farm near a sea lion community, they sometimes go there during breeding season and kill all the babies and males. Or they splash the rocks with oil and burn the area. We’ve been reporting these kinds of practices since 2004."

Cárdenas suspects the farmed-salmon industry has had more of an influence on the sea lion hunting issue than the government is letting on. Chile is the world’s second-leading producer of farmed salmon after Norway. Despite a serious slump that began in 2007 with the outbreak of the fish disease Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA), the industry still generates some US$2 billion per year (NotiSur, Jan. 30, 2009).

"The salmon industry has said during workshops that took place in preparing the [sea-lion-population-control plan] that its sea-lion-related losses total some US$140 million," said Cárdenas. "They want to strongly eliminate the presence [of sea lions], but with the government and artisan fishers doing all the dirty work."

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