



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

I am absolutely convinced that Canada is determined to wipe out the harp seal population in the north-west Atlantic. The country isn't merely reducing numbers – it wants to annihilate the lot.

The hunt no longer makes headline news as it did when I spent an awful fortnight watching young pups being clubbed to death on the bloodied ice floes 25 years ago. But that doesn't mean that it's over. Far from it – 1 million baby seals have been killed in the past five years alone, and it is still the largest and most brutal slaughter of marine mammals anywhere on the planet.

In fact, the only thing that does seem to have changed is the ice. Global warming sceptics should visit the Gulf of St Lawrence and the north-east coast of Canada, where the ice that traditionally blanketed the region has almost completely gone. Harp seals need ice to breed and, if there isn't any, huge numbers of newborn pups die at sea.

The hunt should have been stopped for this reason alone, yet the quota for 2010 was a mind-boggling 330,000 harp seals (not to mention 50,000 grey seals and 8,200 hooded seals).

While seal meat is served in the Canadian parliament (and was even offered to guests at the recent G8 meeting), the rest of the world condemns the hunt as brutal and irresponsible.

The Canadian authorities, meanwhile, claim that it is necessary to preserve vanishing fish stocks and provide jobs in an economically deprived area. But the sealers are fishermen who earn less than 5 per cent of their income from the slaughter – and the industry's arguments about fish stocks are both tired and naïve.

How many times do scientists and conservationists have to show that marine mammals are not responsible for vanishing fish populations? People are to blame. Have the Canadians conveniently forgotten that the near-annihilation of their cod stocks is held up to the rest of the world as the ultimate example of how not to manage a fishery?



The slaughter earns seal hunters less than 5 per cent of their income.

Canada's harp seal hunt is still the largest and most brutal slaughter of marine mammals anywhere on the planet.

Paul Darrow/Reuters/Corbis

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer and tv presenter. Don't miss his revealing feature on the ethics of wildlife photography on p58.