

16. Sealing in the Islands and South Georgia

§ a. Introduction:

The history of sealing in the Islands and one of its former Dependencies can fairly be described as the history of the human and commercial over-exploitation of an abundant natural resource. A number of the issues raised in the chapter concerned with the history of the farming industry and the use of the land, reappear in the history of Southern Ocean¹ sealing.

The response of Governmental and political authority to this Southern Ocean version of the gold rush was control through Ordinance.² The weakness of concentrating purely upon regulation is clearly revealed in this story. Despite the good intentions of pioneer conservationists such as Governor William Allardyce, the greed of the sealers and the activities of poachers constantly undermined the regulatory system. The practical difficulties of enforcement in such a vast and remote area, which was being exploited by sealers from many nations, can also be clearly seen. The issues surrounding the practical difficulties of enforcing of regulatory regimes will also be seen later in this dissertation in chapter 18, which outlines the history of the development of the fishing industry.

The classic 'boom and bust' story of human exploitation of a natural resource is seen in this account of Southern Ocean sealing. There is a distinctly pioneering/frontiersman colour to the attitudes and behaviour of many of those involved in the sealing industry. The rapid decline in the seal stocks was also hastened by the naïve assumption that the bounty of nature was limitless. When it became obvious that there were limits to this natural resource, the problems of conservation

¹ The term *Southern Ocean* in this dissertation generally refers to waters south of approximately latitude 60° S, which are physically distinct from other oceans to the north. On the biology of the polar seas particularly the Southern Ocean see: Hempel, G; (1985) in Gray, J S and Christiansen, M H; (1985) *Marine biology of the Polar Regions and effects of stress on marine organisms*; Chichester: John Wiley & Sons; p6.

² One of the earliest recorded proposals for the controlling the catching of seals was made by John Leard of the *Intrepid*; letter to Lord Hawkesbury, President of the Council for Trade and Foreign Plantations, 1788; BT/95; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew. also: King, H; (1964) An early proposal for conserving the southern seal fishery; *Polar Record*; Vol. 12; No.78; pp 313-316.

were compounded by optimistic over-estimation of the remaining seal stocks by regulatory authorities and their scientific advisors.

For simplicity this account has been divided geographically and chronologically into four sections. The sealing history of the Islands is divided into two parts: the period from discovery of the seal stocks until the beginning of Government regulation; and secondly the period from the first Fisheries Ordinance of 1881, until the end of the Islands sealing industry in 1967. The sealing history of the Dependencies is also divided into two sections: from the discovery of the seal stocks by James Cook in 1775, until the first sealing licence granted to Compañia Argentina de Pesca in 1910 and secondly the period of licensed exploitation until the end of hunting for Elephant Seals (*Mirounga Leonina*) - which came when whaling also ceased on South Georgia in the 1960s.

At various times, in the Islands, and its Dependencies, a total of seven species of seal was hunted. The first recorded sealing commenced in the Islands and their Dependencies in 1766 and licensed sealing continued until 1968. There is evidence that both United States and British sealing ships were exploring in the Islands waters from 1774 onwards. Edmund Fanning visited the Islands in 1792 and he wrote in his journal:

On our arrival we learned the seals were up in great numbers on some of the outer islands. At Beauchêne Island, for instance, the top of the rock forming the north-eastern head of the island was literally covered with South American Fur Seal (*Arctocephalus australis*).³

Original stock sizes cannot be accurately assessed. Catch records are notoriously inaccurate; anecdotal comments have suggested that as many as eight million Fur Seals and five million Elephant Seals were taken from the Southern Ocean islands in the period up to c1900. Alan Moorhead may well be exaggerating about size of the Southern Ocean seal stocks in his book *The Fatal Impact*, but nevertheless his point is well made about what happened to them once they had been discovered:

³ Quoted in: Strange, I; (1969) Marine Mammals of the Falkland Islands; *Pacific Discovery*; Volume 22, No.5 p17.

‘No one will ever know how many whales and seals were killed in the Southern Ocean in the ensuing fifty years [after Cook’s discoveries]. Was it ten million or fifty million? Figures become meaningless; the killing went on and on until there was virtually nothing left to kill, nothing at any rate that could be easily and profitably killed.’⁴

A former Senior Marine Biologist of the British Antarctic Survey has warned about the difficulty in assessing the accuracy of these figures.⁵ Sea Lion and Elephant Seal stocks partially recovered during the late nineteenth century in the Islands, and sporadic controlled exploitation occurred until 1968. Sea Lion populations in the Islands continued to decline from an estimated 380,000 in 1937 to 30,000 in 1969. A breeding stock of 3,500 Elephant Seals on the Islands has recently been estimated. The numbers of Fur Seals found in the Islands (which are different sub-species from the Antarctic Fur Seal (*Arctocephalus gazella*) found in South Georgia) have not recovered to the same extent as Fur Seals have on South Georgia. The numbers of Fur Seals in the Islands are currently (2004) estimated to be fewer than 16,000. The Antarctic Fur Seal population has recovered in South Georgia since 1900 and annual population growth rates of between 10% and 17% have been estimated. The stock is now estimated to be in excess of three million. The Elephant Seal stock has been estimated to be approx. 750,000 and this sustained a controlled industry from 1909-1965. This seal oil industry was possible because of the parallel development of a nearby land based whaling industry.

All Seal species in the Islands were protected from exploitation by Government Ordinance of 1964; this has recently been superseded by the Conservation of Wildlife and Nature Ordinance 1999. The 1964 and 1999 Ordinance only extend to land, internal waters and the Islands’ territorial sea. The Marine Mammals Ordinance of 1992 (which remains in full force and effect) replaced repealed Ordinances, which allowed licences to be given to take seals and whales, and which defined “Falkland Islands waters” to include fisheries waters as well as internal waters and territorial sea.

⁴ Moorhead, A; (1968) op.cit.; p195.

⁵ Boyd. Dr. I; currently (2004 Professor of Marine Biology at St. Andrews University.

§ b. Sealing in the Islands up to 1881.

The first cargo of sealskins and oil directly exported from the Islands was by Bougainville and other French settlers in 1766. Thus began an industry which continued intermittently for two centuries. Concerted commercial exploitation commenced in the Islands in 1774 when United States whalers based their activities in the Islands. British vessels arrived soon afterwards, in 1775, from Greenland waters. Mixed whaling and sealing voyages were made. Some sealing was done by Islands settlers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; however most sealing was done by visiting crews. Little financial investment was necessary, and large profits were possible. Over-exploitation caused stocks, and thus profits, to decline.

Sealing was interrupted by the United States War of Independence. (1775-83) The British Government blockaded New England ports, preventing many whaling and sealing vessels from leaving. British vessels returned to the Islands in 1786 for whale and seal oil for the London market. New England vessels returned to the Islands in 1789 and their ships dominated the trade in skins. The seal rookeries were depleted by the end of the eighteenth century. At this point as many as fourteen sealing ships were operating regularly around the Islands.⁶ Elephant Seal hunting became more common from about 1815 and it supplied oil for an increasingly industrialised United States. The oil was required for lubrication, soap, and for lighting.⁷ In the absence of government on the Islands, conservation measures could not be introduced or enforced. Many Fur Seal rookeries during this period were eradicated and have never subsequently recovered.

Daniel Jewitt claimed the Islands for the Provincias Unidas de la Rio de la Plata in 1820. His attempts to stop foreign sealers and whalers were ignored. The Provincias Unidas reasserted a claim in 1826 and they licensed Louis Vernet, who had settled at Port Louis, with exclusive sealing rights. Vernet was keen to conserve seal stocks to develop a sustainable domestic sealing industry. Masters of foreign vessels were told

⁶ Strange, I; (1972) Sealing Industries of the Falkland Islands; *Falkland Islands Journal*; Volume 6; pp. 13-21.

⁷ Strange, I; (1972) *The Falkland Islands*; op.cit.; p196.

to stop sealing but the ban was difficult to enforce, and sealing continued by British and United States crews. Vernet attempted to enforce his demands by seizing the United States sealing ship - the *Harriet*. Vernet took the *Harriet* to Buenos Aires in order that the Master (John Davidson) could stand trial. The United States denounced Vernet as a pirate and a United States Navy corvette - the *Lexington* - destroyed Port Louis in retaliation. United States sealing ships continued to reduce the already seriously depleted stock. Further attempts were made to ban United States vessels in 1833, but such measures were difficult to enforce. With the decline in stocks the profitability of the trade also declined.⁸

In 1840 the first licence for sealing was issued by the British Naval Officer then in charge of the Islands (Lieutenant John Tyssen). This was for the rookery off Volunteer Point. The rookery had to be rested on alternate years. This was the first significant attempt to conserve seal stocks after 75 years of exploitation.

With the establishment of British civilian government, control became easier. In his long Despatch of 14 April 1842 Governor Moody reported that the stocks of seals were depleted. His words reveal clearly the scale of early hunting on the Fur Seal populations:

The Hair and Fur Seals, which were formerly so abundant in these islands, have decreased considerably in number, in consequence of the wanton destruction at all times of the year when they can be met with; neither old seals nor pups are spared by the sealers.⁹

Moody requested a warship to patrol the western islands to intimidate United States ships who waited for local sealing ships to leave. The foreign ships would then send men ashore to work unhindered and unreported. Moody reported in 1843 that there were 28 foreign ships in the Islands, but only three local ships were described as being involved with sealing.

⁸ Jones, A; (1992) Fur sealing in the Falkland Islands in the 1820s and 1830s; *Falkland Islands Journal*; Volume 6 (part 1); pp. 39-47.

⁹ Moody, R; (1843) *Information respecting the Falkland Islands*; Charles Knight & Co.; p13.

By 1860 most sealing was taking place on the coast of South America, but after these stocks became depleted (by 1871) United States sealers returned to the Islands and South Georgia. The stock, which had been relatively undisturbed for 25 years, once more became the target of exploitation. Strange commented that ‘another rush south took place’¹⁰ but once again stocks were soon depleted to the point of near extinction.

Despite the optimism of Governors Moody and Rennie that the establishment of a sustainable domestic sealing industry would be possible, the project failed because it was unable to provide substantial revenue for the Colony as a result of low stocks and catches, and also because of the increased involvement of the settlers in other employment - particularly sheep farming.

§ c. Sealing in the Islands 1881-1967.

The Islands Government introduced the Seal Fisheries Ordinance in 1881 to encourage the recovery of seal colonies in order to enable the development of a domestic sealing industry. This introduced a closed season and the requirement for royalties and licences. Hunting was prohibited during the breeding season and fines (up to £300) were established for breaking regulations. A Naval vessel (initially HMS *Dwarf*) was stationed in the Colony to enforce the Ordinance. Sealing Licences became a requirement from 1889. Governor Goldsworthy wrote to the Senior Naval Officer (Captain Lacy) thus:

During the stay of the *Magpie* here an American vessel the *Sarah Hunt* came in with 600 seal skins which the master stated he had procured off the Horn. It is far more probable that they were obtained from one of our outlying islands.¹¹

It should be noted, however, that these measures failed to have controlling effect on pelagic sealing.

¹⁰ Strange, I; (1972); op.cit.; p14.

¹¹ Goldsworthy, R; Letter to Senior Naval Officer; 21 November 1891; Outward Letter Book 1881-1908; Falkland Islands Government Archive.

The Falkland Islands Gazette of 1891 requested tenders for hunting in five areas or sealing districts and Charles Hansen ¹² successfully applied for a licence. He was drowned in 1891, but his widow, Sarah, continued to use the licence. Sealing appears only to have occurred on Carcass, Beauchêne, and the Jason Islands. Sarah Hansen used the licence until 1914. The stocks did not recover as expected and little sealing took place thereafter. Thereafter the sealing industry became of minor importance to the Colony's economy.

Canadian and Chilean rookery poaching and pelagic hunting from 1901-1911 also delayed Fur Seal recovery. During this period the Canadians took at least 70,000 Fur Seals from the whole of the South Atlantic region. The seal skins were transhipped through Stanley, and the Stanley Shipping Registers show that the season 1903/4 was the peak of the activity, with 22,360 skins shipped.¹³ Thereafter there was rapid decline, with only 6,870 skins shipped in 1911. During the same period Islands based licensed sealing accounted for between 152 and 310 seals annually. Accurate records do not exist concerning the activities of Chilean sealers; the number of seals taken by them is unknown.

Canadian and United States sealing ships continued to take Fur Seals, on a casual basis, as they rounded Cape Horn en route to the Pacific. In 1895 the sealing vessel *Director* took 610 skins, from the Islands, although the coast of Japan was her intended destination. When the Bering Sea was closed to pelagic sealing at the end of the nineteenth century a serious effort was then directed towards the Southern Oceans. The desire for commercial secrecy was another factor in the continuing decline of Fur Seal stocks. ¹⁴

In 1904 a new Sealing Ordinance was enacted, and this required that a charge of ten shillings, for each sealskin, be levied. This however did not have the desired

¹² For an account of the life of Charles Hansen see: Miller, S; (1990) *A life of our choice*; privately published; pp. 1-17.

¹³ Dickinson, A B; (1987) *The history of Sealing in the Falkland Islands and Dependencies 1754-1972*; unpublished Ph.D. thesis; Cambridge; p140.

¹⁴ Busch, B; (1985) *The War against the Seals*; Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press; 1985; p211.

controlling effect. No sealing ships called at Stanley for over a year; sealskins were transhipped though Punta Arenas where the taxes were considerable lower. Financial interests in the Falklands complained about the loss of revenue to the Governor and the Ordinance was revoked in 1906.

Governor William Allardyce entered negotiations with the Canadian Sealing Company in 1908 'for exclusive rights of Fur sealing upon and about all the rookeries around the said Falkland Islands.'¹⁵ In a confidential Despatch, to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Allardyce revealed his deep concern for the conservation of the remaining Fur Seals, and of the parlous state of the rookeries:

Considering how small they are and the limited number of seals on them at the moment ... if things are permitted to remain in the unsatisfactory condition in which they have been in for many years past, the result is almost certain to be the absolute depletion, if not the entire extermination, of the Fur Seal in and around the Falklands, and the loss to Government of what, if properly managed, would prove in a few years to be a valuable source of revenue ... I have merely to refer you to my Confidential Despatch of 29 December 1908, containing particulars of a raid on the Fur Seal rookery at Volunteer Rocks, almost within sight of the seat of Government. On that occasion the rookery was depleted and the seal pups left to die ... When the rookeries are properly protected it is probable that the number of seals will increase rapidly.¹⁶

In the event the quota that was set was only for 900 seals. The uneconomic nature of the agreement meant that the Canadian licence application was withdrawn. Allardyce was well aware that poaching by the Canadians was continuing:

When I first came to the Falklands I was prepared to doubt whether Canadian sealers raided the Fur Seal rookeries in the Colony, but subsequent

¹⁵ Allardyce, W; Despatches to the Secretary of State 1908 - 1915; 9 February 1908; MSS SPRI 240/1 & MSS SPRI 240/2.

¹⁶ Allardyce, W; MSS SPRI 240/1 & MSS SPRI 240/2.

occurrences have unwillingly forced me to the conclusion that they are by no means above suspicion.¹⁷

In a general comment about the use of the Colony's natural resources - including seals - Allardyce also revealed his concern that some people in the Colony would not face up to their responsibilities:

The Colonists are non-progressive, and not unnaturally perhaps are perfectly satisfied with a sheep farming investment which has given a return of late years of over 30%, and permits them after a few years spent in this Colony to retire and live in a substantial competence in the Old Country, and join the band of absentee owners ... Needless to say such action does not make for the development of the country or its progress, but permits them in great measure to evade their responsibilities to the Colony in which they have made their fortunes.¹⁸

The Islands Government subsequently offered sealing licences to Ch.Salvesen & Co. (at that time based on New Island) in the hope that the presence of the whaling crews might deter the poachers. The Company did not take up the offer. A possible explanation for Salvesen's reluctance was that the fee fixed by Allardyce was £50; 'this may appear at first sight to be a little high, but on the other hand the Government is not particularly anxious to issue any such licences.'¹⁹

Ernest Shackleton wrote to Governor Allardyce, in March 1914, with a proposal to form the Falkland Islands Fur Seal Company.²⁰ He applied for a lease of 21 years. An agreement was drawn up, on 20 March, which required the Company to have £25,000 capital. The lease permitted sealing on 4560 acres on a number of islands; notably The Jasons, Beauchêne Islands, Bird Island and Volunteer Rocks. Shackleton ratified the agreement but the Company was not established because Shackleton left England in

¹⁷ Allardyce, W; 1 November 1908; MSS SPRI 240/1.

¹⁸ Allardyce, W; 13 July 1908; MSS SPRI 240/1.

¹⁹ Allardyce, W; 9 June 1909; MSS SPRI 240/1.

²⁰ CO78/132; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 6 March 1914.

the *Endurance* on his polar expedition. The lease option lapsed in 1915;²¹ the failure of this venture meant that further stock depletion was thus avoided.

A controlled and viable industry was impossible because of the depleted stocks and uncontrolled foreign poaching: Nevertheless the conservation legislation introduced provided the basis for the development of further regulations to control the conduct of sealing in the Colony and Dependencies.²² Poaching decreased during World War I because of the presence of Royal Naval vessels, but by 1919 the Colonial Office was once again making representations to both the Chilean and Argentine governments about the activities of South American seal poachers. Local interest in sealing increased again at the end of the war; there were eight applications for licences,²³ but none appear to have been issued.

The first attempt to assess the numbers of Fur Seals in the Islands took place in 1919 by Dr. J Hamilton, the Government Naturalist.²⁴ The report gives a highly graphic account of Hamilton's activities, but it is remarkably imprecise about seal populations. The lack of accuracy of Hamilton's seal counts was to have serious consequences in later years, when successive Government administrations fixed the level of sealing quotas for Sea Lions and Elephant Seals too high. Fur Seal numbers were estimated to be 5,500 in total and insufficient to support an industry - particularly as substantial poaching by Chilean ships of Fur Seals was still occurring.²⁵ The Government Naturalist recommended that a 3-inch naval gun be placed on Elephant Jason Island to deter poachers.²⁶ Hamilton urged strong protection measures for the Fur Seal, but that the numbers of Sea Lions were such that they 'are a field for industrial development.'²⁷ The Seal Fishery (Consolidation) Ordinance 1921 was introduced. Seal Fishery Officers were appointed in 1922 and armed

²¹ Fisher, M and J; (1957) *Shackleton*; James Barrie Books; London; p333.

²² Dickinson, A B; (1987); op. cit.; p134.

²³ CO78/154; Report by the Government Naturalist (J E Hamilton) Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; Jan 1920.

²⁴ CO78/154; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1920.

²⁵ C/5/44; *Poaching of seal rookeries in the Falkland Islands*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 9 August 1944.

²⁶ CS250/22; *Reports establishment of Armed Guard on Elephant Jason Island*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 21 March 1922. The permanent guard was withdrawn from Elephant Jason Island in September 1924, but the hut and its supplies were left on the Island for use by seasonal guards. See: CS578/24; *Withdrawal of Jason Guard*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; April 1924.

²⁷ CO78/154; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1920; op. cit.

officers were placed at major rookeries during the breeding season. Fur sealing was prohibited. HMCS *Afterglow* was purchased to assist with protection of the rookeries.²⁸ There were worries in the Colony that the cost of this protection could not be met from the revenues of the sealing industry.

In April 1923 Governor Middleton wrote to the Secretary of State expressing concern about the diminishing numbers of Fur Seals in the Islands.²⁹ The Government Naturalist had visited Elephant Jason Island, Bird Island and Volunteer Rocks from October 1922 to March 1923, and his report showed that although the exact number of Fur Seals could not be stated with complete accuracy, nevertheless the numbers were very much less than had been indicated in earlier reports.³⁰

Hamilton was of the opinion that the presence of large numbers of Sea Lions:

On or near the hauling or breeding places of the Fur Seal is most undesirable and that steps should be taken to remove them. There should be no difficulty in doing this if the Sea Lions are driven to the edge of the rocks and shot there or in the water.³¹

Hamilton concluded that Fur Seal numbers were now so low that the Islands would be unable to support the costs of a protection scheme within a reasonable time. 'At £3 per skin an annual yield of 1,496 skins would be necessary and this implies a herd of over 30,000 Fur Seals, and highly polygamous at that.'³²

Strange commented, in 1969, that although the last recorded visit by a sealer to Beauchêne Island was in 1919:

²⁸ CS990/21; *Purchase of Drifter 'Afterglow'*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1921. For reports on the voyages of *Afterglow* see: CS68/22; *Report of voyages of HMCS Afterglow*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; January 1922. For subsequent sale details see: CS560/27; *Approval of sale of HMCS Afterglow*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1927.

²⁹ CS692/24 *The re-stocking of Fur Seal Rookeries by obtaining specimens from Lobos Islands*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 26 September 1924. Also: D/16/59; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1958.

³⁰ CO78/164; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1923.

³¹ CO78/164; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1923.

³² CO78/164; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1923.

Just two years before these animals were given complete protection. What actually happened to this colony we shall probably never know, but it is quite likely that the last sealer to go there took the remaining few animals. Why after all these years of protection Beauchêne Island has not again become an important breeding ground for Fur Seals is puzzling, unless, as we suspect, the surviving herds of seals in the islands have remained static and are not forced onto new grounds.³³

A G Bennett visited Elephant Jason, Volunteer Rocks, Beauchêne Island and Bird Island between 19 December 1924 and 12 February 1925 and he estimated that the total number of Fur Seal pups was 8,100.³⁴

The Trustees of the British Museum (Natural History)³⁵ and its Director Dr Sidney Harmer³⁶ advised the Colonial Office on sealing and whaling matters. The Colonial Office was optimistic that the costs of protection measures could be recovered and that seal numbers would recover if proper protection were given. The Islands Government thought that the Colonial Office did not understand the problems caused by the large numbers of Sea Lions and that Dr Harmer was ‘an extreme protectionist.’³⁷ However, Sidney Harmer’s alleged ‘extreme protectionism’ did not appear to extend to the Leopard Seal (*Hydrunga leptonyx*).

³³ Strange, I; (1969); op.cit.; p17.

³⁴ CS174/25; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Bennett, A G; to Colonial Secretary; 10 March 1925.

³⁵ Until recently the official title of the museum in South Kensington was ‘The British Museum (Natural History)’ but for the purposes of this dissertation it will hereafter be referred to as the ‘Natural History Museum’.

³⁶ Sir Sidney Harmer (1862-1950) As a consequence of Harmer’s initiative the Natural History Museum became the centre of whale and seal research. In 1911 he began to warn about the immense slaughter of whales in the Southern Ocean. His Linnaean Society Presidential addresses of 1928 and 1930 charted the history of the whaling industry, and also how the alarming whaling statistics demonstrated the high level of killing. These Presidential addresses are discussed in greater detail in the chapter on Whaling.

³⁷ CO78/166; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1923.

It is a ferocious pest; it preys on penguins as well as fish, and any diminution in its numbers may, perhaps, be viewed with equanimity. Whether it is merely a pest depends on whether the skin and oil have any economic value:³⁸

Sea Lion stocks were estimated to be large (thought to be 380,000 in 1937) and these numbers were considered to be ‘excessive.’ Sea Lions were reputed to damage farmed land, and to compete with Fur Seals for breeding space. In support of an application for a sealing licence made by Jack Davis, Governor Hodson wrote to the Secretary of State thus:

Sea Lions are to be found in almost countless numbers round the coasts of the Falkland Islands ... the taking of 20,000 Sea Lions would have no untoward effect and would involve absolutely no danger of the extermination of the species. In fact the killing off of a proportion of these animals, which do incalculable damage to tussock grass, would be of material benefit to sheep farmers, many of whom of made representations to me on the matter.³⁹

Licensed Sea Lion hunting was thus to be encouraged. The first licence was issued in 1925 and annual quotas of 10,000 Sea Lions and 1,000 Elephant Seals were established.

Commander Frank Worsley, a member of Ernest Shackleton’s expeditions, applied for a sealing licence in 1928, in conjunction with the Hudson Bay Company. Worsley also attempted to charter RRS *Discovery I*, for a nominal sum. The *Discovery I* would engage in sealing in order that the expedition could be self-supporting. The Discovery Committee refused to allow the charter of their ship,⁴⁰ and Worsley was forced to look elsewhere for a suitable alternative. Worsley formed a company called British Sealing Industries Ltd. - to be based in Stanley - and the Colonial Office agreed to a

³⁸ CO78/154; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1920. Also: CS3/31; *Sea Leopards – danger in regard to at West Point Island*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Letter from Felton, A; to Colonial Secretary; 30 November 1930. Governor Sir Miles Clifford commented in 1949: ‘It appears to be a singularly vicious and useless beast and I don’t know why it is protected.’ CSO0958/B; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 31 December 1949. Dr J E Hamilton, the Government Naturalist, wrote the Discovery Report on the Leopard Seal: Hamilton, J E; (1939) *The Leopard Seal Hydrunga leptonyx*; Discovery Reports. Vol.XVIII, pp.239-264; Cambridge University Press.

³⁹ CO78/176/10; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1927.

⁴⁰ SPRI MSS1284/4/10 (folio 887).

£10,000 loan from the Colonial Development Fund (chargeable to the Dependencies Fund), using the Company's sealing vessel as security. In the event Worsley was unable to obtain a ship that satisfied the requirements of the Crown Agents, and the scheme failed.⁴¹

The Falkland Islands and Dependencies Sealing Company operated sporadically, usually at a loss, at Albemarle from 1927 until 1940.⁴² On one occasion this Company drove Sea Lions overland from Cape Meredith Lagoon to the sealing station at Albemarle - a distance of nearly 11km. The seals were driven with bullwhips, and arrived at Albemarle badly gashed and bleeding. Anecdotal evidence suggests that 800 seals began the drive, but only 100 arrived. In the event most of the seals that arrived promptly escaped before their planned slaughter. Jim Robertson, the manager of the nearby farm at Port Stephens, ensured that there were no more seal drives to Albemarle. This event has become a byword for cruelty in the Islands.

Governor Hodson wrote about the unsatisfactory state of The Falkland Islands and Dependencies Sealing Company thus:

The Company is in debt to the tune of over £15,000 of which no less than £12,000 is owing to the Falkland Islands Company. Under-capitalised at the outset the Company was rushed into extravagant expenditure on the vessel *Belleville* and the shore station at Albemarle through the advice of its Norwegian experts, as to the integrity (of the Company) at least grave doubts are admissible.⁴³

Failure was also partly the consequence of the low price of oil prices on the world market, and also because the Company's main quarry - the Sea Lion - yielded less oil and a less valuable pelt in comparison with the Elephant Seal. Between 1928 and 1938 a total of 39,696 animals were taken.⁴⁴

⁴¹ C/9/31; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1 June 1931.

⁴² For example in 1930 the Company's accounts show a loss of £9,146. See: CSO589/27; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1927-1936 and CS73/35; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1935-1937.

⁴³ CO78/188/5; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1931.

⁴⁴ Strange, I; (1972); op.cit.; pp. 13-21.

The South Atlantic Sealing Company was formed in 1949, sponsored by the Colonial Development Corporation, and the exploitation of Sea Lions and Elephant Seals recommenced in 1950 at Albemarle. The Company was licensed to take 9,000 Sea Lions and 2,000 Sea Elephants. The ships *Golden Chance* and *Protector III* were obtained to assist with sealing operations. Full utilisation of the carcasses was required, and the ship *Protector III* was employed to enforce this requirement. Sealing operations stopped in 1951. With high oil prices the scheme was expected to make a good financial return, but in the event only 3,045 Sea Lions were taken and the Company had lost an estimated £50,000. This failure was mainly due to the scarcity of seals, although the Governor and the Government Sealing Officer also blamed the failure of the oil extraction machinery.⁴⁵ An additional problem was that the source of potentially exploitable seals was restricted because of a protracted dispute between the Colonial Development Corporation and the Falkland Islands Company about sealing rights in Lafonia on East Falkland Island.⁴⁶

Licences were then offered to Salvesen⁴⁷ and also to Albion Star (South Georgia) and the Companies initially appeared keen to take up the licences because of the high price of oil on the world market. Although they were allowed to take seals⁴⁸ from large areas of the Islands, they did not do so because from the mid-1950s the oil price fell yet again.

In 1951 Dr Richard Laws of the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey estimated that the Fur Seal population was approximately 20,000.⁴⁹ As a result of this survey complete protection was afforded to the remaining stock of Islands Fur Seals.

Ian Strange became increasingly concerned about the stocks of Sea Lions, and in 1963 he opposed the Government granting a sealing licence.⁵⁰ In January 1965 Ian Strange

⁴⁵ CO78/258/16; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; March 1951.

⁴⁶ CO1024/71; Colonial Office Records; Public Records Office; Kew; 1951.

⁴⁷ CSO0157; *Sealing in the Falkland Islands*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 15 December 1954.

⁴⁸ CSO0157; *Sealing in the Falkland Islands*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 7 November 1947.

⁴⁹ Laws, R M; (1951) *The Seals of the Falkland Islands and Dependencies*; *Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey ~ Scientific Reports*; Vol. 2. No.2.

⁵⁰ Strange, I; (1976) *The Bird Man*; London: Gordon & Cremonesi; p46.

and William Vaughan undertook an intensive aerial survey of many seal rookeries. The Report's conclusions⁵¹ proved to be uncomfortable for the Islands Government, and it was never published. Strange reported that he had no difficulty counting the seals because there were so few. The highest figure that the Report gave for the total seal population was 30,000. Vaughan strongly urged the Islands Government to carry out a further census to confirm the results.⁵² The Director of the British Antarctic Survey commented about the conclusions of the Report: 'it seems a sad story, and if it became common knowledge could cause something of a furore in Wildlife and Conservation circles.'⁵³

Despite the Vaughan/Strange Report, Sea Lion licences continued to be issued to some private individuals; in 1965 (for 1,500 Sea Lion pelts) and 1967 - but these were small operations and few seals were taken. The decision to issue licences was based again on Hamilton's estimate of 380,000 Sea Lions.

Ian Strange commented:

To base sealing activities on a census over 30 years old was not a far-sighted policy, especially as there was evidence to suggest that a drastic decline had occurred in the seal herds since that census.⁵⁴

In hindsight it is also probable that the quotas set in the 1920s were based on inadequate information and were set too high, but nevertheless Hamilton's estimated population figures continued to be used for many years to the detriment of the remaining breeding stock. The Vaughan/Strange Report did much to cast serious doubts on the accuracy of Hamilton's figures, and also to change the Government's view on sealing - as did the fact that there were now so few seals present in the Islands that any sealing venture was uneconomic.

⁵¹ Vaughan, W and Strange, I; (1965) *An aerial survey of the Sea Lion (Otaria byronia) stocks in the Falkland Islands*; 0497/IV; Falkland Islands Government Archive..

⁵² 0497/IV; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Letter from Vaughan, R W to Governor 20 October 1965.

⁵³ 0497/IV; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Letter from Fuchs, V E to Governor 17 November 1965.

⁵⁴ Strange, I; (1972); op.cit.; pp. 13-21.

Thus despite the laudable attempts to establish a sustainable sealing industry for islanders, the plan was a failure, because by 1969 the Sea Lion population was less than 30,000 and the Elephant Seal population was less than 3,300. These populations were insufficient to sustain profitable sealing. Dickinson commented:

The sealing companies could not fulfil their high quotas from these low stocks and over-exploitation may have occurred ... It is therefore fortuitous [sic] that a sealing industry could not become re-established; attainment of such quotas would have seriously depleted the stocks.⁵⁵

Throughout its history, sealing has made only a minor contribution to the Islands economy. There was modest revenue from licence fees, and some local employment was provided by the industry. A considerable injection of money and employment occurred in connection with the various ill-fated ventures of the Colonial Development Corporation in the 1950s, but taken overall, most of the profits from the Islands' sealing industry went abroad. The Shackleton Economic Report of 1976 considered the possible re-commencement of sealing. However it noted that:

Before an exploitation of seals is allowed in the Islands, a full evaluation of the populations and their growth rates should be undertaken. Tourism interest should also be taken into consideration.⁵⁶

Ian Strange, a modern pioneer of the conservation movement in the Islands, warned in 1969 that the seal herds now faced an even greater problem than that posed by the sealers, namely the problems caused by the human population explosion. The competition between the seals and humans for the food resources found in the waters around the Islands had started:

Trawlers and research ships are arriving to open up this otherwise untouched larder and sample its contents. Will they go too far, as those before us have, or

⁵⁵ Dickinson, A B; (1987); op.cit; p185.

⁵⁶ Shackleton, E; (1976); op.cit.; volume 2; p55.

will man stop and think and make plans not only for his own survival but for that of his wild companions?⁵⁷

This statement of Strange highlights the continuing need for accurate biological surveys of the seal herd populations. In 1999 the Sea Mammal Research Unit began to study the movements and foraging behaviour of Fur Seals in the Islands. This research is jointly funded by the Islands Government and the United Kingdom's Natural Environment Research Council.

§ d. Sealing in South Georgia and other Dependencies up to 1904.

Sealing probably began shortly after James Cook made known his discovery of the Fur Seal rookeries on South Georgia in 1775. The significance for the seal populations of the Southern Oceans of this momentous discovery is well summed up by Nigel Bonner:

The cycle of discovery, near-extirmination, and subsequent recovery can be illustrated by the history of the exploitation of the Antarctic Fur Seal (*Arctocephalus gazella*), at South Georgia and the islands farther south.⁵⁸

After the American War of Independence, British vessels⁵⁹ began to arrive in 1786/7 to exploit Fur Seal stocks. New England ships first began to arrive in South Georgia in 1792. The seal pelts were sold to the Cantonese market. By 1801 the fur sealing fleet at South Georgia numbered at least 31 ships.⁶⁰ By 1822 Weddell calculated that 'not less than 1,200,00 fur seal skins had been shipped from South Georgia and the species was practically extinct there.'⁶¹ It is clear, however, that Elephant Sealing also occurred during this early period. When Fanning visited South Georgia in 1801

⁵⁷ Strange, I; (1969); op.cit.; p23.

⁵⁸ Bonner, W N; (1982) *Seals and Man - a study of interactions*; Washington; p61.

⁵⁹ Sealing probably began when the British sealer *Lord Hawkesbury* visited the Island in 1786.

⁶⁰ Fanning, E; (1924) *Voyages and discoveries in the South Seas 1782-1832*; Salem Marine Research Society.

⁶¹ Bonner, N; (1958) Exploitation and Conservation of Seals in South Georgia; *Oryx* (Journal of the Fauna Preservation Society) Vol. IV; No.6; p373.

he found the captain of one ship that had disposed of her skins to ‘an English elephant oil ship.’ Bellingshausen⁶² met Elephant Sealers on South Georgia in late 1819.

‘The lure of high profits and the absence of government and conservation made controlled exploitation impossible.’⁶³ The stocks on South Georgia rapidly declined and South Shetlands became the next location for the sealers. Fur Seals and Elephant Seals had been discovered on South Shetlands in 1819. The first sealing ship to arrive in the South Shetland Islands was the *Espirito Santo* from Buenos Aires. This ship took 14,000 sealskins in five weeks, returning to Buenos Aires on 22 February 1820. The *Hersilia*, from New England, arrived at the South Shetland Islands shortly after *Espirito Santo*, and harvested a cargo of 9,000 sealskins in three weeks. Only a shortage of salt, used for curing the skins, prevented them obtaining three times that number.⁶⁴ By 1830 the stocks of Fur Seals on the South Shetland Islands had been almost exterminated.

Sealers had thus destroyed most of the Fur Seal stocks in the Dependencies by the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Very few visits to the South Shetlands occurred again until 1871 when United States sealers began supplying furs to the London market. This continued until 1892, but the numbers of Fur Seals killed was only a tiny fraction of previous levels.⁶⁵

Concern about the activities of the sealers and whalers continued to be felt by the Colonial Office. On 30 April 1918 the Interdepartmental Committee on Research and Development in the Falkland Islands Dependencies was established, and the Committee produced an influential report in 1920. The report led directly to establishment of the Discovery Committee in 1923; Antarctic research work - the Discovery Expeditions - began in 1925. These expeditions were to have a significant

⁶² Fabian Gottlieb Benjamin von Bellingshausen (1778-1852) was the Commander of a Russian Naval Expedition (aboard *Vostok* and *Mirnyy*). The Expedition departed Kronstad on 5 July 1819 and circumnavigated the Antarctic continent in high southern latitudes, This was the first Expedition to cross the Antarctic Circle since James Cook had done so in 1773. Russia claims that Bellingshausen was the first to sight the Antarctic mainland. The expedition lasted 751 days and the ships crossed the Antarctic Circle six times. Bellingshausen arrived at South Georgia 27 December 1819 and on 3 January 1820 he discovered three new South Sandwich Islands.

⁶³ Dickinson, A B; (1987); op.cit.; p103.

⁶⁴ Stackpole, E A; (1955) *The Voyage of the Huron and the Huntress; American sealers and the discovery of the continent of Antarctica*; Hartford, Connecticut; p11.

⁶⁵ Laws, R M; (1953) The Elephant Seal industry at South Georgia; *Polar Record*; Volume 6, No. 46; p746.

effect on the scientific understanding of the Southern Oceans, and upon the management of their resources.

The Scottish Antarctic explorer and scientist, Dr W S Bruce, in his submission in the Interdepartmental Report of 1920 suggested that we:

Take heed of the lesson, which the Fur Seal hunters of 1820-22 taught us, and protect the Dependencies' whales ... And why not resuscitate the Fur Seal fisheries ... Don't kill a single Fur Seal for, say, twenty years. Attempt to breed young on suitable places at the South Shetlands, and possibly South Georgia, as I advocated with Sir Roger Tuckfield Goldsworthy [then Governor of the Falkland Islands] twenty-five years ago ... let us attempt at least to stow them in bulk again. Probably the Falkland Islands Fur Seal fisheries might also be increased.⁶⁶

The Interdepartmental Report of 1920 contains the following stark comment about this period of exploitation:

It is impossible not to condemn in too severe terms the indiscriminate slaughter to which these animals [Fur Seals] were subjected. The result was, as Dr Bruce described it to us, a most important economic disaster, and it should never be forgotten as a warning against the uncontrolled exploitation of animal life for commercial purposes.⁶⁷

Sealing in the South Shetland Islands did not occur thereafter, and numbers of seals have greatly recovered, but not to a size that could support catches of the magnitude of the 1820s.

§ e. Sealing in South Georgia and other Dependencies 1904 - 1969.

⁶⁶ Interdepartmental Committee (1920); *Research and Development in the Dependencies of the Falkland Islands*; Cmd.657; London: HMSO; p36.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*; p16.

Compañía Argentina de Pesca started whaling in South Georgia in 1904.⁶⁸ The Company had been granted a 21 year 500 acre lease, to establish a land station, from 1 January 1906 for £250 p.a.⁶⁹ Whaling crews began to take Elephant Seals in 1905, thus continuing the eighteenth and nineteenth century tradition of supplementing whale oil production with elephant oil production.

Following a survey by C A Larsen (aboard the *Undine*) the Islands Government granted an experimental sealing licence to Compañía Argentina de Pesca in 1909 in order to determine the feasibility of operating an Elephant Seal industry. In ten days of December 595 Elephant and Leopard Seals were taken. Fur Seals were included in the licence, but none were found. Larsen's survey also revealed the fact that there was a 'wholesale slaughter of sea-elephants at South Georgia by the masters and crews of North American vessels.'⁷⁰ After this experiment Compañía Argentina de Pesca was granted a licence in 1910 to take up to 2,000 male Elephant Seals and 500 Fur Seals from three of the four divisions of the Island (The fourth division was rested on a rotational basis). Up to 2,000 tonnes⁷¹ of Elephant Seal oil was produced annually at Grytviken. This was often recorded as whale oil and the two oils were occasionally mixed. The sealing licence was renewed annually 'to prevent the company becoming complacent about the need to preserve stocks. They subsequently enjoyed a virtual monopoly over the industry.'⁷² Sealing was prohibited on parts of the island leased to other whaling companies.

Governor Allardyce sent John Innes Wilson as the Stipendiary Magistrate to administer South Georgia, including the developing Elephant Sealing industry. Wilson's records reveal a careful and methodical man - well suited to the administration of a burgeoning industry far from the centre of government. His description of the South Georgian coastline and the locations of Fur and Elephant Seal

⁶⁸ During its sealing operations in South Georgia Compañía Argentina de Pesca caught a total of 260,950 seals which produced 498,870 barrels of oil or 83,146 tonnes of high-grade oil. This represents 1.91 barrels or 0.32 tonnes per seal. See: Hart, I; (2001) op. cit.; p415.

⁶⁹ Allardyce, W; MSS SPRI 1228/5/13.

⁷⁰ Allardyce, W; MSS SPRI 240/1 12 May 1909.

⁷¹ Conversion factors for tonnes and barrels of seal and whale oil are reckoned thus: a barrel varied between 160 and 172 litres, and six barrels make a tonne - approximately 1000 litres.

⁷² Dickinson, A B; (1987); op.cit.; p192. See also: Bonner, W N; (1960) Unpublished account of fifty years of sealing by Pesca at South Georgia; D/9/59; Falkland Islands Government Archive.

rookeries are precise and informative.⁷³ It was Wilson who devised the pattern of four divisions; these divisions were to be used by the sealers in strict rotation to conserve the stocks. The sealing quotas proved remarkably accurate; the 6,000 annual quota remained unchanged until whaling ceased in 1964, except between 1947-52 when it was unwisely increased. At that stage Fur Seal stocks had not recovered, but Elephant Seal stock had recovered sufficiently to enable controlled exploitation.

Allardyce and Wilson held the view that ‘a viable long term operation could only occur if stock conservation legislation existed and was enforced.’⁷⁴ Allardyce sent a confidential Despatch to Wilson asking him to send any information, which could be discovered, about the whaling and sealing operations of foreign vessels along the coast of South Georgia. But he warned Wilson that any action he might take under the Seal Fisheries (Dependencies) Ordinance 1909, ‘would require the greatest circumspection.’⁷⁵ Governor Allardyce realised C A Larsen was a man with whom he could deal with integrity: ‘Larsen is a decent fellow and he promised me solemnly not to kill too many Sea Elephants as long as there was no competition’ (*i.e.* from other whaling companies).⁷⁶

The Table below details the licences issued for Elephant Sealing in South Georgia and it clearly shows the domination of that industry by Compañia Argentina de Pesca:

⁷³ Wilson, J I; (1912) The coast of South Georgia; *The Geographical Journal*; volume 39(1) pp. 77-78.

⁷⁴ Dickinson, A B; (1987); *op.cit.*; p202.

⁷⁵ C1; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 26 February 1910.

⁷⁶ CO78/151; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1919.

Table 1: Commercial licences awarded in South Georgia for Elephant Sealing 1909-1969

Seasons	Company	Licensed for:
1909 – 1960 (see exceptions)	Compañía Argentina de Pesca	6,000
1948		7,500
1949 & 1950		9,000
1951		8,000
1913	Captain Cleveland	2,000
1958	Ch.Salvesen & Co.	100 - for whole carcass utilisation experiments
1960 – 1962	Albion Star (South Georgia) Ltd.	6,000 annually
1962-1963	No sealing	No sealing
1963 – 1964 1964 – 1965	International Fishing Co. Ltd.	6,000 annually
1963 – 1964	Nippon Suisan Kaisha Ltd.	100 for experimental purposes
1965 – 1966 1966 – 1967	Albion Star (South Georgia) Ltd.	6,000 annually Licence not used No whaling
1968 – 1969	Run Company	6,000 only five seals taken

Source: Dickinson, A.B. (1987); *A history of sealing in the Falkland Islands and Dependencies 1764-1972*.

In 1920 The Interdepartmental Committee on Research and Development in the Dependencies of the Falkland made a number of significant recommendations. It recommended that Elephant Seal stock at South Georgia be assessed to determine its size and the feasibility of continued exploitation.

In view of the instances which have occurred in the past of irreparable harm to animal life, due to the indiscriminate and reckless slaughter, a not unnatural anxiety has been expressed to us as to the condition of the Sea Elephants at South Georgia, where numbers of these animals are taken for commercial purposes. Whatever danger may have threatened in the past it is gratifying to be able to record that, as shewn in the summary of annual reports of the Magistrate, the sea elephant has since rehabilitated itself and is now found in large numbers. In these circumstances the Government is fairly entitled to

claim that the policy pursued since the passing of the Seal Fishery Ordinance in 1909 has successfully protected these animals.⁷⁷

The Report further recommended that experiments should be made to re-establish the Fur Seal in the Dependencies by the introduction of specimens from elsewhere in the South Atlantic, and that pelagic sealing should be prohibited because of the tendency of sealers to kill indiscriminately pregnant female seals.⁷⁸

In 1920 the South Georgia Magistrate, E B Binnie, informed the Governor that sealers were taking the Weddell Seal (*Leptonychotes weddellii*), which was scarce on South Georgia. The Governor instructed the Magistrate to insert a clause in the licence requirements strictly prohibiting the killing of Weddell Seals.⁷⁹

The report of the Islands Government Naturalist in 1921 supported the view that the stock of Elephant Seals was not declining. This was probably due to a combination of the effects of the quota system and also to the low sealing efforts by Compañía Argentina de Pesca. At that time the Company was only taking half its quota because whaling catches were high and the station was very busy.

In 1928 the Government Magistrate at South Georgia reported that ‘there appears to be no doubt that the present system of sealing is extraordinarily wasteful.’⁸⁰ Governor Hodson resolved to deny Compañía Argentina de Pesca their annual renewal of a sealing licence. Hodson intended for the licence to be granted to Salvesen of Leith Harbour, but the Colonial Office overruled the Governor, and Compañía Argentina de Pesca’s licence was renewed. Governor Hodson was of the view that the best long term course of action was that a new sealing company - independent of any whaling interests - should be granted sole licence rights for sealing in South Georgia.⁸¹ Hodson also asserted that ‘the seals are now so plentiful that there is no object in keeping one of the divisions in reserve each year.’⁸² It is fortunate for the future

⁷⁷ Interdepartmental Committee (1920); op.cit.; p18.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*; p19.

⁷⁹ CS556; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 10 May 1920.

⁸⁰ CO78/180/13; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; Jan 1928.

⁸¹ CO78/180/13; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1928.

⁸² CO78/180/13; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1928.

numbers of the Elephant Seal populations that this suggestion was not acted upon. As with farming issues,⁸³ the Colonial Office was very sceptical about the advice it received from Governor Hodson; ‘Governor Hodson is even more elusive in conversation than in writing’⁸⁴ Matters were further complicated when the Governor contrived to be at variance with the Discovery Committee’s Chief Scientist. Hodson regarded the Committee with suspicion because it was largely outside his jurisdiction.

There was some resentment (and not a little jealousy) in the Islands that *Compañía Argentina de Pesca* continued to have the sole rights of sealing in South Georgia. In 1930 a group of influential farmers applied for a sealing licence in South Georgia:

It would appear inequitable that a foreign company should continue to hold a monopoly to the total exclusion of a company formed within the Colony. There is ample scope for two companies each operating two divisions ... We humbly beg to suggest that it does not seem that the Colony is receiving considerate treatment in this matter. The *Compañía Argentina de Pesca* has held sole sealing rights for many years and it is now time that the Colony had its opportunity.⁸⁵

The Colonial Office instructed the Governor not to accede to this request. It is clear from the Colonial Office Minutes that this refusal was for both conservation and diplomatic reasons. The Colonial Office was concerned about giving offence to Argentina by refusing to continue a long-standing licensing arrangement with an Argentine company.

After World War II *Compañía Argentina de Pesca* asked for an increase in its quota - which was unwisely granted. The Company was allowed to take 7,500 seals in 1948; 9,000 seals in 1949 and 8,000 seals in 1951. These changes were regrettably made without a careful stock census. However in 1951 Dr R M Laws made a detailed

⁸³ CO78/180/15; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1929.

⁸⁴ CO78/180/13; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1929; Minute 4 October 1929.

⁸⁵ CO78/187/3; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1930.

survey of stocks.⁸⁶ This was the first detailed study on Elephant Seal biology, and the study showed that over-exploitation was occurring:

These studies suggested that deterioration in the condition of the stock had taken place which, if not halted, might be expected to continue and cause serious depletion of this resource. On my recommendation the sealing regulations were altered in the way best calculated to restore the herd to a sound position.⁸⁷

Quotas were reduced to 6,000 Elephant Seals.⁸⁸ Laws concluded that while a total figure of 6,000 of Elephant Seals killed would not threaten the stock, the figure of 2,000 per division was arbitrary.

The most important result of these recent studies was therefore the revision of the divisional quotas so that the contribution of each division was proportional to the estimated size of the available surplus in that division.⁸⁹

Stricter licensing conditions were imposed and continuous monitoring took place; sealing inspectors were appointed from 1956. The first sealing inspector was Nigel Bonner, and he reported that from 1910 to 1958 the total number of seals taken was 240,442, which yielded 458,793 barrels of oil.⁹⁰

In 1950 the Falkland Islands Dependencies Scientific Committee considered the possibility of utilising the skins of Elephant Seals. The Committee commended the conservation policy of the Colonial Office during the past 40 years at South Georgia.⁹¹ With the recovery of Elephant Seal stocks on South Georgia the Committee urged consideration of the substitution of Walrus skins, used in the upholstery trade and the metal polishing industry, with those of Elephant Seals skins. Tanning trials were carried out by a British Company, but the practical problems

⁸⁶ Laws, R M; MSS SPRI 1228/7/42; see also: Laws, RM; (1960) *Norwegian Whaling Gazette*; October 1960; pp. 466-476 & November 1960; pp. 520-542.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*; p524.

⁸⁸ CO1024/69; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; February 1952.

⁸⁹ Laws, R M; (1960); *op.cit.*; p531.

⁹⁰ Bonner, N; (1959) MSS SPRI 1228/7/54.

⁹¹ CO78/262/5; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; Jan 1950.

associated with processing and shipping seal hides to the UK from both the rookeries on the Islands, and in South Georgia, proved insurmountable, and the project was dropped.

Governor Sir Edward Arrowsmith wrote to the Colonial Office on 11 March 1958 expressing his concern about the methods of sealing of Compañía Argentina de Pesca. He considered that they showed no sign of improving carcass utilisation. Despite all the efforts of previous Governors, even at this late stage, the sealing inspector in 1958 wrote:

At present no use is made of the rest of the carcasses of the seals killed, which are left to rot on the beaches after flensing. The wastage of oil and protein is considerable and it is greatly to be hoped that improved methods of operation will permit their use in future.⁹²

The Governor was anxious to increase the Colony's revenue potential from sealing, and he proposed that Compañía Argentina de Pesca be excluded from South Georgia. In January 1959 Captain Virik Nilsen, the master of *Petrel* - the sealer of Compañía Argentina de Pesca - appeared before the Magistrate of South Georgia charged with having taken 89 Elephant Seals from Gold Harbour during October and November 1958 when no licence had been issued for that area. Nilsen pleaded guilty and was fined £100. This offence against the Sealing and Fishery Ordinance of the Islands provided Governor Arrowsmith with an excuse to pursue his policy of denying Compañía Argentina de Pesca any future licences.⁹³ The Governor proposed that a Sealing and Fishing Company be established in the Islands, and that this Company should be jointly licensed to exploit the seals of both the Islands and South Georgia. The British Embassy in Buenos Aires opposed this proposal on the grounds that 'the eviction of Pesca would be considered a political move and would be likely to cause an outburst of extreme nationalist indignation.'⁹⁴ The Embassy suggested that in the first instance the Colonial Office should renew its previously ineffectual prodding of

⁹² Bonner, N; (1958) Exploitation and Conservation of Seals in South Georgia; *Oryx* (Journal of the Fauna Preservation Society) Vol. IV; No.6; p378.

⁹³ Proceedings of Case 4/1958 in the Court of the Magistrate of South Georgia; D/9/59; Falkland Islands Government Archive.

⁹⁴ FO 371/131892; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 18 November 1958.

the company into adopting more efficient sealing methods. Alfredo Ryan (the owner of Compañía Argentina de Pesca) ‘should be cajoled into improving his methods under threat of losing his licence.’⁹⁵

In the event no such pressure was brought to bear upon Compañía Argentina de Pesca because of the company’s proposal to transfer their assets to The Albion Star Company.⁹⁶

In March 1960 the Administrative Officer at South Georgia advised the Colonial Secretary that Compañía Argentina de Pesca’s whaling manager Fritz Ringdal had applied, on behalf of the Company, for a licence to establish a Fur Company at Grytviken.⁹⁷ The letter of application stated that ‘It would be more convenient to build the breeding farm outside the whaling station’, and this phrase elicited mixed reactions. The Governor thought that this was ‘a development that should be encouraged’; whereas the Colonial Secretary thought that it would be advisable to enquire what animals the company had in mind for the “breeding farm”. The Colonial Secretary thought that the application for a possible mink farm was camouflage to disguise the real interest - which was the resumption of fur sealing. The Colonial Secretary commented: ‘The time is drawing near when the Fur Seal will be exploitable, and we shall probably have to call for tenders before giving a licence.’ But mink farming on South Georgia was not an industry to be encouraged: ‘South Georgia is pretty much of a wild-life sanctuary and escaping mink would be a menace to the penguins.’⁹⁸ Compañía Argentina De Pesca did not pursue the application.

When Japanese companies arrived at South Georgia, for the last three operational seasons, they asked Salvesen and Albion Star to apply to the Islands Government on their behalf for the sealing licences that were available. ‘They recognised that seal oil would make an important contribution to their own oil production.’⁹⁹ Albion Star was

⁹⁵ FO 371/131892; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 18 November 1958.

⁹⁶ D/3/60/B; Falkland Island Government Archive; 3 January 1961.

⁹⁷ D/28/47B; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Letter from Administrative Officer, South Georgia, to Colonial Secretary; 1 March 1960.

⁹⁸ D/28/47B; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Minute by Colonial Secretary dated 12 March 1960.

⁹⁹ Dickinson, A B; (1993) *Some aspects of Japanese whaling and sealing in South Georgia* in *Whaling & History; perspectives on the evolution of the industry* ed. Basberg, Bjørn; Ringstad, Jan Erik; Einar Wexelsen; Sandefjordmuseene, Sandefjord.

successful in their application for a licence for the International Fishery Company Ltd. to operate from Grytviken for the 1963/4 season. The Japanese provided the catcher crews and flensers, and they used the ships used by the previous licencees - *Dias*, *Petrel* and the *Albatross* - with their Norwegian Masters. The Islands Government awarded the licence again to Albion Star/International Fishing Company Ltd. for the 1964/65 season. This annoyed Salvesen considerably, who complained that the decision was unfair and that the Colonial Office was 'biased against us.'¹⁰⁰

Both Japanese consortia soon found that whaling was uneconomic from South Georgia and their operations ceased. Thus whaling, and also sealing, ceased in South Georgia after the 1964/65 season. Sealing licences continued to be available, and applications for licences were advertised in the Falkland Islands Gazette, until 1972. In the event, only one company - the Run Fishing Company - applied for a licence after 1966, but although the licence permitted 6,000 seals, only five seals were taken. The Administrative Officer of South Georgia commented about this Company thus: 'It was very obvious during the operations in which the Run [Fishing Company] endeavoured to kill five Elephant Seals that they had no knowledge of sealing.'¹⁰¹

Nigel Bonner commented that the Elephant Seal industry in South Georgia went through various stages of exploitation. The initial uncontrolled exploitation and subsequent depletion was followed by spontaneous recovery once the sealing pressure was lifted. The next phase was a successful period of controlled sealing, which was:

Damaged by first failing to set quotas in proportion to the stocks, and then by increasing quotas to beyond the combined maximum sustainable yield. This situation was saved by adopting appropriate management policies with which it was possible to maintain the original quotas whilst bringing the stock back to stability with substantially higher production for the sealing company.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Elliot, G H; (1964) *Memorandum, South Georgia seal licence*; Scott Polar Research Institute; MSS 1228/6/51.

¹⁰¹ D/2/64/11; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 5 February 1968.

¹⁰² Bonner, W N; (1982) *Seals and Man - a study of interactions*; Washington: University of Washington Press.

Bonner commented, somewhat wryly, about the end of the commercial exploitation of Elephant Seals:

This valuable industry could have been preserved had it existed independently rather than as an adjunct of a whaling company. When the whaling collapsed from gross over-exploitation, the rationally managed sealing industry was dragged down with it.¹⁰³

Dickinson's conclusions are noteworthy:

Elephant Sealing at South Georgia in the 20th century provided an excellent example of controlled wildlife exploitation. The industry was successful because of the presence of a large and easily hunted stock, whaling personnel and oil production plant, and the existence of conservation legislation from the beginning of the industry.¹⁰⁴

also:

Elephant Sealing in South Georgia in the 20th century was a well-regulated industry. Its demise occurred because the whaling industry could not be similarly well regulated.¹⁰⁵

It is of note that in recent years the Fur Seal population, particularly on South Georgia, has increased dramatically.¹⁰⁶ This increase is causing an adverse effect on the local ecosystem of South Georgia. Tramping is destroying areas of Tussac Grass, and stocks of krill and other pelagic species, such as icefish, are being reduced.¹⁰⁷ Why has this increase occurred? The most likely explanation is the availability of

¹⁰³ *ibid.* p7.

¹⁰⁴ Dickinson, A B; (1987); *op.cit.*; p260. Dickinson has calculated that the seal oil produced at Grytviken amounted to 16% of the total production of oil during the entire period of operation of Compañía Argentina de Pesca. See: Basberg, Bjørn; (1993) *Survival against all the odds; Shore station whaling at South Georgia in the Pelagic Era 1925-1960* in *Whaling & History; perspectives on the evolution of the industry*; ed. Basberg, Bjørn; Ringstad, Jan Erik; Einar Wexelsen; Sandefjordmuseene, Sandefjord; p161.

¹⁰⁵ Dickinson, A B; (1987); *op.cit.*; p230.

¹⁰⁶ CS91; Falkland Island Government Archive; 6 December 1919. Also: C/19/27; Falkland Islands Government Archive. Also: C/2/33; Falkland Island Government Archive; 19 February 1933.

¹⁰⁷ *Environmental management plan for South Georgia - a public consultation paper*; Cambridge: British Antarctic Survey; February 1999; p36ff.

food. The Antarctic Fur Seal feeds on the planktonic crustacean krill *Euphausia superba*, and the commercial depletion of the krill-eating whales, to less than 16% of the numbers at the beginning of Antarctic whaling, will have substantially reduced the competition for krill. Bonner commented:

We thus see how over-exploitation of natural resources by man first of all brought the Antarctic Fur Seal to the point of extinction and then, the exploitation being directed to another group of predators competing for the same food resource, created the conditions by which the surviving Fur Seals could recover at a rate scarcely attainable had the trophic environment remained unchanged. The interaction of species at the higher trophic levels is a matter of main concern to ecologists and biologists alike¹⁰⁸

Exploitation of any pinniped is currently prohibited under the 1975 Falkland Islands Dependencies Conservation Ordinance. It is important to note that this extends only to the seaward limit of the territorial sea. The South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands Government has also now acted to protect seals beyond its territorial sea, and within the South Georgia maritime zone. Sealing is now prohibited under the terms of the Fisheries (Conservation and Management) Ordinance 2000 of SGSSI. This Ordinance provides legislation based on the new conservation policy.¹⁰⁹

§ f. Concluding remarks.

Both the story of sealing in the Islands and the story of sealing in South Georgia end on a slightly wistful note. For Ian Strange the conservation debate about seals and sealing moves beyond the simple utilitarian framework of the exploitation of a natural resource. His plea - that the needs and concerns of 'our wild companions' should be balanced against human needs and concerns - moves the debate into consideration of the moral rights of non-human species. In contrast Nigel Bonner's scientific conclusions about the cessation of the controlled exploitation of Elephant Seals of South Georgia are still firmly locked into the utilitarian viewpoint. For Bonner, seals

¹⁰⁸ Bonner, W N; (1982); op.cit.

¹⁰⁹ South Georgia Government: *Environmental management plan for South Georgia - a public consultation paper*; February 1999; op.cit.; p7.

are a sustainable resource available for harvesting,¹¹⁰ and that sealing only failed because of human failure.

At the heart of the story of sealing there is also a moral question about what has been called the ‘commodification of nature’; is the natural world to be seen simply as a resource for human purposes? The story of sealing shows the consequences of sole reliance upon a utilitarian approach to nature:

The traditional relationship between humanity and nature was therefore broken and so the natural resource demands of the growing urban culture were no longer balanced by an awareness of the limitations of soil, rivers and climate or respect for farm animals or creatures of the wild. The consequent disembedding of human social structures from the limits and needs of the land, and the loss of a widespread awareness of the relationality between nature and human life, is a key feature in the modern abuse of the natural world.¹¹¹

In any consideration of the history of sealing one fact needs to be borne in mind. Interwoven with the story of the commercial exploitation of seals is the story of the communities of New England and Newfoundland that were supported by the sealing industry.¹¹² For many frontier communities seal hunting became a way of life, and thus for some in these communities those who wish to protect the seals ‘fail to recognise the need to balance the interests of mankind and seal.’¹¹³ But times and attitudes have changed, and for many ‘the highest use of a wild animal is to let it be.’¹¹⁴ Briton Cooper Busch’s conclusion is noteworthy:

It is in no man’s interest to jeopardise, let alone exterminate, any seal population ... as for the future, it is unlikely that any such species will be deliberately attacked, if only because of the considerable public attention which the seals have received since the late 1960s.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ D/9/59; mss; Falkland Islands Government Archive. (Bonner, N; an unpublished account of fifty years of sealing by Compañía Argentina de Pesca at South Georgia).

¹¹¹ Northcott, M; (1996); Northcott, M. (1996) *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; p50.

¹¹² Stackpole, E A; (1955); op.cit.; p5.

¹¹³ Busch, B; (1985), op.cit.; p257.

¹¹⁴ Scheffer, V; (1980) *Adventures of a Zoologist*; New York, Scribner’s; p177.

¹¹⁵ Busch, B; (1985); op.cit.; p258.

