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Agenda Item 12, "Consideration of conservation measures for harp and hood seal populations of the Northwest Atlantic Area," was placed on the Agenda at the request of the Canadian Section because of the grave concern we feel for the future of these seal populations and the international sealing industries dependent upon these populations. Our concern arises from the conclusions reached by our scientists who have been studying these populations for many years in order to obtain data on such factors as population size, birth rate, natural mortality rate of each age class, rate of recruitment and exploitation rate. The data available show clearly that the harp and hood seal populations in the Northwest Atlantic area are declining at a rapid and alarming rate and during the last decade have been reduced by 50 to 65 per cent.

In reaching the decision to bring this matter to the attention of this Commission once again, careful consideration was given to the fact that Canada had presented the same item at the Second Annual Meeting of the Commission held in St. Andrews in July 1952. At that time the matter was introduced under Agenda Item 17 - "Other Business," and following informal discussions, at which no agreement was reached, the Canadian proposal was withdrawn. The record of this action is contained in Item 11 of the Report of the Second Annual Meeting of the Commission. However, because of the serious decline in the estimated number of harp and hood seals frequenting the Northwest Atlantic Area which has occurred since 1952 and because of the critical situation which now exists, the Canadian Section is of the opinion that this matter should be given serious consideration once again. There can be no doubt that this international resource which, during the last decade, has been exploited to a varying degree by several countries including Canada, Denmark, France, Norway, and the U.S.S.R., must be regulated internationally. To this end it is the Canadian view that this Commission, which is well established and has an enviable record of accomplishment, is the most logical and competent body to deal with the problem of seal conservation since all the countries currently exploiting the resource are members of the International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries.

An international agreement on opening dates for sealing in the Northwest Atlantic area was reached by an exchange of notes early in 1952. In 1961 agreement was obtained for a closing date by a further exchange of notes. Although a defined open season for sealing will provide some control of the annual catch it is our opinion that much greater protection must be provided if effective conservation with rational utilization is to be realized and thus permit an orderly development of the sealing industry. The recent introduction of more efficient equipment such as steel-hulled boats, large vessels capable of ice-breaching, mechanical devices for loading the catch and the use of aircraft for spotting the herds, coupled with more efficient operations by experienced crews on the ice, indicates that unless stringent restrictions are brought into effect very soon the depletion of these seal populations may proceed to a critical level.

The Canadian Section hopes that this brief summary of existing conditions will provide sufficient background for the Commission to reach a favourable decision with regard to recommending to the participating governments that an understanding be reached to include the conservation of harp and hood seals within the framework of the International Convention for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries.