



Tromsø, 31 August 2021

**To the Attention of the United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit Special Envoy**

Honourable UN Food Systems Summit Special Envoy Dr. Agnes Kalibata,

I am contacting you in my capacity as the General Secretary of the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission, NAMMCO, on behalf of the Commission.

Recognising that the upcoming Food Systems Summit will be a crucial opportunity to take stock of current practices and advance global action towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals, I would like to underline that **effectively and responsibly managed marine mammal hunting can contribute to resilient and sustainable food systems (socially, economically, and environmentally)**. Several marine mammal populations can support a controlled and precautionary catch. Although many marine mammal stocks, especially of large whales but also some seal species, were overharvested and some hunted to near extinction, the ongoing impression that most remain in danger is false. There are several healthy populations which can sustain a harvest; some have recovered to pre-harvest levels or above because of lower, and sustainable, hunting pressure and favourable conditions.

Marine mammals play a key role in the livelihood and food security of many coastal communities, particularly in the Arctic, but also in many coastal areas around the world. More than half of the countries in the world, 114 out of 195, consume marine mammals, obtained from direct and indirect catches and sometimes strandings, with a total of 85 species being consumed (for more details see Robards and Reeves 2011\* and the attached map compiled from this paper and more recent data from different sources). As recently demonstrated, marine mammals can offer a local, low carbon, and more environmentally friendly meat source than local or imported agricultural products (Ziegler et al. 2021\*\*). Few types of food are, however, as stigmatised, and systematically ignored in the discourse on food security as marine mammals. It is therefore important that an **event as important as the UN Food Systems Summit recognises and discusses the role that marine mammals play around the world in ensuring food security and food sovereignty, both now and in the future.**

The inclusion of marine mammals in **food systems can support and accelerate the implementation of the SDGs, and bring proteins, benefits, and jobs in many places where alternatives are few.**

Confronted with unprecedented, multifaceted crises, **well-managed and sustainable hunting can be one of the game-changing solutions for food system transformation and contribute to addressing the climate crisis.** Marine mammals provide a low-carbon and low-water option for animal protein that, together with other aquatic foods, can be at the core of transformative food systems that aim to ensure food accessibility and availability for all without undermining climate mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Food systems that integrate the sustainable use of marine mammal also have other advantages for environmental conservation than just low GHGs emissions and little freshwater withdrawals. There are very limited collateral impacts (such as by-catch or discards, habitat disruption or destruction and pollution) involved in marine mammals hunting. There can be little waste, thus making them a

**North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission**

*Postbox 6453, Sykehusveien 21-23, N-9294 Tromsø, Norway*

*+47 95021228; [genevieve@nammco.org](mailto:genevieve@nammco.org)*

*[www.nammco.no](http://www.nammco.no) [facebook.com/nammco.org](https://facebook.com/nammco.org) [twitter.com/NAMMCO](https://twitter.com/NAMMCO) [sec](#)*



resource-efficient practice. However, the full utilisation of this resource is currently being impaired by bans on by-products, e.g., bans on seal skin products, although this is contrary to the resource efficiency and reduction of waste advocated by the blue economy. There is also an ethical advantage of sustainably harvesting from wild populations over industrial farming systems when looking at animal welfare across the lifetime of the organism.

The well-managed use of marine mammals can improve livelihoods in coastal communities. Existing hunting practices are inclusive and help with social cohesion and are often associated with social activities and communal sharing. In some places, these hunts can be seen as one of the components of multi-gear fisheries. Utilising marine mammals must, of course, be coupled with strict management and monitoring, but recent experience in the North Atlantic has shown that it is possible to reconcile conservation and sustainable harvest. Given that the UN Food Systems Summit aims to renew commitments for sustainable and resilient food systems that are able to tackle and adapt to current challenges, and because marine mammals are **systematically overlooked or ignored as potential sustainable food sources**, I would like to underline that for several coastal communities, sustainable whaling and sealing have great potential for assisting in this transition.

On this basis, I hereby kindly **ask for your consideration of this issue** as you prepare for the upcoming UN Food Systems Summit.

I look forward to your feedback and I am at your disposal should you like to further discuss the matter.

Sincerely yours,

Geneviève Desportes  
General Secretary

**For information, this letter is copied to:** Manuel Barange, Director of the Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy and Resources Division, Food and Agriculture Organization

**CC.:** Ole-David Stenseth, Chair of NAMMCO, Commissioner for Norway  
Norwegian Ministry of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs

*\*Robards, M. D., & Reeves, R. R. (2011). The global extent and character of marine mammal consumption by humans: 1970–2009. Biological Conservation, 144(12), 2770–2786.*  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0006320711002977>

*\*\*Ziegler, F.; Nilsson, K.; Levermann, N.; Dorph, M.; Lyberth, B.; Jessen, A.A.; Desportes, G. Local Seal or Imported Meat? Sustainability Evaluation of Food Choices in Greenland, Based on Life Cycle Assessment. Foods 2021, 10, 1194. <https://www.mdpi.com/2304-8158/10/6/1194>.*