

Governing Arctic Seals: A Longitudinal Analysis of News and Policy Discourse

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Abstract

Arctic states, regional and local authorities, NGOs, and Indigenous communities have debated how Arctic seals should be governed for more than a century. This governance discourse covers a wide array of issues, from seal hunting and the sale of animal products to the impacts of pollution and climate change. This article examines the frames used by political entities to discuss the regional governance of Arctic seals in the North American Arctic from 1900–2020, a period defined by landmark agreements on seals. Informed by framing and agenda-setting theory, the article employs textual analysis of policy documents and newspaper articles. These serve as a source of information and space for policy advocacy and debate to study political entities' discourse regarding the issues and policies that shape Arctic seal governance. The analysis focuses on English-language texts from regional and local newspapers and international newspapers of record. The article identifies four dominant frames, namely perceived threats to (a) economic revenue, (b) animal welfare, (c) Indigenous ways of life, and (d) threats emanating from the involvement of NGOs in Arctic regional governance. Each of these frames is associated with one or multiple political entities involved in the regional governance of seals. The article demonstrates how the dominance of these entities and the frames they employ varies over time and corresponds to several anthropogenic threats to seals, including commercial hunting, pollution, and climate change. The article concludes that tensions between local and regional entities and international and non-Arctic entities are reflective of broader Arctic regional governance dynamics.

Keywords

agenda-setting; Arctic governance; conservation; environmental policy; hunting; journalism; marine mammals; seals

1. Introduction

In 1912, *The New York Times* reported:

When [US Secretary of State] William H. Seward bought Alaska to please Russia [in 1867], nobody supposed that there was anything up there which would amuse, please, or disturb any human being. It was the purchase of a wild waste. (“No more slaughtering of seals for five years,” 1912, p. 10)

However, by the late 1860s, the value of the Alaska purchase, including the local sealing industry, had become abundantly clear. Clothing made with seal furs was considered highly fashionable and shipped across the globe, with seal fur prices in London rising from an average of \$14 in the 1870s to \$27 per fur in the 1890s (Macallister, 2020, p. 1193). Not just in Alaska but across the polar region, commercial seal hunts intensified from the late 1860s onwards, fuelled by global demand for seal furs. Sealers from the US, Russia, Canada (UK), Greenland (Denmark), and Japan were active in the region during this period, and soon their governments grew concerned that the sealing “free-for-all” would devastate seal populations to a point that would harm the industry (Macallister, 2020; Shirnina, 2021). The attempts to regulate sealing that followed mark the beginning of what this article labels regional Arctic seal governance.

For the purpose of this article, Arctic seal governance is defined as the process of governing (managing the control or steering of) wild seal populations in the Arctic, including their hunt, research, and conservation. As part of a thematic issue on Arctic regional governance, the article encourages readers to consider Arctic seal governance as a form of Arctic regional governance. To this effect, the article argues that Arctic seal governance exhibits tensions between local and regional political entities and international and non-Arctic players reflective of dynamics in broader Arctic regional governance. Herein, the article highlights the central involvement of state entities that have traditionally been cast as the central players in Arctic regional governance (Landriault et al., 2020), including Arctic states—Canada, the US, Greenland (Denmark), Iceland, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Russia—and intergovernmental organizations, such as the Arctic Council (AC) and the EU.

Environmental governance issues, including seal governance, have historically been at the core of Arctic political affairs (see Section 2) and shaped the lives of Arctic residents. In particular, seals have long played a vital role for Indigenous communities in the circumpolar North due to their cultural, economic, and dietary value (Graugaard, 2019, 2020; Hauser et al., 2021). Some scholars argue that the “cultural, utilitarian, and identity-giving” significance of seal hunting can equally be observed in non-Indigenous communities in Newfoundland, Canada, that have historically engaged in commercial and subsistence sealing (Burke, 2021, 2022; Sellheim, 2014).

The history of sealing in local and Indigenous communities in the high North is closely entangled with that of colonialism, from “colonial administration’s [sic] dependency on seal products” to the forced resettlement of Indigenous people engaged in sealing (Graugaard, 2020, p. 29). For instance, going back to the example of the Alaskan sealing industry, historians Dorsey (1998, p. 113), Macallister (2020, p. 1195), and Shirnina (2021) note that in 1787, the Unanga \times people were forcefully relocated from the Aleutian Islands to the hitherto unsettled Pribilof Islands by the Russian-American Company (a Russian state company that held the regional monopoly on seal hunting) to aid in their commercial sealing activities. While such involvement of

Indigenous people in sealing for subsistence and commercial purposes is well-documented, scholars found that Indigenous peoples' perspectives have historically been side-lined or limited in news reporting about sealing and related environmental issues (Belfer et al., 2017; Boyd et al., 2019). Similarly, building on the work of Said (1978), Arctic scholars of postcolonialism have criticised romanticised depictions of Indigenous sealers as “Eskimo orientalism” (Fienup-Riordan, 1990, 1995; Graugaard, 2020, p. 29).

Overall, previous analyses of the news and policy discourse surrounding seal governance have predominantly focused on the contention surrounding seal hunting and bans on the sale of seal products by the European Economic Community in 1983 and the EU in 2009 (Barry, 2005; Burke, 2021, 2022; Dauvergne & Neville, 2011; Marland, 2014). To broaden the study of the seal governance discourse, this article seeks to make an empirical contribution by providing the first comprehensive examination of the news and policy discourse on seal governance over an extended timeframe (1900–2020). Herein, the article specifically focuses on political entities' use of frames in shaping the discourse, and how these varied over time. In doing so, the article also provides further information and interpretation of anti-sealing discourse scrutinized in previous research. The study's timeframe and focus on the North American (US, Canada) context were determined through a preliminary review of academic, policy, and grey literature on the subject, indicating that landmark policies shaping seal governance were debated and enacted in this period and geographical location, as well as access to sufficient archival resources.

To investigate how political entities' use of frames shaped Arctic seal governance discourse between 1900 and 2020, the study thus begins by outlining the context of Arctic regional governance. Next, the article explores the agenda-setting theory and framing considerations that inform the textual analysis of English-language news articles detailed in the subsequent methodological section. The article then presents the results of this analysis, identifying four dominant frames (economic revenue, animal welfare, Indigenous ways of life, and involvement of NGOs), and discusses these with reference to Arctic regional and seal governance. This discussion is structured into three overlapping regulation periods: (a) regulation of commercial fishing (early to mid-20th century), (b) seal product bans (late 20th to early 21st century), and (c) environmental regulation (late 20th to early 21st century). Finally, the article concludes by outlining the broader implications of these findings, and suggestions for further research.

2. Arctic Regional Governance

Scholars of Arctic politics often date the beginning of Arctic regional governance back to “1987, when Mikhail Gorbachev gave his now famous Murmansk speech, calling to establish a ‘zone of peace’ in the Arctic” (Exner-Pirot, 2012, p. 225; see also Wilson Rowe, 2018, p. 32). Up to this point, international cooperation in the Arctic was predominantly focused on wildlife conservation and management, most notably in science diplomacy efforts towards wild polar bear protection culminating in the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears (Exner-Pirot, 2012, p. 225; Gehrke, 2023; Stoessel et al., 2014, pp. 54–55), and in the case of Arctic seal governance, as detailed in the remainder of this article. Other examples include regional science programs producing knowledge on the Arctic environment, such as the US–Canada collaboration on the Joint Arctic Weather Stations program (Heidt & Lackenbauer, 2022). This early concentration of Arctic regional governance on wildlife management is emblematic of environmental governance, which has “historically been sectoral in nature, resulting in fragmentation, gaps and inefficiencies” (Stoessel et al., 2014, p. 46; see also Cavalieri et al., 2011). Following the Murmansk speech

and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, international cooperation on Arctic matters would take on a broader scope superseding this sectoral approach as political entities united to form the AC.

Established in 1996, the AC constitutes “the main regional body involved in Arctic governance” (Humrich, 2013, p. 80). It is made up of eight Arctic member states (Canada, the US, Greenland/Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Russia) and six Indigenous Peoples’ organizations that hold permanent participant status (Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich’in Council International, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, and Saami Council). Additionally, several non-Arctic countries as well as non-governmental, intergovernmental and interparliamentary organizations, have been granted AC observer status. As of early 2023, these observers consisted of 13 non-Arctic countries, 13 intergovernmental and interparliamentary organizations, and 12 NGOs (AC, 2023). Environmental governance has always been at the core of the AC’s activities, dating all the way back to its inception. As Landriault et al. (2020, p. 23) note, the Council “began as a limited environmental governance body” growing out of the 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy under the so-called Rovaniemi Process.

Beyond the AC, it is important to note that Arctic regional governance does not only refer to processes occurring in the Arctic but also includes those outside the polar region about or affecting the Arctic (Wilson Rowe, 2021). For instance, multiple entities and jurisdictional arrangements driving Arctic governance are based outside the circumpolar region, such as proceedings concerning the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea or the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (see Stoessel et al., 2014).

The Arctic seal governance discourse examined in this article highlights the tensions between this international and external dimension of Arctic regional governance and the local, with some entities seeking to influence both dimensions. These entities constructing the “mosaic” of Arctic (seal) governance include AC members, permanent participants, and observers, as well as other regional and local authorities, NGOs, and Indigenous communities (Young, 2005). In examining how these entities and the frames they employ to shape Arctic seal governance discourse over the course of 120 years, the article thus contributes to the literature on Arctic (regional) discourse and representation (see Wilson Rowe, 2018, pp. 11–12). In addition, the article explores larger questions regarding Arctic regional governance and the persistence of its sectoral focus on environmental issues, bringing Arctic and non-Arctic entities together from the early 20th century until today. The following section explores the underlying theoretical considerations informing the article’s investigation of the ways in which these entities frame seal governance.

3. Agenda-Setting and Framing

Tracing news and policy discourse on a specific subject, such as seal governance, allows researchers to gain insights into two stages of the agenda-setting process: (a) the problem and (b) the policy stage. First, a review of newspaper coverage can offer scholars insight into how entities frame an issue as a (political) problem. In the language of agenda-setting theories, this is the problem stage in Kingdon’s (1995) multiple streams framework, where entities work to define issues as problems. In Downs’ (1972) issue attention cycle, this stage encompasses the latter part of the “pre-problem” and early part of the “alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm” stages when awareness of a problem grows from a few experts and interest groups to the broader

public. Second, in addition to policy documents, a review of media coverage can also provide insights into the policy discourse, as newspapers provide a space for policy advocacy and debate. In Kingdon's multiple streams framework, this is represented in the policy stream and, to a lesser extent, in the politics stream. Here, the policy stream refers to so-called "policy entrepreneurs" advocating for their preferred and pre-conceived approach to addressing the problem at hand. The politics stream, in turn, concerns the political conditions necessary for a problem to gain traction and enable policy entrepreneurs to enact their preferred solution to the latter; in other words, the political will and power (e.g., votes) to act on a problem (Kingdon, 1995).

Knaggård (2016), however, criticizes Kingdon for placing too much emphasis on this policy stream, requiring the problem stream to always frame an issue with reference to specific policy approaches or solutions. The second stage of Downs' issue attention cycle can be criticized for the same shortcoming, as it requires the public's sudden focus on a problem to always be framed by an optimistic attitude towards the problem's resolution (Downs, 1972, p. 39). Knaggård argues that this emphasis on the solution or policy stream places a disproportionate focus on policymakers, alienating so-called "knowledge-brokers" who work to frame issues as political problems and thereby impact "which issues receive political priority" (Knaggård, 2016, p. 110; see also Litfin, 1994). Knaggård thus suggests attributing both the problem and the policy stream the same amount of importance. The article follows this suggestion by examining the above-described insights regarding the (a) problem and (b) policy streams that can be identified in the news discourse. Though the article primarily focuses on these two streams, the (c) politics stream is also represented in the contextual information on political conditions underpinning the respective period in seal governance discourse when discussing the results of the framing analysis.

Before detailing the methods informing this framing analysis in the following section, the remainder of this section first specifies what is meant by framing. Discussions of framing are often conflated with notions of problem definition, problematization, and problem frames (cf. Bacchi, 2009; Knaggård, 2016; Litfin, 1994; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994). Though the question of framing can be traced back to early agenda-setting research, scholars concede to difficulties in defining framing (see Perloff, 2022, pp. 480–485; Saurugger, 2016, pp. 138–141). According to Perloff (2022, p. 484), "a key problem is that, unlike agenda-setting, framing is not a theory that makes specific hypotheses, but an approach...or, for lack of a better word, a framework." For the purpose of this article, a discourse and agenda-setting-based definition is thus adopted, suggesting that framing refers to the interpretation of issues as problems by discourse participants in news reports that may impact how the given issue is perceived by the public (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11; Strydom, 2000, p. 59). Herein, "different actors frame reality or, rather, the basic problem at issue in different and, at any rate, competing or even conflicting ways." (Strydom, 2000, p. 64). This article examines how different political entities frame seal governance, and how their use of frames may vary over time. The following section explains how the researcher identifies and analyses the frames in question.

4. Methods

To analyse policy documents and newspaper articles, the article used qualitative textual analysis (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; McKee, 2003). This type of discourse analysis can help researchers uncover the meaning-making processes at work in a given text, to deduce the interpretation(s) of the text that the audience would likely assume. To do so, the researcher adopted a two-step approach. First, the author familiarized themselves with the materials by reading the collected texts once. Upon completing this task,

research notes were written out to reflect initial impressions and perceived dominant frames. Second, with these frames in mind, the texts were coded using the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. In doing so, the researcher highlighted evidence for the inductively identified dominant frames, and revised or amended the latter based on the findings from this second round of text analysis. This allowed the researcher to trace frame changes over time, thus reconstructing the progression of the Arctic seal governance discourse over the course of 120 years (1900–2020).

The timeframe from the early 20th to the early 21st century was set following the preliminary review of grey and academic literature on seal governance. There were some efforts to regulate sealing in the Arctic before the turn of the century, such as the 1893 Fur Seal Arbitration, also known as the Paris Arbitration (see Macallister, 2020). But rather than amounting to legislation, these early efforts merely “formed the basis for multilateral relations” that would eventually lead to the Fur Seal Agreement (see Section 5.1) in the early 20th century, where this study starts (Shirnina, 2021). The author further narrowed the examined timeframe through an analysis of policy documents. Relevant policy documents were identified via academic and grey literature on Arctic seal governance in Canada and the US. These policy documents were, in turn, used twofold: First, the timeframe for the selection of news articles was narrowed down, by limiting the search for news articles to the years in which important policy documents were published (12 months before and after each publication), where possible. Second, the analysis of policy documents supported the interpretation of the news analysis, providing valuable insights, e.g., regarding the inclusion of Indigenous rights in policy documents when mention thereof is missing in the news coverage of seal governance at the time.

Newspapers were selected for analysis on the basis of four criteria: (a) language of publication (English); (b) audience (international, regional/local), (c) location (US Arctic—Alaska; Canadian Arctic—Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Yukon; Canadian Circumarctic—Labrador, Newfoundland; non-Arctic/international); and (d) availability (access to newspaper archives with coverage over extended periods within the overall 120-year timeframe). Due to the article’s focus on regional governance, the analysis emphasized regional and local newspapers, while also considering international news coverage to a lesser extent. Long-form periodicals, such as *National Geographic*, were not included in the analysis due to format and comparability limitations.

Based on these criteria, the researcher analysed 842 articles in 17 regional and local news outlets (*The Juneau Empire*, *The Anchorage Daily News*, *The Beacon*, *The Chesterfield Hi-Lites*, *The Eastern Arctic Star*, *The Gander Beacon*, *Ikpiarjukmit Pivaliayuit*, *Kisaut*, *News/North*, *Nunatsiaq News*, *The Midnight Sun*, *The Northern Reporter*, *The Pine Pointer*, *The Rankin Times*, *Tusautit*, *Tusaquik—The Listening Post*, and *The Whitehorse Star*) and 138 articles published in two American newspapers of record with an international readership (*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*). Newspaper articles were collected through a keyword search of digital news archives and a manual analysis of 68 microforms and films.

The analysis of these articles provided in the following is limited in two ways. First, the article examines English-language sources only, focusing on the North American (US, Canadian) context. This concentration is based on the availability of historical and contemporary local and regional news sources in the examined timeframe, and the accessibility of English-language materials to larger audiences compared to materials composed in the languages of other Arctic states. This limitation may impact the article’s conclusions regarding Arctic seal governance and Arctic regional governance more broadly due to varying conditions and

circumstances in the American High North compared to other parts of the Arctic (for a discussion of Greenlandic sealing narratives, see, e.g., Graugaard, 2019, 2020). Second, the article interpreted the news coverage without considering the agency or motivation of the journalism professionals involved, due to limited available information on the journalists, editors, and publishers working on seal governance news coverage in the early 20th century, with some articles missing by-lines entirely.

5. Results

The analysis identified four dominant frames, namely (a) economic revenue, (b) animal welfare, (c) Indigenous ways of life, and (d) the involvement of NGOs in Arctic regional governance. To structure the discussion of how political entities employ these four dominant frames to shape the Arctic seal governance discourse, the article divided the 120-year timeframe analysed in this article into three overlapping regulation periods: (a) the regulation of commercial fishing (early to mid-20th century), (b) seal product bans (late 20th to early 21st century), and (c) environmental regulation (late 20th to early 21st century). The discussion of the latter is the shortest as it is subject to ongoing development, limiting researchers' ability to draw definitive conclusions. The three periods also reflect the ongoing shift in perceptions of anthropogenic threats to seals, with the first two periods focusing on commercial hunting, and the third concentrating on pollution and climate change. While the first period is predominantly associated with economic frames, the other two periods feature all four dominant frames.

5.1. Regulation of Commercial Fishing

In the 20th century, the Arctic seal governance discourse was dominated by the debate over commercial sealing in Alaska and Canada. Seals were considered an abundant resource and experts estimated that in the Bering Sea alone, hunters could harvest “over 130,000 seal furs annually...without damaging the reproductive capacity of the herds” (Macallister, 2020, p. 1194). However, as seal furs were in high demand in cities around the globe, excessive commercial sealing led to a decline in Bering Sea seals “from approximately 4,000,000 in 1867 to a rapidly dwindling 100,000” in 1911 according to Bailey (1935, p. 1), with newspapers at the time reporting even lower numbers of “somewhere between 30.000 and 50.000 [sic]” (“No more slaughtering of seals for five years,” 1912, p. 10).

In light of these intense sealing activities, the policy and media discourse in this period is primarily concerned with preventing the overhunting of seals to ensure their continued availability for commercial purposes, refraining from discussions of subsistence hunting. Newspapers frequently reported seal fisheries catch and revenue as well as featuring debates on the specificities of specific seal governance policy proposals and regulations between state officials, researchers, and stakeholders in the fishery industry. This period is thus defined by economic frames, with political entities focused on “Saving the seal fisheries” (1909) rather than the seals themselves or the communities that rely on them. The political entities informing this period of seal discourse are government officials, scientific experts, and to a lesser extent, commercial sealing stakeholders.

One such government official in particular, the US Department of the Treasury special agent Henry W. Elliott, becomes a central actor in this discourse. Sent up to Alaska to study the Alaskan fur seals around the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea, then Smithsonian Institute clerk Elliott was the first US official to observe

the seals from their arrival until their departure from the region “and consequently the only man whose authority is indisputable” as “the best informed man in the world on the seal question,” according to *The New York Times* (“No more slaughtering of seals for five years,” 1912, p. 10). This statement is reflective of the news discourse in this period, which privileged such “authoritative” accounts by male experts from the North American non-Arctic. By contrast, considerations of Indigenous harvesting were omitted or, in a few cases, mediated through external commentators rather than members of Indigenous communities.

Arctic scholars note that the privileging of authoritative voices, like Elliott’s, emerging from “colonially charged male Arctic exploration and scientific inquiry, and the resulting descriptions/travelogues” continues “until today,” stressing the extent to which these accounts have shaped “portrayals of Arctic nature and Indigenous communities and cultures” (Kelman, 2017, p. 42). The following sections illustrate how this paternalistic attitude of outsiders explaining Arctic environmental issues evolved over time (Section 5.2) towards the eventual inclusion and, in some cases, even foregrounding of Indigenous voices (Section 5.3). In this first period of seal governance, however, the voices of authoritative non-Arctic male government affiliates, such as Henry Elliott, define the Arctic sealing discourse.

Elliott would go on to play a critical role in documenting and problematizing hunting procedures threatening Alaskan fur seals, working with the Department of State to create the necessary conditions for political action (NOAA, 2022; “The slaughter of baby seals,” 1911). Herein, the problem framing focused on so-called “pelagic” open water sealing that specifically targets mother seals swimming on the surface, whose killing also results in the death of their pups waiting for their mothers’ return to be fed (“No more slaughtering of seals for five years,” 1912; “The slaughter of baby seals,” 1911). A 1921 retrospective in the *Whitehorse Star* on the impacts of pelagic sealing in decades prior noted that “the industry declined, the seals all...disappeared” due to the “greed and indiscriminate methods of slaughter practiced by some of the sealers” (White, 1921, p. 3).

With the US, UK (Canada), Japan, and Russia engaged in commercial seal fishing in the Bering Sea, international cooperation between the states was required to effectively prevent all parties from engaging in pelagic hunting. Elliott and other researchers and government officials employed economic frames casting pelagic sealing practices as detrimental to commercial hunting revenue due to its impacts on Alaskan fur seal populations. These efforts first led to a prohibition of hunting on the Pribilof Islands in 1910 and eventually culminated in a ban on open-water sealing and regulations on the handling of on-land seal herds in the 1911 North Pacific Fur Seal Treaty signed by all four nations, the “first international treaty for wildlife conservation” (NOAA, 2022; Shirnina, 2021). Though considerations of subsistence hunting were largely absent from the news discourse at the time, the treaty included exemptions for Indigenous hunters (Convention for the Preservation and Protection of Fur Seals, 1911, Art. V). The treaty would eventually be replaced by national and international regulations discussed in the following section.

While the involvement of international non-Arctic political entities in the regional governance of Arctic seals is reflected throughout the 120-year-long history of Arctic seal governance, this aspect is particularly pronounced at the state level in this early period. For instance, discussions of seal governance between the US and Canada still involved consultation with “the mother country” of the latter, the UK (“Canada to decide seal question,” 1909). On the one hand, these connections underscore the international cooperation facilitated by this type of sectoral Arctic regional governance and countries’ shared interest in commercial seal hunting. On the other hand, these relations are also reflective of the enduring impacts of

colonial legacies in the Arctic, both at the state level and in relation to Indigenous populations. While this section highlighted how Indigenous engagement in sealing was narrated through non-Arctic authoritative male voices in the first period of Arctic seal governance, the following section further explores these colonial legacies through the interaction of Arctic local and Indigenous communities and non-Arctic intergovernmental organizations.

5.2. Seal Product Bans

Both in Canada and the US, early regulations on seal hunting, such as the 1911 Fur Seal Treaty, Canada's 1949 Seal Protection Regulations, or the US Fur Seal Act (1966), would later feed into more comprehensive regulations on marine mammals, namely the Canadian Marine Mammal Regulations (1993) and the American Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972) more attuned to the language of conservation. Similarly, news discourse on Arctic seal governance increasingly featured environmental and animal welfare frames in this period. While the next section will elaborate on these environmental frames, this section focuses on the animal welfare frames from the 1960s onwards as anti-sealing campaigns became more prominent, and with them, the role of non-governmental organizations in informing this discourse (Malouf et al., 1986, p. 18). This period is consequently defined by two European regulations in reaction to the anti-sealing movement: (a) the 1983 European Economic Community's ban on the import of seal pup pelts, and (b) the 2009 EU regulation on the trade in seal products, as well as corresponding national regulations.

In 1983, the European Economic Community banned the import of seal pup pelts, after the US "had [already] banned the importing of seal pelts a decade earlier" (Burns, 1987, p. 1). To prevent further boycotts and harsher anti-sealing campaigns and "as a tactic for salvaging what's left of the hunt," the Canadian Sealers Association urged the Canadian government to tighten restrictions on the hunt of seal pups, that had effectively stopped in practice years prior following the initial brunt of anti-sealing campaigns (Martin, 1984). Canada thus followed suit in 1988, banning the commercial hunt of seal pups (whitecoat harp seals and blueback hooded seals). Multiple newspapers reported that these protests and subsequent regulations "virtually ended seal hunting as a major industry in the region," (Burns, 1987, p. 1) though Inuit "and other coastal hunters were exempted from the ban, but were asked to hunt older seals" (Associated Press, 1988, p. 3).

The tension between the local and regional players and the national and international entities involved in Arctic regional governance becomes particularly pronounced when it comes to the issue of hunting. A *New York Times* journalist reflects that for the sealers he interviewed, "the waning seal hunt is yet another example in a long history of external oppression...people feel they are pawns in one of the biggest environmental battles ever...watching helplessly as outsiders battle over their fate" (Martin, 1984). Another article quotes a Canadian fisherman stating that "in Europe and in the States there are people...who feel so strong [sic] about seals that they are willing to have me and my kin starve" ("Newfoundland sealers call hunt vital to isle," 1983, p. 24). Similarly, Indigenous representatives featured in local newspaper coverage stressed the extent to which this affects "all Inuit seal hunters in the Arctic...The consequences of the ban in Nunavut, Canada, are largely the same as in Greenland" (Montgomery, 2016), with one NGO executive concluding that "the commercial seal hunt is a dying industry" (The Canadian Press, 2016). In a report commissioned by the Canadian government, opposition to sealing was attributed to a misguided and emotional public that was not "well informed about seals and sealing" and thus easily swayed by "the attractive picture of white, dark-eyed 'baby seal[s],' or...the brutal image of one being clubbed and skinned on the ice" (Malouf et al., 1986, pp. 24–25). The report suggests

that the government could have the sealing opposition “reduced or eliminated” by simply “providing better information to the public, especially through the media” (Malouf et al., 1986, p. 24; see also Marland, 2014).

Following this episode in the Arctic seal governance discourse, a shift in the framing of sealing occurred, with NGOs perceived to have contributed to the anti-sealing discourse being heavily criticized. This backlash against NGOs in news and policy discourse varied depending on how extreme the NGO’s anti-sealing views were considered: While the World Wildlife Fund’s more moderate push for revised hunting quotas and oversight was largely spared news criticism, NGOs that represented more extreme anti-sealing positions, such as Greenpeace and the International Fund for Animal Welfare, were harshly criticized (Barry, 2005; Burke, 2021, 2022; Dauvergne & Neville, 2011). Similarly, at the policy level, the latter organizations were also criticized, with the Canadian Fisheries minister labelling them “blackmailers,” “liars,” and “fanatics,” while the World Wildlife Fund’s Arctic Programme would eventually become the first NGO to be granted AC observer status (AC, 2023). This distinction between more or less moderate NGOs in the anti-sealing backlash highlights important nuance in the overall tension between local and regional entities and international entities involved in Arctic regional governance.

Despite this backlash, observers were able to witness the dynamics of the 1980s anti-sealing protests and the European Economic Community ban play out once more in 2009, when the EU imposed a ban on seal fur products “after EU citizens expressed concerns about animal welfare aspects of seal hunting” (European Commission, 2023). Arctic political entities from the Canadian state to members of Indigenous communities condemned the ban, and the Canadian government consequently refused the EU’s application for permanent AC observer status (Hennig & Caddell, 2017). Additionally, political entities unsuccessfully appealed the ban, until the World Trade Organization “eventually ruled that the de facto exclusion of Canadian Inuit seal products from the EU market was unlawful and discriminatory” (Hennig & Caddell, 2017, p. 299).

While the law was subsequently amended to exempt “Inuit and other Indigenous communities” from the seal product ban (European Commission, 2023), NGOs representing Indigenous interests “maintain the exemption is meaningless, because the EU ban destroys the seal market for all producers” (“After failed EU seal ban appeal,” 2013). In appeals to the ban, Indigenous organizations stressed “that they have been affected personally by the ban,” with a spokesman for the Inuit land claims organization Nunavut Tunngavik noting that “even though Inuit were exempt from this ban, we are highly affected” (CBC News, 2016).

As exemplified in the above quotes, Indigenous perspectives on Arctic seal governance already featured prominently in local and regional newspapers decades prior to the ban, including direct accounts from Indigenous community members themselves rather than outside observers speaking for the communities (cf. Sections 1 and 5.1). International newspapers, however, were slower to adopt Indigenous frames connecting the importance of seals to Indigenous communities with references to culture (clothing, country food, etc.), traditional knowledge, income, and health. While the examined international newspapers included Indigenous frames in their reporting as early as 1983, the papers also continued to feature op-eds well into the 2000s that described seal hunts as “barbaric,” “slaughter,” and called for boycotts of tourism and seafood products “until the [seal] hunt is ended for good” (Cohen, 2004; Ragan Gaithersburg, 2006). The frames employed in these op-eds are reminiscent of the animal welfare and economic frames utilized by anti-sealing NGOs (cf. Dauvergne & Neville, 2011). This difference in the speed at which local and regional newspapers incorporated Indigenous frames further underlines the tension between the local and regional

dimensions and the international and external dimensions of Arctic regional governance highlighted in this article.

5.3. Environmental Regulation

Beginning in the late 1980s, environmental concern for Arctic seals started to overtake the discourse on Arctic seal governance, adding to and, in some cases, superseding hunting-related concerns. In previous decades, international, regional, and local newspapers featured limited coverage of the impacts of environmental issues on seals, often mentioning them only as one of many harmed or threatened species, e.g., following an oil spill. However, this changed in the late 20th century amid growing awareness of the impacts of climate change on seals and large-scale environmental disasters, such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

In this most recent period of Arctic seal governance, environmental frames are often combined with animal welfare and Indigenous frames. Herein, policy and news discourses relate environmental concerns to increased risk and limitations on hunting for natural predators (polar bears, orcas) as well as hunters from Indigenous communities. Several articles describe the threats to Indigenous culture due to the increased dangers facing hunters brought on by climate-related sea ice decline, with a *Juneau Empire* op-ed noting that “some have even lost their lives trying to hunt on the thin ice” (Aouinat, 2020).

Economic frames also play a role in the seal news coverage in this period, with seal governance discourses involving considerations of nature tourism revenue, the sale of seal products, and economic developments, such as the Alaskan Willow drilling project. News stories combining economic and environmental frames frequently point out pollution concerns related to these economic activities, including the impacts of oil spills, as well as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). These substances, also known as “forever chemicals,” have been found in Arctic wildlife and individuals consuming regional animal products, with one Arctic resident quoted in *The New York Times* noting: “Young people now prefer to eat young seals because they think the older seals are more contaminated” (Krauss, 2004). This sentiment was echoed in quotes by the National Marine Fisheries Service featured in local news stating that “seals are an essential resource for Alaska Native communities....Food safety is a major concern, and some people are also concerned about contamination” (Hanlon, 2019). Local, regional, and national news coverage of pollution affecting seals tends to privilege local and authoritative government or NGO sources over direct quotes from Indigenous hunters and food consumers, reflecting Boyd et al.’s (2019, p. 8) finding regarding the “general lack of Indigenous information sources” in Canadian news reporting on mercury contamination of seals and other traditional food sources.

Policy approaches discussed in this context are largely limited to preventing or limiting potentially environmentally harmful activities from taking place in the region, for example, by restricting oil drilling. However, there is little discussion of policy solutions for environmental issues originating outside the Arctic, such as forever chemicals reaching the region via air or water. For instance, when the Stockholm Convention went into effect in 2004, “binding on [sic] 150 countries...to prohibit the production of a dozen toxic chemicals and to bring about the destruction of existing stockpiles,” only *The New York Times* noted that “the treaty has been cheered by Eskimo leaders, who lobbied for the accord” (Krauss, 2004). By contrast, the local newspapers analysed in this study sparsely took note of the convention in connection to seals, with only *Nunatsiaq News* detailing calls for the ratification of the treaty in 2002 (Hill, 2002). The convention was

not mentioned again until 2010 when the effectiveness of the treaty in reducing persistent organic pollutants in the Arctic was noted (George, 2010).

However, as members of the AC's Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (2021) caution, persistent organic pollutants and other chemicals remain issues of concern for seals, particularly as the climate crisis continues to intensify. With the Arctic warming four times faster compared to average global warming, national, regional, and local newspapers warn of a host of potential threats to Arctic wildlife due to "dwindling sea ice and rising Arctic ship traffic" (Schwing, 2023). While many of the same political entities involved in Arctic seal governance also contribute to environmental governance efforts to address the climate crisis, there is little evidence of this in the examined news and policy discourse beyond mentions of existing conservation and pollution measures, such as the US Endangered Species Act or the Stockholm Convention. In the language of agenda-setting, policy and problem streams diverge at this point. Consequently, as the climate crisis and related environmental issues continue to intensify, this disconnect between the local impacts of environmental issues on seals in the Arctic and the national and international policy approaches to address the issue's point of origin largely based outside the Arctic (global emissions, manufacturing involving forever chemicals, etc.) may further contribute to the tension between local and regional entities and international and non-Arctic players involved in Arctic regional governance.

6. Conclusions

This article considered Arctic seal governance as an example of Arctic regional governance, exploring how political entities employed frames to shape the seal governance discourse over the course of 120 years. The study identified four dominant frames (economic, animal welfare, Indigenous, NGOs) used by political entities in shaping regional seal governance, as illustrated in three overlapping regulatory periods, from the initial regulation of commercial fishing to European bans on the sale of seal products and ongoing developments regarding environmental threats to seal populations. Herein, the article demonstrated changes in the political players and frames involved over time and highlighted tensions between the local or regional and the international or external dimensions of Arctic seal governance.

While demonstrating the success of international collaboration in Arctic seal governance to create treaties, such as the 1911 Fur Seal Treaty, the article stressed underlying tensions between the political entities contributing to the regional seal governance discourse. Here, the concern of Arctic (local, regional) entities regarding the involvement of external (national, international) entities in Arctic regional governance constitutes a recurring theme in the regional seal governance discourse. This apprehension is also reflected in larger Arctic governance debates regarding the inclusion and intrusion of external entities in Arctic affairs, from their presence in institutions, like the AC (Wilson Rowe, 2018), to governance issues, such as sustainability (Coates & Holroyd, 2017).

These concerns are further heightened by the uncertainty stemming from the ongoing changes to the circumpolar North amid the climate emergency and the reignition of geopolitical conflict due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Future studies may examine the impact of these ongoing developments on Arctic seal governance. In addition, scholars may further explore the differences in local, regional, national, and international news coverage on Arctic seal governance, and the influence of the given political context on this discourse. Examples of this could include considerations of different regime types or expanding the area

of inquiry to other locations and domains of seal governance beyond the North American context examined in this article.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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