‘Seaspiracy’ Criticized For Anti-Inuit Racism After Targeting Seal Hunt

The filmmakers walked back their anti-seal hunt endorsement shortly after Ugrunna, an Iñupiaq TikToker, went viral for calling them out.

By Anya Zoledziowski
TORONTO, CA
The makers of Seaspiracy, a controversial new Netflix documentary that explores the fishing industry’s threat to marine life, are facing criticism for failing to acknowledge Inuit rights and customs after endorsing a call to end the seal hunt in Canada.

Last week, Seaspiracy’s Instagram account, which boasts more than half a million followers, shared a post with the banner, “Stop the Canadian Seal Hunt” and linked to a Humane Society petition asking the Canadian government to end the seal hunt. (The Humane Society has repeatedly faced allegations of disseminating false information about the hunt, including that it risks endangering the Harp seal population.)
In response, a 21-year-old Iñupiaq woman, Ugrunna, posted a TikTok that has since gone viral, amassing nearly 720,000 views.

“Fuck non-Natives that don't understand the importance of traditional hunting, especially fuck Seaspiracy on Instagram,” Ugrunna says in her video. “Thousands of people have already signed this petition not understanding the impact that it has on Inuit.”

Ugrunna points to racist, anti-Inuit messages in the comment section of Seaspiracy's Instagram post, including one that said, “I feel nothing for human life. If you live in an area and the only sustainable way is killing animals...then move.”

“As if moving is even a possibility,” Ugrunna responds.

Ugrunna also explains how hunting supports Inuit who already suffer huge income disparities compared to people living in the south. “We are often attacked for the lifestyle we have lived for thousands of years and it's rooted in ignorance and in not
On Monday, Seaspiracy posted a response to Ugrunna in an Instagram story.

“We recently put out a post sharing information about the annual seal hunt in Canada...the post however did not make the important distinction between mass slaughter of seals and the Inuit subsistence hunt, which has understandably caused some confusion and concern,” the post said. “We’d like to take this opportunity to thank Ugranna (sic) who brought this to our attention and clarify that we were referring to the industrial mass slaughter of seals, and not targeting those who depend on hunting.”

Ugrunna also set up her own petition calling on Seaspiracy to remove its anti-seal hunt calls from its pages. Seaspiracy’s posts have since been removed.

While most experts agree that industrial fishing is harmful, the film, which dropped on March 24, has come under fire from some marine biologists for allegedly making false claims. For example, the film says that by 2048, oceans will be “empty” if fishing practices don’t change. “This claim is a misinterpretation of a now-dated research paper,” marine biologist Daniel Pauly wrote in Vox. The film was produced by Kip Andersen, who is also behind vegan documentaries What The Health and
Decades of animal rights activism against the seal hunt has dramatically reduced Inuit income. According to the Guardian, after Europe banned seal products in the 80s, the average income of a seal hunter in Resolute Bay, a hamlet in Nunavut, plummeted from $54,000 to only $1,000, while 18 of 20 villages in the Northwest Territories lost an estimated 60 percent of their communities’ income.

In 2015, the median annual income for Inuit in Canada hovered around $33,000, while non-Indigenous earners reported a median income of $43,000. Across the Arctic, food costs are also exorbitant. A turkey costs nearly $100 in Alaska, while a veggie tray can cost up to $70 in Northern Canada.

“Many Inuit rely on our traditional ways of hunting in order to survive,” Ugrunna says in her TikTok. “As if enough hasn't been stolen from us...This form of activism does absolutely nothing for positive change.”
Ugrunna said people viewed the video as “undermining Seaspiracy’s entire message, but that was not my intention at all.” She said she wanted the organizers to explicitly acknowledge Inuit hunting.

“A lot of Indigenous people don’t have the right to hunt or fish still and are fighting for the right to practise their own culture. I didn’t want my people to go through that and I wanted to nip this problem at the bud to ensure my people would be safe,” Ugrunna said.

Even more problematic is the assumption that veganism is the best, or only, way to live sustainably and ethically, Ugrunna said.

“I always like to say that if you want to really have a zero carbon footprint then research how Indigenous people ate and lived on the land you're living on.”

Ugrunna called the apology “a good step in the right direction,” but said people can’t be applauded for doing the “bare minimum.”

“We have to ensure that they actively fight against the racism we face,” Ugrunna said.
In defence of the seal hunt, told VICE World News Seaspiracy’s apology doesn’t go far enough, in part because a lot of Inuit work in commercial sealing. “You can’t just say, ‘I’m only against commercial or the Canadian seal hunt.’ Both include Inuit and are dominated by Inuit,” she said.

More than that, Arnaquq-Baril said that unlike many Indigenous peoples in Canada who don’t consider themselves Canadians, Inuit do, so referring to the “Canadian” seal hunt as if Inuit aren’t part of that “isn’t right.”

For Arnaquq-Baril, apologies need to be followed up with campaigns that don’t target racialized people and their economies.

“Of course animals should not be hunted to extinction, of course conservation should be an important issue, but stop using language that makes it sound like seals are going extinct,” Arnaquq-Baril said, adding that harp seals are “nowhere near extinct, so conservation is not an issue.”

Framing the seal hunt falsely and in a racist way threatens Inuit livelihoods and causes harm—online as well, Arnaquq-Baril said, who said she and others have received racist messages and threats in response to their speaking out.
struggling, and this happens on a daily basis to Inuit from the vegan community,” Arnaquq-Baril said. “I really want to debunk the idea in the vegan world that vegans are all about liberation and are fighting oppression and, therefore, can’t be oppressors themselves.”

Seaspiracy’s post is only the latest example of white veganism getting called out. Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq received death threats from animal rights advocates in 2014 after she posted an image of her daughter next to a dead seal. That same year, she shouted “Fuck PETA” in solidarity with the seal hunt during her acceptance speech for the Polaris Music Prize. VICE World News previously reported how the vegan movement often fails to acknowledge people of colour, even as it co-opts human suffering.

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