

RECLAIMING THE SEAL HUNT

The success of anti-sealing campaigns has inflicted serious harm on Northern communities who rely on the seal hunt. Two friends are fighting back to promote seal meat as an ethical and sustainable food source.

TEXT

Caitlin Stall-Paquet

PHOTOS

Yoanis Menge

Photographer Yoanis Menge first realized he wanted to fight back against the anti-sealing movement when he saw an ad in a Parisian subway station in 2009. Part of a campaign by the Fondation Brigitte Bardot, the image depicted an adult seal standing over a human baby, club in hand and ready to crush its skull.

The idea was to show a moral disparity: we wouldn't allow seals to kill our children, so how can we tolerate the reverse?

Menge recognized the campaign as ill-informed and insensitive propaganda, designed to play on people's emotions and the human tendency to anthropomorphize animals—especially cute, charismatic ones. He was working as a photojournalist at the time, frequently dropping into conflict zones in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Mali, and he felt he could use his documentary skills to help correct the misrepresentation.

Soon after, Menge decided to leave behind his life in Europe and return to Québec's Magdalen Islands, where his mother had grown up and where he'd spent his summers as a child, hunting game with his father. Back on this familiar territory, he connected with local hunters, learned to hunt seal, and began coming along aboard sealing vessels. These trips instilled a deep respect for the hunters' closeness and respect for nature.

The artist brought his documentary style to this new passion, photographing his seal-hunting journeys in close quarters with other hunters. Menge

released a book, *Hakapik*, in 2016, featuring images taken throughout his hunting journeys in the Magdalen Islands, Newfoundland, and Nunavut.

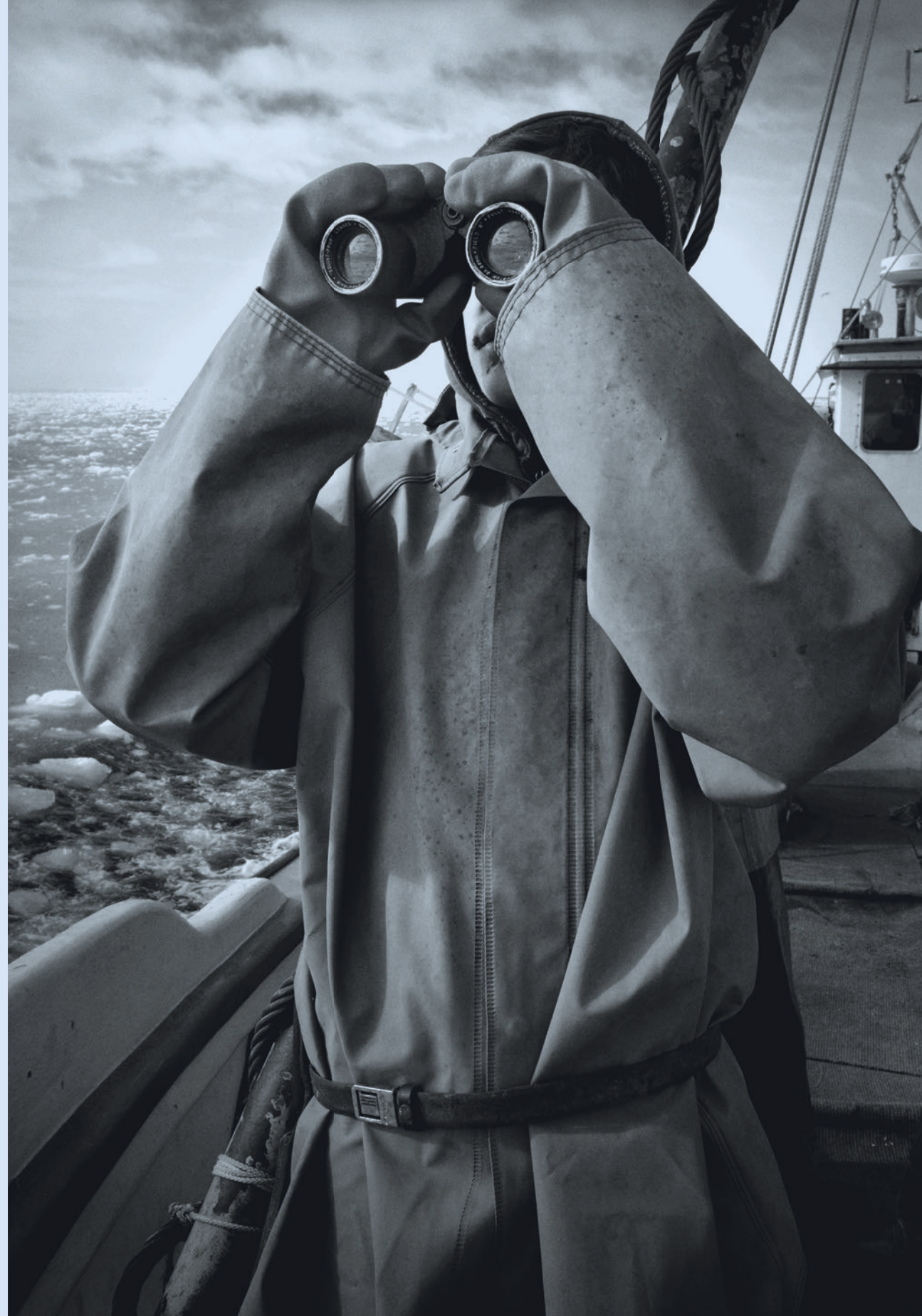
"I never saw it as a project on the seal hunt. I'm a hunter who photographs hunting," Menge told me over the phone from his home on the remote islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. "It's my view of the seal hunt, [and of] that intimacy with its people, too: living with them, sleeping alongside them, and sharing day-to-day life."

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On September 30, 2021, the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, Menge joined forces with a friend, fellow seal hunter and Inuit multidisciplinary artist Ruben Komangapik, to create a non-profit they aptly named Reconseal Inuksiuti (which means "for the people").

The initiative brings together hunters to harvest grey seal in the islands and then distributes every part of the butchered animals to Ottawa-based Inuit organizations. The pair also fight to raise awareness and gain respect for these much-maligned practices.

The seal hunt has drawn the outrage of animal rights activists for decades. In 2009 the EU placed an embargo on the sale of commercially hunted seal meat, though it continued to allow the import of Inuit-hunted seal. However, dramatic and emotionally manipulative media campaigns like the one Menge



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saw in the Paris subway were shaping the narrative. Seal hunting was demonized, without regard for the cultural and environmental realities. Demand for seal meat crashed, and the seal population boomed.

The embargo and smear campaigns also destroyed the economies of Inuit and Atlantic Canadian communities that relied on the hunt financially. Though Inuit-killed seals were not banned, the European market for anything related to the animal crumbled, regardless of who was doing the hunting. These people had built their lives around proximity to seals; they understood the seal's migration patterns, diet, and place in shared habitats. Disrupting that connection upset long-established, balanced relationships.

The popular outcry against sealing fails to take into account the central role that it plays for the northern Inuit too, who eat every edible part of the animal before using its bones and pelts for crafting clothing or tools. Nor does it consider the Inuit down south, for whom seal meat offers an important link to their culture back home. In the last decade, organizations like Greenpeace have apologized for the effects of their anti-sealing messaging, but the cuts are deep.

After years of disparaging depictions—often racist, like in 2009, when PETA claimed then-Governor General Michaëlle Jean eating seal heart with the Inuit would give Canada a Neanderthal image—of seal hunters, communities turned against each other, says Menge. He describes how people in Nunavut, Newfoundland, and the Magdalen Islands have been pointing fingers at one another for the financial harm and cultural pain wrought by the anti-sealing movement. These are the wounds Reconseal is trying to heal.

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Before the baby seal hunt was outlawed in 1987, the seal population off Canada's East Coast hovered around 1,500,000. It has since skyrocketed to about 8,000,000. Though animal rights groups call the seal hunt unsustainable, fishermen and hunters say the opposite is true. They have been pleading for changes to federal hunting rules for decades, as mature seals eat up to two tonnes of fish a year. They feast like kings, too: their stomachs are often found full of pricey catches like snow crab, cod, and lobster.



Menge argues that overpopulation can actually create more suffering for the animals. He points to out-of-control deer populations on places like Québec's Anticosti Island. Once they run out of food and space, deer are more vulnerable to disease. "That's what's happening with the seals here, too," he says.

Though fishermen sometimes consider seals a competitor, Inuit hunters like Komangapik have tremendous respect for the species that has fed their people for millennia. He hopes the hunt can be seen as a counterpoint to the often-horrific conditions and resource-intensive processes common in industrial meat production.

But the stigma persists and the challenges are great. Menge mentioned to me that a new lobster bait has been developed that mixes seal meat with fish. Crustaceans caught with this bait have been refused by many international buyers because of the seal.

Some local businesses continue to eagerly promote the abundant food source. At the Magdalen Islands butcher shop Côte à Côte, Réjean Vigneau has long served seal cuts. I first encountered the delicious, iron-rich meat that tastes of the sea at the Kamouraska waterside restaurant Côté Est, as a tender filet topped with sweet chokeberries and crunchy sea asparagus.

Menge and Komangapik hope that more people will open up to seal meat as a positive, abundant, and sustainable food source worth celebrating. As that process slowly unfolds, the two friends are doing everything they can to help people understand the hunt and its vital importance to Northern communities. ▀

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YOANIS MENGE is a visual artist whose photographic work issues from the social documentary genre. He involves himself intimately and seeks to cultivate long-term proximity with the social issues of his concern. His first book, *Hakapik*, was published in 2016.