

# STOP THIS SLAUGHTER!

**Brutal killing of baby seals: Namibia faces growing anger and tourist boycotts**

**RIGHT:** The bloody seal culling on the Namibian coast, 180 km west of the capital, Windhoek. This footage of men killing seal cubs was smuggled out of the country. **BELOW:** Up to 90 000 cubs, many still suckling pups, will be culled between now and October to safeguard Namibia's hake fishing industry.



**I**MAGINE a group of seal cubs surrounded by men with clubs. The cubs below helplessly but their cries of distress fall on deaf ears. Are the men there to help the defenceless creatures in any way? If only . . . Suddenly the blows start raining down on the cubs in wave after wave and they die – brutally and needlessly.

Some of the animals are still alive as the men move among them, slitting bodies open with knives to make sure none of

them has survived.

This blood bath has been taking place in Namibia every year for decades when up to 90 000 seals, most of them pups, are slaughtered on the country's beaches.

Meanwhile thousands of South Africans are enjoying carefree holidays here, blissfully unaware of the cruel practice in which the blood of the endangered Cape fur seal is spilt along the largely unspoiled coastline.

Experts say the way seals in

Namibia are culled is one of the most brutal practices in the world because the animals don't die immediately. The fact that this is happening to an endangered species makes it so much worse.

The horror culling scenes are worlds apart from the images featuring relaxed superstars Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, who chose the scenic country as the birthplace of their daughter, Shiloh, causing international tourists to see the area in a dif-

ferent light.

And while the purpose of the cull is to protect the country's fishing industry, the bad publicity it has generated is now threatening Namibia's much larger tourist industry.

Judging by the chorus of protest from A-listers such as Paris Hilton, the band Red Hot Chili Peppers, actors Pierce Brosnan, Kim Basinger and Pamela Anderson, as well as former Beatle Sir Paul McCartney, the world is now beginning to as-

sociate the country with gory seal culling. And they're demanding that it be stopped.

Local celebrities are equally outraged. "This disregard for life must stop," says musician Cito, lead vocalist of the South African band Wonderboom and star of the musical, Jesus Christ Superstar.

"Here in South Africa we stopped this form of culling as far back as 1990. It's high time Namibia did the same."

Behind him all the way are personalities such as adventurer Braam Malherbe of 50/50, jewellery designer Jenna Clifford, singer Danny K, model Candice Brink and Miss SA 2010, Bokang Montjane.

"I just can't get the picture of a dead baby seal with mother's milk streaming from its nose out of my mind," says Nikki Botha of pressure group Fur Free SA.

She fears that the seal colony where the cull happens – the largest in Southern Africa – will be wiped out in the process. "There is a huge difference between conservation and the slaughter of animals for profit, but the Namibian government claims it's doing it for conservation purposes."

Model/actress Christina Storm agrees. "The slaughter has nothing to do with conservation because the seals are an endangered species," she says. She appears in the Fur Free SA campaign video highlighting seal clubbing in Namibia.

The cruelty of the Namibian cull exceeds any other in the world, Botha says.

"The beaches are putrid with blood and acid from the mothers' milk but the government is doing everything in its power to conceal it from thousands of tourists."

But the world's taking notice, and the first boycotts have already started.

THE first moves to stop the slaughter of seals started in America as far back as 1972, with Mexico hot on their heels. In South Africa the culling of seals ceased in 1990 and at the

## 'The beaches are putrid with blood and acid from the mothers' milk'

time Namibia was advised to follow suit.

"The Namibian government refused," says Pat Dickens, campaign manager of Seals of Nam, a South African organisation dedicated to the preservation of the Cape fur seal.

"Until last year Canada was the biggest perpetrator and was strongly criticised, but the Canadian harp seal is not an endangered species. The cubs, with their white pelts, may still be hunted only when they're older than six months and weaned."

The Cape fur seal is on the red data list of endangered species. "They are brutally killed when they're seven months old and still dependent on their mothers. Namibia is the only country in the world that permits it," Dickens says.

In 2009 the EU also entered the debate by banning trade in all seal products because of the "inhumanity and cruelty" involved.

Namibia is now the world's biggest offender – and thanks to Seals of Nam's awareness campaign this is no longer a secret overseas.

The economic case for the annual cull is compelling. The hake industry contributes about R1,4 billion a year to the state coffers and it's argued that uncontrolled breeding of seals could put the industry at risk.

But Namibia stands to lose more in tourism revenue as a result of its seal culling.

Although just 70 000 tourists visit the country's seal colonies annually and contribute about R2 million to the tourism industry, Namibia's total income from tourism is about R7,2 billion – five times more than the fishing industry's contribution.

Negative publicity for tour-

ism could deliver a hefty blow to the Namibian economy.

Meanwhile international animal rights organisation People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta) has thrown its weight behind SA campaigns to stop seal hunting in Namibia.

Apparently Namibia is contravening its own animal protection legislation which states no one is permitted to kill or torture a wild animal "in captivity or under a person's control".

"A seal is a wild animal but technically it's not in captivity or under the control of a person. And that's how they get away with it," Dickens says.

The culling usually takes place in restricted areas around old diamond mines where the public don't have access.

Occasionally, when the Namibian SPCA was allowed to observe proceedings, it was carried out in a humane way – but footage acquired by freelance journalist and filmmaker Bart

Smithers provides a more disturbing picture.

In 2009 he was assaulted by two seal hunters who caught him secretly filming them. He was arrested and received a five-year suspended jail sentence before being deported.

Smithers was able to smuggle the footage out in his underwear and bring it to the attention of the world.

THERE is a glimmer of hope that the killing won't continue indefinitely, Dickens says.

Beauty without Cruelty and other global animal rights organisations have now joined the resistance campaign of the international stars.

People are urged not to buy Namibian products or holiday in the country and there's even an official request to rugby bodies to have the Namibian rugby team barred from the World Cup in September.

But Smithers is not optimistic. He says more intense and better orchestrated pressure needs to be brought to bear on the Namibian authorities to bring about meaningful change. And until this happens, he says, the carnage will continue. □

SOURCES: THE TIMES, PETA.ORG, FUR FREE SA, SEALS OF NAM, CANADA BROADCASTING CORPORATION, WORLD ANIMAL FOUNDATION



**ABOVE:** A worker at a factory in Henties Bay, Namibia, prepares seal carcasses to export their fur to countries such as Turkey. Seal culling provides temporary work for just 80 people.