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# **An Eco-Feminist Perspective on the Co-existence of Different Views of Seals in Leisure Activities**

## **Abstract**

This study adopts an eco-feminist perspective and investigates leisure activities involving seals occurring in the area of Tromsø, an Arctic town in Norway. The aim is to contribute to the discussion of the existence of various conceptualisations of wild animals, with particular attention to their implications in terms of animal welfare and wellbeing, and the promotion of specific ways we as humans view wild animals and ourselves. The data was collected through promotional material, local media and history literature consultation, and participant observation. The results suggest four co-existing conceptualisations of seals: as part of the local cultural heritage, as prey and pest, as friends and pets, and as entertainers. These conceptualisations are discussed in relation to the components of the leisure experience (entertainment, education, self-identity construction), animal welfare and wellbeing, and the ethical implications of the way the local people perceive the seals and view themselves as humans.

Keywords: animal-based leisure activities, eco-feminism, Arctic

## **Introduction**

This study concerns the existence of various conceptualisations of seals in a leisure context. By drawing on an eco-feminist perspective, this study aims to discuss the ethical implications of various and co-existent conceptualisations, with particular attention to the possible meaning of the transmission and promotion of specific ways we as humans view, treat, and interact with wild animals, and also view ourselves.

Contemporary social sciences have recently shown interest in discussing the complexity of our relationships with animals (Cohen 2009; DeMello 2012). Some scholars

from leisure and tourism studies have joined these discussions, investigating the inclusion of animals in our lives and our ethical world (Beardsworth and Brymann 2001; Carr 2009; Fennell 2012; Lemelin 2013). In the case of wild animals, there is quite a broad agreement among these scholars on the opportunity to frame this issue in contextual and dynamic terms, since historical and socio-cultural aspects of a specific setting can play a central role (Markwell 2004; Brandin 2009; Cohen 2010).

This study focusses on leisure activities occurring in an Arctic town, and concerns Pinnipeds, more specifically seals. The research questions are: (a) How, and to what extent, do new conceptualisations of seals in a leisure context emerge alongside and eventually replace traditional conceptualisations? and (b) What are the moral implications of this emergence and possible co-existence?

The perspective adopted in this study is based on eco-feminism, more specifically the care tradition. Until now, few scholars from leisure and tourism studies have used a feminist or, in particular, an eco-feminist perspective in the study of animal-based activities (Espiner, Gidlow, and Cushman 2011; Yudina and Fennell 2013; Yudina and Grimwood 2016). Eco-feminism can be placed among the poststructuralist feminist perspectives that seek to uncover the sometimes implicit and little-debated cultural codes by which various hierarchies are constructed, legitimated, and reproduced (Aitchison 2005). In this specific case, the relevant hierarchy is constructed as human/animal; the main principle held by eco-feminists is that such a relationship is not subaltern (Gaard 1993).

This paper is organised as follows. The theoretical framework is divided into two sections. First, the case of wild animals in leisure activities is presented along with some relevant ethical considerations. Second, the main tenets of eco-feminism are exposed and related to the case of leisure activities that include wild animals. This results in a theoretical framework that is then applied to analyse the case of seals in leisure activities in Tromsø

(Norway). Finally, the conclusions highlight the main results and present some implications from an eco-feminist perspective.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Wild Animals and Leisure Activities: An Ethical Perspective***

Traditionally, wild animals are seen as sources of essential sustenance (e.g., food and material for clothing and tools) and as symbols in some religious and nature-based spiritual movements (Beardsworth and Brymann 2001; Lee and Kanazawa 2015). To a certain extent and with a less marked aspect on the sustainment aspect, these functions are observed and are quite important in relation to leisure activities. Some examples include game as a typical food delicacy, local handicraft made by animal body parts for souvenirs, and animal icons linked to recreational and tourism destinations (Jones and Jenkins 2002; Tremblay 2002; Gibson 2014).

The symbolic aspects of wild animals is also related to the activities they are involved in, and their meaning in the personal life of recreationists and tourists (Dimanche and Samdahl 1994). In this case, leisure activities involving wild animals can be associated with particular values relative to self-identity. An example is boar hunting in Italy and the related perception of masculinity (Weibel-Orlando 2008).

In addition to these conceptualisations of animals as sources of food, material, and symbols, new conceptualisations and uses have emerged (Beardsworth and Brymann 2001; DeMello 2012). Recreational hunting and fishing are performed in relation to the functions mentioned above (food and symbolic meaning), but also for entertainment. Fennell and Nowaczek (2010) explore the various interactions humans have with fish. Here, a spectrum of positions is identified: from an ego- and anthropocentric position to an eco-centric position where the sanctity of all life is recognised. The authors clearly distinguish cases where interactions imply the death of the animals as meeting immediate human needs from those

cases relevant to today's leisure context, where the killing of the animal is not related to subsistence needs.

Wild animals are also used for entertainment in circuses, zoos, and aquariums. This kind of interaction is called presentation (Beardsworth and Brymann 2001) and differs from an encounter which occurs in the animals' habitat. Although recent changes have been made in the ways the aforementioned institutions frame and perform their activities, several scholars argue that they tend to promote a conceptualisation of wild animals and nature that is detrimental to the promotion of a conservation mindset (Fennell 2012, 2013b; Bell 2015).

Cases of entertainment and educational activities that do not imply a direct contact with the animals are considered less problematic but still relevant from an ethical point of view. These cases are called representation and quasification (Beardsworth and Brymann 2001). Representation refers to the way wild animals are depicted in pictorial art, movies and texts. Quasification is a form of representation, but it is focussed on the creation of fake animals. Examples include toy animals sold at souvenir shops, and the stuffed animals in natural science museums. Bertella (2013) investigates the aspect of representation in tourism promotional material. In her study based on empirical evidence from northern Norway, she concludes that the conceptualisation of animals depends on the type of animal, the possible animal-human interactions, and some personal traits of the humans involved. Interestingly, this study also notes that promotional images do not always correspond to the view of animals dominant in the local culture of the specific destination.

Aiming to make order within the complex issue of the use of animals in leisure contexts, and to focus and reflect on related moral aspects, Shani and Pizam (2008) develop a framework about a set of ethical concerns and principles that act as guidelines for animal-based attractions. This framework is based on an animal-rights position, and is built around three components: entertainment, education, and animal welfare. As the intention of the

authors is to focus on the ethical aspect of animal-based attractions, the third component has a privileged role in the framework. The framework includes several relevant questions. For example: “To what degree can a tourist site stretch the animal welfare principle in order to entertain the visitors?”, “Are the educational aspects of animal attractions effective in generating environmental awareness among visitors (...)?”, “What kind of mechanisms can be established to ensure the welfare of animals in tourist attractions?” (Shani and Pizam 2008, 687–688).

This study further investigates the aforementioned aspects concerning the ethical considerations about the use of wild animals in leisure activities. This is done within the perspective of eco-feminism.

### ***Eco-Feminism***

Eco-feminism reflects on and criticises the various hierarchies observable in our usual conceptualisation of the world and our positions in the world. More specifically, it focusses on those hierarchies that have the form of dualistic opposites, where one element is considered superior to the other (Gruen 2011; Adams and Gruen 2014). Such dualisms include: male/female, culture/nature, and human/animal. In regards to the latter, eco-feminists, especially those from the care tradition, view animals as individuals for whom humans have the moral obligation to care and with whom humans can develop reciprocal and meaningful relationships (Donovan and Adams 2007). In line with this position and based on the recognition that we humans are also animals, non-human animals are viewed as subjects with whom we have similarities and differences at the species and also at the individual level (Gruen 2015). Animals are the others to whom we compare our human selves; eventually, such comparisons can contribute to a deeper understanding of both them and us. It can be argued that the way we view and treat animals is indicative of the way we view ourselves. In this sense, eco-feminists advance a view of humans as caring and responsible beings who use

our power not to dominate but to help, an attitude and behaviour sometimes qualified as compassionate.

Different from other animal-ethical positions, eco-feminism argues that both our cognitive and emotional capacities should be used in relating our world to the animal world (Donovan 1993; Gruen 2015). The mode of moral reasoning typical of animal-ethics positions as utilitarianism and animal rights is criticised because it is considered too rationalist and calculative. More specifically, the main criticisms concern the detached and rationalist calculations typical of utilitarianism, and the “like-us” approach of animal rights theorists. Eco-feminists encourage the inclusion of relational and affective reasoning when conceptualising animals and nature. It is only through adopting our full potential as human beings that we are able to see, understand, feel, and respect the other. Moreover, such forms of intelligence can also be used to approach animal issues in a contextual way. In this sense, some eco-feminists propose a position that—avoiding any form of universalism—takes into account the specific situation (Curtin 1991; Twine 2014). This is done with the intention of gaining a deep understanding of the issue, and without justifying oppressive practices attempts to find alternative solutions. In regards to such a practical aspect, eco-feminism views values and actions as inseparable: our conceptualisation of animals has to be translated into practices that reject and contribute to the end of oppressive human/animal dualism, and instead respect the lives of animals (Birkeland 1983).

Fennell (2015) suggested that the direct experience of wild animals tends to be criticised by eco-feminists. The reason for this is that the performance of leisure activities that include direct contact with wild animals implies many challenges. On the other hand, it can be argued that the direct experience of wild animals can contribute to the development of those emotional and cognitive capacities that support caring attitudes and behaviours towards wildlife and also towards the natural environment. Examples include wildlife watching tours

that do not interfere in the lives of animals (for example land-based whale watching), and visits to animal sanctuaries where individual animals are cared for due to the impossibility of them living in the wild.

The cases where there is no contact with living wild animals, representation and quasification, are less problematic. They can be viewed as morally acceptable and desirable when they promote the understanding of the animal world and involve caring attitudes and behaviours.

### *Ethical Concern about Wild Animals in Leisure Activities from an Eco-Feminist Perspective*

Inspired by the three-component framework put forth by Shani and Pizam (2008), some ethical questions about wild animals in leisure activities are proposed from the perspective of eco-feminism. Regarding the animal welfare component and in order to better capture aspects relative to the ethical treatment of animals, the animal wellbeing principle can be included. Although similar to the animal welfare concept, the wellbeing concept intends to highlight aspects such as the psychological perception of happiness and meaningfulness experienced by animals (Fennell 2013a).

The differences between welfare and wellbeing issues are often discussed in relation to the use of animals as food. Here, animal welfarists argue that as long as the animals are guaranteed a good life, their killing is morally justified. Shani and Pizam (2008) summarise the animal welfare position with the following words: 'It is acceptable to use animals for most human purposes, as long there is a sincere attempt to maximise their welfare and minimise their suffering and pain' (681). In their framework, the authors specify that from an animal rights perspective, such efforts should be directed to the elimination of pain and suffering.

Eco-feminists go further and view animals as individuals who deserve care and respect. Continuing with the case of food reported above as an example, several eco-feminists



argue that taking the life of another individual against his/her will cannot be morally justified (Gaard 2002). The same critical position is held in relation to animals used in leisure activities: it is queried whether their participation in leisure activities is against their will, whether the sense of leisure perceived by humans implies a sense of leisure for the animals, and whether the ways the animals are involved respects their dignity (Desmond 1999; Cataldi 2002).

In the original framework of Shani and Pizam (2008), the animal welfare component has a privileged role, being both a component and the underlying logic of ethical questions. This role is here shared with the wellbeing principle. Both welfare and wellbeing aspects are particularly important for the modes of engagement that infer direct contact with animals. In regards to the welfare principle, the ethical questions proposed by Shani and Pizam (2008) are still pertinent, while some questions can be developed for the wellbeing component. For example, one can ask: To what extent can the animals decide on their own life? To what extent do animals have the ability to develop their physical, cognitive, and emotional potentials? To what extent are animals helped through the different phases of their lifecycle? Are the animals enjoying the leisure activities?

Welfare and wellbeing are also related to representation and quasification. Here, relevant ethical questions can be developed as well. For example, one can ask what the pictorial representations of wild animals suggest in terms of the welfare and wellbeing of the animals: Are the represented animals alive, dead, or in agony? Is the representation of dead and dying animals an objective description, or a celebration of the act of killing? Similarly, in the case of quasification, it can be asked: Have stuffed animals been killed for the purpose of exposing them, and what is the educational purpose of stuffed animals?

Finally, another component can be added to the original framework: self-identity construction. The inclusion of this component is based on the recognition of the symbolic

aspect of leisure consumption and the view of animals as subjects with whom we can compare our human selves (Dimanche and Samdahl 1994; Gruen 2015). Contact with animals can trigger reflections around the extent to which we differ from them, and consequently, reflections about how to relate to them. This element can be thought of as the process through which we reflect on our own identity as humans and as animals. Relevant questions concerning the self-identity construction component include: What kind of relationship between humans and animals is encouraged? Is such a relationship characterised by domination or care?

## **Method**

The empirical part of this study investigates seals in the context of leisure activities in Tromsø, a northern Norwegian town located in the Troms county, above the Arctic Circle. Having been a Tromsø resident for 17 years, the researcher is quite familiar with the local leisure activities. Additional knowledge about such activities and the specific socio-cultural context was gained by collecting data from local media, promotional materials, and local history literature. Two leisure activity facilities were identified as relevant:

- the aquarium that houses seals in captivity and hosts various exhibitions concerning Arctic wildlife and nature;
- the Polar Museum, dedicated to Arctic hunting and polar explorers.

In regards to the collection methods used, data sources were used by considering research ethics, particularly reflexivity and relational research ethics (Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Ellis 2007). The concept of reflexivity in research concerns the impact of the researcher's values and interests on the way research questions are posed, framed, and investigated. Relational ethics is a concept close to the ethics of care and poses questions about mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched. Considerations about these two aspects lead to the conclusion that researchers have moral obligations in terms of recognising and making explicit their ethical position, consequently

acting in relation to their approach towards the research participants, interacting with them in a respectful and non-exploitative way. Having explicitly taken an eco-feminist perspective, the researcher has consciously maintained this same perspective in the choice of data collection. Having some previous knowledge about specific leisure activities, participation in some activities was excluded. In particular, the investigation of activities by the aquarium was based exclusively on secondary data gained through the consultation of the aquarium website and Facebook page, and the local press articles concerning this facility. The same data sources were used for the other facility, the Polar Museum. In addition, the museum is relatively well known by the researcher who previously worked at the museum shop for some months in 2000, and visited again in January 2016.

Additional data was collected through covert participant observation in three events:

- the 2015 Researchers' Night, a popular science event that included a presentation about seal hunting and a related photo exhibition (25<sup>th</sup> September 2015; duration approximately 4 hours);
- a closed arrangement for employees at the local university museum dedicated to natural sciences and local history, concerning a journalist's documentary about a seal hunting expedition in 1961 (1<sup>st</sup> February 2017; duration approximately 1 hour);
- a local event concerning a recently released documentary about a seal hunting expedition in 2016 (22<sup>nd</sup> February 2017; duration approximately 3 hours).

The first and third event were open to the public. The researcher was invited to the second arrangement by a colleague employed at the university museum with the explicit purpose of helping the researcher in the data collection. The researcher evaluated that the covert aspect of the observations was not in conflict with the guidelines by the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees as there was not direct contact with the observed people and the collected data are not particularly sensitive (Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humanities, part B, §8 Respect for individuals. Research without consent). Notes were taken during and after the events.

The data analysis identified the traditional conceptualisation of seals. Once identified, the analysis was directed to find which leisure activities promote such conceptualisation and how. Similarly, the existence of other conceptualisations in the leisure context was investigated by adopting the concepts of encounter, presentation, representation, and quasification (Beardsworth and Brymann 2001). As guidelines for the analysis of data from an eco-feminist perspective, some ethical questions were used. These ethical questions were inspired by Shani and Pizam (2008) and are listed in the Appendix. The analysis of the data proceeded applying the questions to the various seal-related activities and events that were also analysed on the basis of which components (e.g., education, entertainment, self-identity construction) they could be related to.

## **Findings**

### ***The Traditional Conceptualisation of Seals***

The traditional way to view seals in the Troms area and generally in northern Norway is mainly related to their use as food, material sources, and potential economic benefits (i.e., job opportunities and seal products sold for profit). These relevant traditions belong to the indigenous Sámi culture and the Norwegian coastal communities. Within the Sámi context, seals are mainly viewed as sources of material (e.g., sealskin; Fors 2004). This is in line with the close relationship the Sámi culture has with nature. Their view of nature depends heavily on local livelihoods and daily practices (Valkonen and Valkonen 2014). Among such practices, a central role is played by those relative to essential sustainment, including hunting, fishing, herding of semi-domesticated animals (reindeers), and *duodji*, the handicraft tradition that usually creates items out of animal-based materials such as bone, antlers, and leather (Helander 1999; Valkonen and Valkonen 2014).

Other relevant Sámi practices concern the Sámi animistic worldview according to which some rocks, plants, and animals are regarded as spiritual and conscious beings

(Valkonen and Valkonen 2014). Some rituals include animals (mainly domesticated animals such as goats and horses) as sacrifices, and some wild animals (e.g., the bear) as symbols in hunting and eating rituals (Westman 1997). No particular role is reserved for seals.

In regards to the Norwegian coastal culture, seals have had a very important role in the local economy as a source of meat, oil, and—even more importantly—sealskin. Seal hunting started around the 1800s, with peak years between 1920 and 1930 and also just after the Second World War (Drivenes and Jølle 2004). Seal hunting took place mainly in the West Ice close to Greenland and in the East Ice in the Barents and White Sea close to Russia. Hunting expeditions employed many vessels; approximately half of them were from the Tromsø area. Starting in the 1960s, due to the international debate on seal hunting, the sector started to show some signs of decline (Drivenes and Jølle 2004). It is plausible to think that this was also due to the harsh life aboard these vessels and the changing lifestyle of the local youngsters, influenced by the beginning of oil exploitation by the Norwegian state. Locally, the seal hunting debate became quite heated after the publication of a report by Odd F. Lindberg who was on-board a vessel in 1987, and documented the hunting practices with photos and verbal descriptions based on his observations (Lindberg 1989; Drivenes and Jølle 2004).

These events and other more recent episodes (e.g., introduction of regulations, a recent animal cruelty episode occurred on a vessel and reported by the national press, the European Union ban of trading seal products, and the heavy dependency of the industry on public subsidies) have contributed to the decline of the sector (Drivenes and Jølle 2004; Hansen and Magnus 1996; <http://www.ssb.no/a/aarbok/tab/tab-368.html>; <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/2-millioner-til-selfangstnaringen-i-2016/id2478282/>; [https://www.nrk.no/troms/\\_-drev-skytetrening-pa-levende-sel-1.6986701](https://www.nrk.no/troms/_-drev-skytetrening-pa-levende-sel-1.6986701)). In 2017, the Directorate of Fisheries stated that it was not profitable to subsidize seal hunting,

and therefore, although three ships had obtained the permission to hunt, only one got the public financial support (<https://www.nrk.no/troms/rederi-klager-pa-manglende-stotte-til-selfangst-1.13440609>).

### ***Seals in Tromsø***

#### *Encounters with Seals in the Wild and their Representation*

Living seals can be found in the surrounding areas of Tromsø. Occasionally, they are spotted by the local population and become an object of curiosity. One example is the observation of a seal at the town beach in August 2009. This event is reported in one of the local papers that includes a picture of four children walking towards the animal. The article described the situation as follows: ‘The little seal rests on the beach at Telegraftbukta and enjoys the good weather, just like all Tromsø residents do’ (<https://www.nordlys.no/nyheter/selskapssyk-sel/s/1-79-4518578>).

Another example is from 2014 and involves a walrus who lived for a couple of months on a beach close to town (<http://www.itromso.no/nyheter/article10493491.ece>). Although not being a seal, the walrus belongs to the same superfamily as the seal (*Pinnipedia*) and therefore this example is included. The animal was observed by a local person who is also a relatively famous photographer. The event is reported in the local press as the story of a friendship. On several occasions, the photographer commented on the episode, highlighting his attempt to keep the animal’s presence secret in order to protect it. He also commented on the affection that (according to him) developed between him and the walrus. This is described in a local newspaper that reports the photographer’s words as follows:

It was a fantastic experience. The reason why the walrus’ name is Kompis [Buddy] is because he became like a buddy to me .... At the beginning he was shy (...), after a while he became quite social and became as a buddy for us [the photographer and some friends]. He was almost as a dog; we could pet him and he followed us. It was incredibly fun! (<http://www.itromso.no/kultur/article10756741.ece>)

Seals living in the local area are also the objects of recreational hunting. The National Association of Hunters and Fishermen and its local section present seal hunting as a ‘fascinating form of hunting’, and also as a solution to the damages that seals can cause to fishermen (NJFF 2002). In this latter case, the seal is compared to a pest. The paper and digital material concerning recreational seal hunting describe in detail the challenges, methods, and regulations concerning hunting. The seal is identified as ‘the big game of the sea’, and is used in the tourism context to sell safari tours to foreigners (Lovelock 2008).

### *Presentation of Living Seals and Quasification*

Living seals can be observed closely at the local aquarium. On the webpage of this facility, four bearded seals are presented as the main attraction. Some general information about the seals is given on the webpage. Moreover, the seals are presented by their first name and with a description of their origin and individual characteristics. Two seals arrived at the aquarium when they were 5 weeks old; although this is not explicitly written, it can be assumed that they were captured with the intention to exhibit them at the aquarium. The other two were born in captivity at another aquarium. Some details about the individual characteristics of the animals are also presented on the webpage, including their appearance and personality. For example: ‘Bella [the seal’s name] likes new challenges and can be very energetic. She is self-confident and shows very clearly when she thinks that the training session is boring’ (<http://www.polaria.no/bella.272812.no.html>).

The aquarium webpage explains that the seals are trained with positive reinforcement methods that, as it is explicitly explained, are the same used in Walt Disney movies (<http://www.polaria.no/foring-og-trening.155313.no.html>). The training is justified in relation to the intention to improve the seals’ quality of life, stimulate them, and teach them behaviours that might be useful during veterinary visits. The seal training methods are also focussed on in a mini-course arranged in October 2016, described as follows:

You will learn both the theory and the practice of training. Our trainers XXXX and XXXX will teach you and then show you how you train animals in our classroom [the pools]. Afterwards, you can try these methods yourself with XXXX's Chihuahua dogs .... This activity suits all those who like animals. (<http://www.polaria.no/minikurs-i-dyretrening-paa-polaria.5919547-156649.html>)

Pictures from the local press show some images of the training sessions and the shows that are performed for the visitors. Seals are often represented with toys, being hand-fed, posing with people for photo portraits, and performing anthropomorphised behaviours like kissing, giving red roses to visitors, and shaking hands (<https://www.nordlys.no/bilder/polaria-moro-i-12-ar/g/1-79-5867940>).

For local schools, the aquarium arranges theatre shows where children are actively involved and learn about the local tradition of seal hunting. This is described as follows:

This show is about the history of Tromsø as a seal hunting town. Here, school children will experience life on-board the boat *M/S Polstjerna*, and learn about the use of sealskin and meat. They will taste seal meat, build their own products from sealskin, and—not least—visit the seals in the pools. (<http://www.polaria.no/selvsagte-det-sel.155995.no.html>)

Some pictures from previous arrangements reported in the local press show that toy seals are used during these arrangements, and children handle them as prey (<http://tromsoby.no/node/18499> 5.10.2012). The same seal toys are sold in the aquarium shop, as well as in other tourist places in town.

#### *Presentation of Dead Seals and Representation*

Seal products can be found for sale in Tromsø. This is another way that people can have direct contact with the animals, although they are dead and mutilated. Seal products include boots, slippers, vests, coats, and (particularly in souvenir shops) small gadgets. They are sold in few local shops and in many souvenirs shops, including the one in the Polar Museum.

In the spring and summer, seal meat is served at local restaurants, and can be bought at supermarkets or directly from the boats at the harbour. Seal meat sales are always reported



by the local press as a special occasion meant to appreciate a rare culinary delicacy (<http://www.itromso.no/nyheter/article9675465.ece>). Such articles are often accompanied by pictures showing the sellers handling pieces of meat that are usually kept in big plastic buckets, or local people happily showing pieces of seal flesh in their shopping bags.

Seal meat-eating is a tradition that has not been particularly popular with younger generations. Once part of many families' diets, seal meat has become a delicacy over time (Møller 1981). This trend has been reported in several local articles commenting on the local people's desire to preserve this tradition and their support in financing hunting activities and marketing of the meat with public money (<https://www.kystogfjord.no/nyheter/forsiden/Skal-faa-ut-selkjoett-til-folket>; <https://fiskeribladet.no/nyheter/?artikkel=45801>; <https://fiskeribladet.no/nyheter/?artikkel=45952>).

During the showing of a 1961 documentary by a journalist on a seal hunting expedition for employees at a local university museum, a local woman commented on her memories about seal hunting and eating. She could remember very well when the boats came back from the expeditions; it was a sort of celebration because it meant that spring was near. She also commented that she remembered the strong smell of the seal meat at home (observation, 01 February, 2017).

At the same gathering, a picture was shown from the previous year when the employees had lunch at the museum canteen where seal meat was served. Employees commented that they felt lucky and privileged to be a part of this previous event, since the tradition of seal hunting and eating might disappear. More precisely, the person who presented the documentary commented on the picture, saying: 'And we got what might be the last seal meat...here we are enjoying it! And I remember that it was very tasty!' (observation, 01 February, 2017).

Other documentaries on seals also concern seal hunting expeditions. One is a photo documentary that was part of the 2015 Researchers' Night, a popular science event where this researcher participated as an audience member. The documentary and related photo exhibition, titled *Seal in the Shot*, was presented by a former seal hunter who is well-known among the local people. He was working on-board the seal hunting ship *M/S Norsel* from 1981 to 1984, and documented these tours with his camera. The photos show the daily life of the men on-board, and include many shots of moments when the animals were under siege, shot, and skinned. Many pictures are dominated by the red colour of blood spread on white snow, or covering the boat area where the animals were skinned.

The former hunter recounted many episodes from his personal experiences, describing a strong sense of camaraderie among the men, and also a strong sense of pride in relation to their expertise in killing and skinning the animals and enduring the Arctic climate. During the description of the hunting trips, the following expression was used over and over again: '... and then there was only one thing to do ... to shoot them ...' (observation, 25 September, 2015).

The other documentary is a 2-hour film that participated in the 2017 Tromsø International Film Festival in January 2017. This documentary, titled *Sealers—One Last Hunt* (2016), concerns an expedition from the 2016 seal-hunting season. The film is reported in several articles in the local press, with particular emphasis on the broad interest that has awakened among the people and the promotional activities arranged for the film première (<http://www.itromso.no/feedback/feedbackfilm/2017/01/18/Damene-elsker-selfangerne-14080786.ece>). The documentary's release included the following events: the serving of seal meat at the movie theatre, a première held at one of the oldest town pubs belonging to the local brewery, and hunters dressed in their typical working clothes for participants to take selfies with them.

A sort of pride can be noted in the way the local press commented on this documentary. The documentary was also shown at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam with success. The following episode is reported as a form of victory in relation to the international debate concerning seal hunting and the animalist movement in general, noted in the following article extract:

Amsterdam is of course the capital of Greenpeace and the vegan movement. Still, when the lights went on after the film was over, we saw that people were weeping. They were weeping not because they had seen seals slaughtered. They were weeping because they thought it was so sad that captain XXXX and his crew had lost their culture.... (<http://www.itromso.no/nyheter/2017/01/11/Publikum-gr%C3%A5t-under-premi%C3%A8ren-p%C3%A5-filmen-om-ishavsskipper-Bj%C3%B8rne-Kvernmo-14048874.ece#.WHd8G3MZ9LM.facebook>)

A reader commented on the same article:

I know XXXX [the captain of the expedition boat] personally from our youth, and I can say without a doubt that he is a very good person who can be seen as legend in the seal hunting tradition. I want to congratulate him and the filmmakers who made Norwegian seal hunting eternal.

Moreover, another article reports that when showing the documentary in Europe, the filmmakers smuggled in some seal meat. Although referring to an illegal act, this episode seems to be reported with pride (<http://www.itromso.no/kultur/2016/10/26/Til-Amsterdam-med-film-selkj%C3%B8tt-og-selfangere-13701127.ece>).

The documentary was shown again by a cultural group called Polar Wine and Knowledge, along with the local cinema club and the Polar Museum that hosted the event. People attending the event were quite different in terms of age, and some children were also present, in addition to numerous university employees. On this occasion, seal hunting was presented as an important tradition. The event started with a short presentation about the amount of wild seals in the areas where hunting had traditionally taken place, the related regulations about intake and killing methods, the environmental sustainability of the activity, and challenges due to climate change. The presentation was introduced by a short speech that

started as follows: ‘An era is over. This documentary is both important and emotionally moving ...’ (observation, 22 February, 2017).

Finally, in regards to the representation of fake seals at the Polar Museum, some stuffed animals are present. One scene in particular represents the culling of a seal by a man. This particular exhibit is reported by the local press as it has provoked some negative international attention in the past (<http://www.itromso.no/nyheter/2015/11/30/Turister-i-sjokk-etter-%C3%A5-ha-bes%C3%B8kt-Polarmuseet-11868945.ece>). The museum representative interviewed by the journalist reports that, due to the realism and brutality of this scene, the museum was mentioned by Lonely Planet among the worst tourist experiences in Scandinavia in 2003. Still in relation to this exhibit and in more recent years, some negative comments by the tourists can be observed in the museum guestbook. In the same article, the museum representative highlights the importance of documenting the local history for tourists as well as providing a sense of identity for the local people.

## **Discussion**

The data show that various conceptualisations of seals co-exist in the leisure context in Tromsø. Four conceptualisations can be identified: seals as part of the local cultural heritage, as prey and pest, as friend and pet, and as entertainer.

Seals are strongly associated with the northern Norwegian coastal culture, particularly in relation to seal hunting. This has been observed in leisure contexts relative to the Polar Museum, documentaries and their associated events, and theatre activities hosted by the aquarium. In these contexts, the animals seem to have quite a marginal role. The data relative to the Polar Museum and the documentaries concerning seal hunting are characterised by images describing men living in harsh environments, isolated from the rest of society, in close contact with each other, and very committed to killing the seals and exploiting their bodies. This dominating and often brutal attitude and behaviour towards the seals is

transmitted to the local children in the context of theatre activities arranged by the aquarium, and through their exposure to documentaries.

In regards to seals and their role in the local cultural heritage, seals are viewed as having a cultural gastronomic value. Seal meat is not reported in today's leisure activities as necessary for subsistence, but instead as a gastronomic experience. Thus, the relevant components regarding seals as part of cultural heritage include education in terms of history and self-identity construction. Both seal hunting and eating are related to the personal memories of some older residents. This data suggest an important aspect relative to self-identity construction: a nostalgic sense of the past youth of those people who had personally experienced seal hunting in an important and memorable phase of their lives.

In recreational hunting, seals are prey. The data suggest that in this case, the animals have a secondary role, while the focus is on the hunters who are described in relation to the challenging activity they engage in. Moreover, the conceptualisation of seals has a negative connotation as seals are considered as pests.

Another conceptualisation is related to seals as friends and pets. This conceptualisation can be observed in the leisure contexts of encounters in nature and the aquarium. In both contexts, the entertainment component seems to prevail, although in the case of the aquarium, an educational component relative to the biology of the animals can be observed as part of the offered guided tours and information presented on the webpage.

The aquarium also promotes the conceptualisation of seals as entertainers, with a marked dominance of an entertainment component that is reminiscent of typical circuses. Although the webpage text highlights the usefulness of the training, the pictures and the arrangement of training sessions *à la* Disney confirm the entertainment aspect derived from the animals doing tricks and playing anthropomorphised roles.

***Ethical Considerations and Implication from an Eco-Feminist Perspective***

The four conceptualisations of seals identified above and the related leisure contexts and components can be commented on from an eco-feminist perspective. Some ethical implications are developed focussing on what the various conceptualisations of animals tell us about the perception that involved humans have about themselves and humans in general (Donovan and Adams 2007; Gruen 2015). The way seals are viewed and treated in leisure contexts is indicative of how the local people view and choose to represent themselves, their self-perception and, more generally, their conceptualisation of humans in relation to wild animals.

In regards to seals as cultural heritage, the principles of welfare and wellbeing are not particularly present in relevant leisure contexts. From an eco-feminist perspective, this use and presentation of seals and seal-related activities can be viewed as acceptable when contextualised (Curtin 1991; Twine 2014). In this specific case, such contextualisation seems to be partial. The very limited concern about the animals' welfare and wellbeing appears only in the mention of regulations concerning seal hunting. In the case of the Polar Museum, seal hunting is contextualised in relation to the historical and geographical setting, but this seems to be limited to the exhibit and not extended to the souvenir shop, where seal gadgets are sold as souvenirs. The partiality of such contextualisation can also be related to the marked characterisation of the documentaries that appear to be the celebration of and the mourning for a particular lifestyle, and the younger years of a generation that is now disappearing. This seems to be confirmed by comments made by the local people about the photo documentary and the journalistic documentary.

The conceptualisation related to cultural heritage can be associated with a particular view of humans. People engaged in these leisure activities, documentaries, and seal meat eating can be associated with a self-perception and representation as dedicated community

members and nostalgic bearers of a tradition. Here, the animals are clearly subaltern to humans.

Dominating attitudes and partial contextualisation also occur in recreational hunting. Here, the contextualisation refers to the possible damage that seals can indirectly cause to the fishermen. Seal killing is then justified by a sort of responsibility towards a locally important consumptive use of another animal species. The data suggest that the component relative to self-identity is also relevant here, with people who engage in recreational hunting perceiving and presenting themselves as responsible outdoor people who like challenges.

The conceptualisation of seals as friends and pets was observed at the aquarium. In regards to this and in terms of welfare and wellbeing, the captive animals are encouraged to be mentally and, to a certain degree, physically active. It can be noted that the animals do not have the freedom to choose whether to engage in such activities in captive conditions or not, and this aspect is not commented on or explained in the aquarium webpage, where these activities are presented exclusively as entertainment. This can be interpreted as a limitation to welfare and wellbeing due to the unbalanced power relation between the seals and the aquarium staff and the use of the animals for activities that seem to be arranged with the main objective being to entertain the public. As a result, the view of humans that emerges is likened to an abusive friend. Moreover, the use of captive seals in the entertainment of visitors with tricks and shows indicates that the dignity of the animals is not respected. From an eco-feminist perspective, humans can then be qualified as exploiters and bullies.

The case of seals as friends and pets when met in nature is closest to the eco-feminism perspective on human/animal interactions. Even though humans seem not to have the role of normal friends but more as intrusive friends, it seems that there is no intention of domination.

Table 1 systematises the considerations discussed in this section. First, the various seal conceptualisations and the relevant leisure contexts and components are presented. The

second part of Table 1 presents some notes about ethical considerations and implications from an eco-feminist perspective, with a focus on the perceptions the involved humans have about themselves, humans in general, and the animals.

[Table 1 Near Here]

These results lead to the conclusion that recreational activities conducted privately seem to advance views of animals and humans that are not too far from eco-feminism more than organised leisure activities. From an eco-feminist perspective, such results can be viewed in relation to the natural cognitive and emotional capacities that may help us approach the animal world in a caring and responsible way (Donovan 1993; Gruen 2015).

The leisure context where three conceptualisations of seals co-exist is the aquarium that, in addition to offering organised activities, profiles itself as an educational institute. Here, the seals are associated with cultural heritage, friendship, and abuse. This can be interpreted as a clear need for some actors within the leisure industry to reflect on the ethical and educational messages that are promoted. The overall impression is that the specific institution encourages a use of seals not according to their needs in terms of welfare and wellbeing, but almost exclusively on the basis of the local people's needs in terms of education, entertainment, and self-identity.

## **Conclusions**

This study investigated the various conceptualisations of seals in leisure activities in an Arctic Norwegian town. This was done adopting the eco-feminist care perspective. Due to its characteristics, and in particular the emphasis on an emotional, relational and contextual understanding of human-animal interactions, such a perspective has been fruitful in focusing



on the meaning that the different conceptualisations of the seals have in terms of human self-perception and self-identity construction.

The results suggest a limited consideration of the animals' welfare and wellbeing. Four conceptualisations of seals were identified: seals as part of the local cultural heritage, as prey and pest, as friends and pets, and as entertainers. The first conceptualisation is clearly linked to the local traditions deriving from the Norwegian coastal culture, and is still very present. The various conceptualisations can be viewed as indicators of the ways humans engaged in specific leisure activities view the animals, themselves, and their relationship to the animals. As cultural heritage, prey and pest, the animals have a marginal role, functional in supporting self-portraits of people engaged in the related activities as committed members of a community and subculture, and dominators of wild animals. In the case of seals as friends and pets, some signs indicate attention paid to the animals' welfare and wellbeing. In this case, the relationship between humans and animals can be qualified as friendship, more specifically an abusive or intrusive friendship. As entertainers, seals are denied their dignity, and the representation of humans engaged in this leisure activity can be described as exploiters or bullies.

The coexistence of various conceptualisations seems to be viewed as unproblematic by the local people, as it is advanced within the same institution (the aquarium). From an eco-feminist point of view, such co-existence raises some questions about the coherence of the implicit message. It can be proposed that the underlying understanding of seals that is promoted in this way is about the animals serving different functions to the advantage of the humans. In other words, a clear utilitarian and anthropocentric position emerges.

The results also suggest that in comparison to commercial leisure activities, activities conducted privately seem to advance a view of animals and humans that is closer to eco-feminism. Although this might not always be the case, this aspect refers to the sense of inter-

species empathy that eco-feminists view as an important aspect of human nature. This perspective should be encouraged and promoted by the leisure industry that, at least in this case, seems to have failed to do.

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Table 1. Summary of the Findings.

	Seal as cultural heritage	Seal as prey and pest	Seal as friend and pet	Seal as entertainer
Leisure context and activities	seal hunting documentaries, museum, aquarium (theater activities), social eating	recreational hunting	encounters, aquarium	aquarium
Components	self-identity, nostalgia, education	entertainment, self-identity	entertainment, education	entertainment
Ethical concern considerations	very limited or absent considerations in terms of welfare and wellbeing, dominating attitude and behaviours toward the seals, partly contextualized and justified	very limited or absent considerations in terms of welfare and wellbeing, dominating attitude and behaviours toward the seals, weakly contextualized and justified	some considerations in terms of welfare and wellbeing	some considerations in terms of welfare and wellbeing, no respect for the seals' dignity
The self-perception and representation of the humans engaged in the leisure activities and events and the promotion of a specific view of humans and animals	part of a community, tradition bearers, youth nostalgic, dominators	part of a subculture, responsible outdoor individuals who like challenges, dominators	abusive or intrusive friends	exploiters or bullies

## APPENDIX

[Table 2 Here]

	Ethical concern questions
<b>Animal welfare and wellbeing principle</b>	What kind of mechanisms can be established to ensure the welfare of animals? To what extent can attractions be trusted to care for the animals' welfare if it clashes with the visitors' requirements? Are the animals represented alive, dead or in agony? How are possible limits in animal welfare contextualized and explained to the visitors? To which extent can the animals decide on their own life? To which extent do the individual animals have the possibility to develop their physical, cognitive and emotional potentials? To which extent are animals helped through the different phases of their lifecycle? Is there any sign that could indicate that the animals are happy or unhappy?
<b>Entertainment component</b>	To what degree can attractions including living wild animals “stretch” the animal welfare principle in order to entertain the visitors? Do entertainment activities promote animal wellbeing? Is the dignity of the involved animals respected? Are the animals playing or represented to play anthropomorphised roles? Are the animals represented as entertainers? How are the entertainment activities that include animals experienced by the animals? Do the animals involved in entertainment activities perceived such activities as entertaining?
<b>Education component</b>	Are the educational aspects of animal-based attractions effective in generating environmental awareness and animal concern among visitors? Do the educational activities include moral considerations? Do the educational activities promote reflection on the welfare and wellbeing of animals? Is the use and representation of wild animals contextualized? Which educational message is implicitly or explicitly communicated to the visitors about the animals’ value?
<b>Self-identity construction component</b>	What kind of relation between humans and animals is encouraged or represented? Is such relation characterized by domination? Are visitors encouraged to have, practically or imaginatively, a dominating or caring attitude towards the animals?

The table is inspired by the framework of Shani and Pizam (2008). It shows the questions relative to the key principles of welfare and wellbeing, and those relative to the components of entertainment, education, and self-identity construction.