

Seal hunters promote new products

By DOUG MELLGREN

LOFOTEN ISLANDS, Norway (AP) Seal meat and skins aren't big sellers anymore, so entrepreneurs have developed new products such as furry bow ties and seal-meat lasagna to reduce their stockpiles.

"Norwegian Seal Fashion," a catalog published by small Arctic companies, offers seal-skin evening clothes, traditional boots, furry key rings and a range of gourmet seal.

A decade ago, the seal hunts, a coastal tradition, were an important business on Europe's Arctic fringe, bringing in 100 million kroner (\$14 million) yearly.

Since then, international protests have curtailed the hunt. The United States and the Netherlands banned imports of seal products, and the European Community limited them.

Rieber and Co., the only raw seal buyer left in Norway, has a stockpile of about 200,000 skins, plus meat, and little demand.

In 1983, more than 150 people worked at Rieber's seal-processing and sales center in Bergen, on the west coast.

Others worked at Rieber's Arctic offices.

"Now there are 10 people left," said Eirik Olafsson, manager of the seal division.

The company still exports about 85 percent of its reduced production, but a big problem is foreigners' aversion to seal furs and meat.

Photographs of fluffy, white seal pups being slaughtered with spiked staves horrified animal lovers. Norway has since banned the staves and the hunt for pups, and sends government inspectors to keep an eye on the hunters.

The seal-hunting ship Polarfangst set sail Monday for the annual hunt, which starts March 23 and can last into May. It later will be joined by a second boat, and a third will sail east to the Barents Sea for its share of the kill.

The quota for this year's state-subsidized hunt is 19,600 adult hooded and harp seals, the same as in 1992. Norwegians hunted more than 100,000 seals a year in the 1950s and '60s, but the size of the hunt declined in the 1970s.

Olafsson said Norwegians understand the need for the

hunt, since hordes of seals, possibly driven by hunger, have sometimes invaded their coast. But outside the country, opposition remains strong.

"Every spring, when the hunts start, the protests start too," he said.

Rieber and Co., along with six cottage industries in the economically depressed Arctic, hope to break into new markets with seal fashions, and are promoting seal meat as a healthy, low-fat delicacy.

Much of the demand, especially for seal meat, has been in Arctic Norway.

"In northern Norway, people are familiar with eating seals and whales," said Per Clausen, who employs three people in his Arctic Kitchen restaurant.

Clausen offers smoked and salted seal meat, seal pate, marinated seal and seal-meat lasagna.

"If I were to give you seal without telling you what it was, I don't think you could tell," he said. The meat is dark, very tender, and is like "something between liver and beef," he said.