



Food



Whale meat (to the left) in a Norwegian supermarket © Paul Thompson

In the northern coastal regions, marine mammals have been an important food source for millennia, because of their year-round abundance and accessibility compared to seasonally restricted land **resources** and many fish. The consumption of marine mammals still represents a significant aspect of

food security and cultural well-being in many coastal regions. While there are health benefits to eating marine mammal meat (rich in vitamins, minerals, unsaturated fatty acids, antioxidants), there are also health risks because of the level of some **pollutants** in the meat.

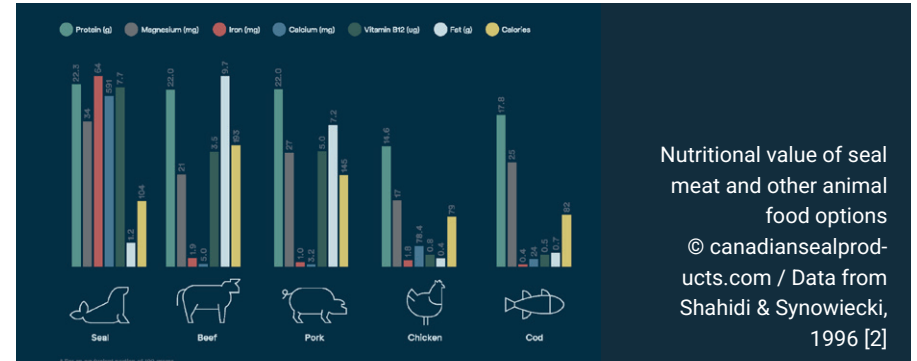


Did you know that...

- The **nutritional value** of marine mammal meat is comparable to other top seafood products, and better than meat from livestock animals.
- Whale liver oil was a major source of vitamin D through the 1960s.
- Food is not only important for nutrition, but also plays an important role in culture.
- Marine mammal meat is the main food source for some people, while for others it is an addition to their diet, or just a delicacy.
- The nutritional and cultural importance of traditional and local foods is acknowledged by many international fora.
- For some regions, where most of the other food must be imported, marine mammal meat is the most **sustainable** option [1].



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Nutritional value of seal meat and other animal food options
© canadiansealproducts.com / Data from Shahidi & Synowiecki, 1996 [2]

Narwhal skin, known as **mattak** in Greenland, contains around 38 mg of vitamin C per 100 g [3]. In comparison, an orange usually contains around 50 mg of vitamin C per 100 g, but oranges do not naturally happen in the Arctic. Seal meat is much more nutritious than other meat food sources. The consumption of marine mammals has protected the Inuit from diseases like scurvy, a condition caused by vitamin C deficiency that was common in historical Western Arctic expeditions, as well as life-style diseases like cardio-vascular diseases, obesity or diabetes.

Marine mammal species are long-lived **top-predators**, many at the top of the **food chain**. The food they eat can have high levels of **toxins**, as these build up through **bioaccumulation** and **biomagnification**. These **contaminants** can be dangerous for the people who eat the meat, and the Faroese and Greenlandic governments have given advice on the maximum amount of marine mammal meat that should be consumed.



Humpback whale blubber
© Fernando Ugarte



Discuss: Locally hunted marine mammals can represent the most **sustainable** food option in some areas, but is generally not considered ethical by western societies. What do you think is the most correct in terms of wildlife **conservation**: eating **sustainably** or eating "western-correct"?

Read more about marine mammals as food on the NAMMCO website:

