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## Governor-General's hearty seal meal 'proper etiquette'

Matthew Coutts, National Post

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A beater harp seal rests on the ice floes during the annual seal hunt in Gulf of St. Lawrence March 25, 2009.

- S. Cook/IFAW/Reuters

The thought of Canada's regal representative wrist-deep in the carcass of a freshly slaughtered seal, skinning a layer of blubber and slicing off a piece of heart to consume may evoke the same charges of savagery as the contentious seal hunt itself, but Governor-General Michaëlle Jean was actually following dining etiquette to the letter.

"She went there to show solidarity, and if that is part of the custom, then it is part of the whole thing. You either do it 100% or you don't do it," said professional etiquette consultant Diane Craig. "It was the proper etiquette."

Ms. Jean joined a community feast in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, on Monday, the first day of a week-long Arctic tour. Using a traditional carving knife to gut and feed from a seal, she kneeled next to a community elder and asked questions about the meal they were about to share.

Ms. Jean reportedly told her daughter, Marie-Eden, the seal tasted like sushi.

A spokeswoman travelling with the Governor-General said Ms. Jean was "warmly received" when she joined the celebration, alongside over one hundred Inuit.

"This celebration involved the serving of raw meat, as is the tradition during community feasts in the North. [Monday] night, raw caribou, arctic char, seal were among the meats served as part of the festivities along with soup and the traditional bread bannock. Everyone was invited to try the different meats including the Governor General," Marthe Blouin wrote in a statement.

Imagery of the Governor-General wearing a black track suit and kneeling over a seal carcass caused a stir Tuesday. The gesture of solidarity with the country's beleaguered seal hunters was viewed by many to be an unwelcome break from tradition and an affront to animal rights.

Opinions posted online on Ms. Jean's participation varied from describing it as "hardcore" and "leadership by example" to "embarrassing" and "shameful."

Gawker, an American media blog, wrote a column comparing Ms. Jean to Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin, notorious for hunting wolves from a helicopter, declaring the Queen's representative in Canada "clearly the more badass of the two."

Earlier this month, the European Union voted to impose a ban on seal products to protest commercial hunting methods used in Canada's seal hunt. The ban is to take effect in 2010.

The Canadian government supports the hunt as crucial for some 6,000 North Atlantic fishermen. While northern Aboriginals are exempt from the ban, they fear the stigma will put an end to their way of life.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals described the incident as a revolting, predictable publicity stunt to save "a dying industry." Bruce Friedrich, PETA's vice-president for policy, said the Governor-General was giving Canada even more of a "neanderthal image than it already had."

"The seal hunt is Canada's shame, and in 10 years, Canadians will be horrified, saddened, and ashamed that their government defended it for so long. The Governor-General will come to understand her disgusting stunt as the most immoral and stupid thing she has ever done in public life," Mr. Friedrich said.

Ms. Craig, president of Corporate Class Inc., a Toronto image consulting firm, says politics aside, Ms. Jean was absolutely correct to join her hosts in the centuries-old tradition.

"She was a guest ... and you are supposed to eat what the host offers up. In a situation like this, because of the symbolism, it was the right etiquette to do that," she said. "I'm sure she didn't have two plates of it."

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