



# Harbour (common) seal *Phoca vitulina*

## Species Action Plan

### 2009-2013



<b>Plan Lead Organisation</b>	INCA
<b>Plan Coordinator</b>	Robert Woods
<b>Action Group</b>	Wetland and coastal
<b>Associated Plans</b>	
<b>Latest version</b>	March 2009



### Description

The harbour or common seal is one of the widest ranging seal species, being found along the temperate and Arctic coastlines of the Northern Hemisphere. UK coastal waters support around 27,650 harbour seals, which is 33% of the European total. Of these, Scotland holds approximately 85% of the UK population, with 11% in England and 4% in Northern Ireland. The males of the subspecies which is found in UK waters can be up to 1.9m long and weigh up to 170kg, while the females are around 1.5m long and weigh up to 100kg. Harbour seals have a smaller, more rounded head than the grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*), with smaller nostrils which are further apart and more horizontal.



Both the harbour and grey seal can be seen at Teesmouth, but the former is the only species to breed there. Harbour seals give birth at Seal Sands between late June and early July. The pups are taken into the water only hours after birth and remain with their mother constantly. The mother/pup relationship is critical as a pup will need to feed for at least 10 minutes in every hour to reach a weight at which they can wean successfully. There is a four week lactation period during which the pups more than double their birth weight, so that by mid August the pups are weaned and become independent of their mother.



Seals haul-out to rest and for the purpose of thermo-regulation. At Seal Sands they use the period around low tide to haul-out on to the exposed sand banks. Their diet consists of pelagic fish species such as herring, cod and whiting and ammodytids such as sand eel species. They will also eat various molluscs and crustaceans.



### Current factors causing loss and decline

The UK population has declined in size by 40% or more since the early part of this decade. The reasons for this decline are not entirely understood, but are probably attributed to a combination of factors:



- ◆ Food sources are in decline.
- ◆ The grey seal population is increasing, moving into harbour sea territory and may be having a competitive advantage over the harbour seal.
- ◆ Harbour seal appears to be particularly susceptible to a devastating *Phocine* Distemper Virus, which has affected the UK population in 1988 and 2002.

## Conservation Status

The 'Conservation of Seals Act 1970' gives only a very limited degree of protection for the Harbour Seal.

## The Species in the Tees Valley

Seals have probably lived around the mouth of the River Tees for many hundreds of years but had declined rapidly by the mid 1800s as a result of habitat loss and pollution. By the 1930s they had totally disappeared from the estuary. Improvements in environmental quality gradually led to the re-appearance of seals in the estuary and by the mid 1980s there was again a resident population of seals. Teesmouth is the only known estuary in Europe where seals have re-colonised as a direct result of environmental improvements.

Currently the breeding population of Harbour Seals at Teesmouth is around 70 individuals, which is around 2% of the English population. The colony is producing pups close to the normal rate of 20-25% of the population, which is indicative of a healthy colony. There are limited opportunities for habitat creation in the estuary, so conservation of the seal population rests around ensuring that the current area remains viable as a location for them to breed.

## Current Activity in the Tees Valley

The Tees Seals Research Programme has been monitored by INCA since 1989. Each year INCA coordinates a team of volunteers to monitor the seal population on Seal Sands between early June and late August which includes the period in late June and early July when the Harbour Seals give birth and in August when they gather to moult.

At each daylight low tide period (2 hours either side of low tide), monitoring is undertaken from the observation hide on the sea wall above Greenabella Marsh, which is approximately 250m from the most regularly used haul-out site.

Monitoring records the following observations:

- ◆ Total population of each species.
- ◆ Variation in the number of seals which haul out on each low tide.
- ◆ Areas used as haul out sites and the changes in site usage.
- ◆ Number and health of pups.
- ◆ Disturbance to the colony and other potential problems, such as injuries and indications of pup desertion.
- ◆ Inter-and intra-species behavioural interaction. This includes feeding observations, porpoising activity,
- ◆ Play and aggression.

## Further Information

Sea Mammal Research Unit, St.Andrews University. [www.smru.st-andrews.ac.uk](http://www.smru.st-andrews.ac.uk)

Tees Seals Research Programme Monitoring Reports, Industry Nature Conservation Association [www.inca.uk.com](http://www.inca.uk.com)

## Vision Statement

To ensure continuing success of the harbour seal population at Seal Sands by monitoring their population dynamics, by educating industrial partners around the Tees estuary about the ecology of the seals and by helping to minimise disturbance to the population, particularly during the critical pupping season.

## Targets

HS.T1 To maintain population of harbour seal at Teesmouth at their current levels.

Goal To Maintain population of between 60-70 individuals.

## Actions

Code	Action	Organisational lead	Action contact	Partners	End date
HS.A1	Monitor known population of harbour seal.	INCA	Robert Woods	Corus Huntsman Pigments	Ongoing
HS.A2	Record instances of disturbance and deal with these through the appropriate authorities.	INCA	Robert Woods		Ongoing
HS.A3	Foster links with Seal Rehabilitation Facilities at Tynemouth and Scarborough.	INCA	Robert Woods	Scarborough Sea Life Centre Tynemouth Sea Life Centre	Ongoing
HS.A4	Liaise with Sea Mammal Research Unit at least twice per year to keep abreast of current research relating to the harbour seal and to link the Tees Research Programme in to the national project.	INCA	Robert Woods	Sea Mammal Research Unit, St. Andrews	Ongoing
HS.A5	Ensure that there is a mechanism in place to recover seal carcasses and to carry out post mortem to discover the cause of death.	INCA	Robert Woods	little turn warden Borough Councils Vets	Feb 2009
HS.A6	Carry out at least two seal education sessions per annum.	INCA	Robert Woods		Ongoing
HS.A7	Carry out public 'seal watches' which are carried out at Seal Sands.	Teesmouth Field Centre Natural England	Robert Woods	INCA	Ongoing
HS.A8	Engage local media to foster interest in the seal population at Teesmouth by carrying out at least two media interviews per year.	INCA	Robert Woods	Natural England	Ongoing