

A manifesto for seals



Key asks

- Effective sustainable fisheries management for all target stocks
- Make seal disturbance illegal (as it is with whales and dolphins)
- Enforce existing legislation
- Scientific research to fill important data gaps
- National marine life disturbance and human activity recording database
- Climate change mitigation
- Avoid seal habitat loss
- Enable seals species to shift with climate
- Enforce all Defra Environmental principles, particularly precautionary, polluter pays and prevention principles
- Expand post mortem and other screening for infections and pathogens UK wide
- Ban flying rings from sale in the UK
- A new statutory requirement for access to and engagement with nature within education

Elaboration of key asks

Proper sustainable **fisheries**

- Mandatory Remote Electronic Monitoring for all fisheries vessels as soon as possible
- Ban inshore gill netting to reduce bycatch and habitat degradation
- Modify fishing gear with escape hatches to reduce marine mammal bycatch, nets that biodegrade (when no dry cycle occurs) once lost
- No new purchase of gear without proper certification of responsible disposal of old gear
- Compulsory ecosystem training to gain a commercial fishing licence.

Ensure quantified, evidence based, balanced two-way, **scientific research** to investigate marine species and fisheries interactions and other data gaps.

Add all native and vagrant seal species to the **Wildlife and Countryside Act Schedule 5 (all Section 9 offences) as a matter of urgency** as recommended by the JNCC and the EFRA Committee Inquiry on Marine Mammals. This will be a popular and well supported action.

Fully enforce **existing legislation** in relation to seal offences and bycatch reporting.

National standardised marine life disturbance and human activity recording database led by a statutory agency to gather evidence to assess the scale and impact of this issue. Mandatory Automatic Identification System (AIS) use on all commercial eco tour vessels. Specific sensitive seal site, community generated management plans with identified best practice guidelines related to the geography of each site to enable human activity whilst minimising **disturbance** (this being the easiest pressure to mitigate!) Continued promotion and encouragement of compliance with [Defra Marine and Coastal Wildlife Code](#) with a view to making this mandatory.

Continued push on **climate change** mitigation from statutory level down to an individual household level

- Enforce emission reductions to meet government targets
- Fast track nature based blue carbon habitats by enhancing existing ones and planting new ones.

Avoid seal habitat loss

- Establish meaningful whole site approach management of all MPAs
- Prevent any development around sensitive seal haul out sites around the coast
- Proactive management of human activity around sensitive seal haul out sites (excellent examples by National Trust)
- Make all sensitive seal sites County Wildlife Sites
- Conduct a UK wide review of current SSSI notifications to include seal species as monitored features
- Designate all offshore islands as a SSSI
- Ban seabed mining and marine geoengineering projects without robust scientific baseline data, holistic monitoring, proven safety for marine ecosystems and clear future feasibility studies of substantial net gain and societal benefit
- Supporting the establishment of additional MPAs in various forms (for example UNESCO Biospheres, Important Marine Mammal Areas and County Wildlife Sites).

Enable seals species to shift with climate ([Taken from Investigating Climate Change Resilience of Vulnerable Marine Species around the UK by CEFAS and JNCC](#))

- Ensure existing human activities do not create barriers to movement
- MPAs to provide the types of habitat necessary to facilitate movement
- Manage MPAs using a site (rather than feature) based approach and make them 'no take zones'
- Identify further areas for protection from damaging activities
- Assess whether there are sufficient prey resources for seals in relevant areas and adapt fisheries management as appropriate

Enforce polluter pays principle to reduce a wide range of pollution issues and impacts. Fast track compulsory washing machine microplastic filters and the development of much more effective grey water and sewage treatment to remove all harmful chemical and physical **pollution**.

Continue and expand funding to enable marine strandings and ongoing monitoring of marine species health through post mortems to understand and identify existing and new emerging **infections and pathogens**.

Evidence underpinning key asks

Significant proportions of World and European seal species in the UK

We need to make sure that **grey seals** are a priority. Given that we have 34-38% of the world's population (and 95% of the European sub population) of grey seals here in the UK, they are our internationally important, native, heritage marine species.

We need to make sure that **harbour seals** are a priority as well. They have just started recolonising in Cornwall with the first two successfully weaned pups in 2021 and 2022, and five harbour seal pups rescued by BDMLR in 2023!

Climate change means vagrant species are increasingly likely to enter UK waters. As a result, it is vital that any non-native visiting seal species are given full protection within UK waters.

Multiple cumulative pressures faced by seals.

Climate change, food availability, habitat loss and pollution affect ALL seals

Whilst **bycatch/entanglement, disturbance, persecution and infections** affect a proportion of the seal population.

Human impacts on seals

Grey seals face a range of impacts from environmental and anthropogenic sources:

- Climate change - extreme weather events separating maternally dependent pups and increasing lost gear; reducing fecundity following year; rising sea levels flooding sea caves and haul outs; increasing rates of coastal erosion with rockfalls killing seals; heavy rain disturbance; toxic algal blooms (domoic acid); ocean acidification; <https://www.cornwallclimate.org/films/under-the-surface>;
- Food availability with fish stocks being depleted, changing and shifting;
- Habitat loss through increasing marine activity and coastal squeeze;
- Pollution in the form physical (macro and micro) and chemical outflows ranging from industrial, agricultural, transportational and household activities including emerging issues such as pharmaceutical runoff (e.g. painkillers and hormones).
- Bycatch and entanglement in operational and lost fishing gear;
- Disturbance by increasing coastal activity from land, sea and air;
- Persecution using variety of fatal and debilitating actions;
- Infections bacterial and viral, some of which are zoonotic.



Evidence from Seal Research Trust and partners

Mortality rates

Thanks to CWT Marine Strandings Network we know that in 2023 the **number of dead seals** recorded in Cornwall was the **highest ever total for the county at 301**, despite the fact that our census data from 2007 (shared with the University of Exeter for Helen Chadwick's published paper on seal strandings) shows numbers of seals appear stable around the SW (virtually the same number in 2022 compared to 2008!) Approximately half of these 301 dead seals were white coated and moulted pups.

Seals are experiencing massive **phenology shifts**

Peak haul out season 2004/2015 (Mar/Apr) to 2016 to 2023 (Dec/Jan) apart from 2011 (Feb)

Peak pupping season 2010/2016 Oct followed by Nov has shifted to Sep followed by Aug (2022/2023)

Bycatch and entanglement

SRT did a best, but very rough, estimate for the DEFRA lead, Brigid Finlayson, on Bycatch about the proportion of seals **bycaught and entangled** in Cornwall – estimated at 15% of all seals (13% dead bycatch and 2% live entanglement)

Disturbance

SRT's [People Protecting Precious Places Report](#) shows on average 1000+ seals are seriously disturbed every year (2003 to 2021) right around the Cornish Coast with 3 hot spots at West Penwith North, West Cornwall and Pentire. There is a statistically significant increase in disturbance in the summer. All coastal user groups caused disturbance. Trip boats, RIBs and Air-based causes resulted in the highest proportion of disturbance at all levels. Paddlesports and Swimmers most frequently caused the most serious disturbance incidents. Seals were disturbed between every 18 to 62 minutes. Seals were disturbed 68% of the time when people were present. People were present during 65% of the time.

More recent data suggests that the patterns of serious disturbance and deaths (from CWTMSN) mirror each other and may be associated. Similar rates of disturbance and number of seals seriously disturbed have continued since.

Persecution

SRT know historically from fishers that they used explosive and poisoned fish as well as shooting to kill seals. In 2023 there is a pending open case being investigated by the MMO about an alleged stabbing of a seal sleeping in the water by a fisher.

Infections

Cornwall Marine Pathology Team data from Post Mortem Examinations for 2023 had the primary condition found at death to be infection in 36% of seal PMEs.

Flying Rings

This is an emerging issue. Flying rings are already injuring and killing seals with up to 35 documented cases across the UK as well as a dolphin recorded in the US. These are non essential toys that are easily replaced with alternative flying solid disc toys.

Access to nature for children

A recent survey of 3000 children, conducted by Save the Children, showed that 70% of children are worried about the world they will inherit, with 75% calling on the Government to take stronger action on their behalf. 60% felt that climate change and inequality are affecting their generation's mental health in the UK, and more than half (56%) believe it is also causing a deterioration in child mental health globally.