



Conservation and Management of Seals

Policy on Conservation and Management of Seals

Policy of the Scottish Wildlife Trust (**The Trust**) on the conservation and management of seals. The policy refers to both grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) and harbour or common seals (*Phoca vitulina*).

Policy Statement

1. The Trust believes that the United Kingdom, and particularly Scotland, has a special responsibility for the conservation of seal, especially grey seals.
2. The Trust believes that there is currently no ecological justification for the culling of seals. We will work with other organisations to keep the situation under review.
3. The Trust believes that there is currently no justification for the culling of seals to protect fish stocks.
4. The Trust accepts that there may be justification, although only in exceptional circumstances, for shooting individual, properly identified 'rogue' seals causing economic damage at nets, or fish farms, or within salmonid river systems.
5. The Trust will only accept the shooting of rogue seals by experienced marksmen with a current firearms licence.
6. The Trust believes that all shooting of seals, whether under licence or not, should be reported to the Scottish Executive which should collect and publish annual statistics on this.
7. The Trust will encourage development of non-destructive methods of protecting fish stocks from predators.
8. The Trust will encourage green tourism that makes use of seals as an important constituent of our marine heritage.

Context

Seals form an important component of Scotland's wildlife and the populations of grey and harbour seals in Scottish waters in 1999 are estimated at 113,000 and 45,000 respectively (ref 1.). Approximately 40% of the world's grey seal population breeds round the Scottish coast, giving Scotland a major responsibility for the conservation of this species. On a world basis, the grey seal remains a rare species and it is protected under Annex II of the EC Habitats and Species Directive. The Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU), a world leader in studies on seal biology, now based at St Andrews, monitors grey seal numbers annually and harbour seals every 5 years for the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) Special Committee on Seals. Following the *Conservation of Seals Act 1970*, a significant increase in the overall population of grey seals has been observed, based on aerial monitoring of numbers of pups born. However, the increase in numbers at the main breeding sites is not uniform with, for example, those on the Monach Isles changing little over recent years.

Protecting Scotland's wildlife for the future

Headquarters: Cramond House, Cramond Glebe Road, Edinburgh EH4 6NS
•Tel: 0131 312 7765 •Fax: 0131 312 8705 •Email: enquiries@swt.org.uk

Registered at Edinburgh under No 40247 Charity Registration No SC005792

[www.swt.org.uk]



The Scottish Wildlife Trust has been involved in seal protection for 20 years and is in regular contact with SMRU on issues concerning seals. The Trust represented The Wildlife Trusts on the Wildlife Link Seals Group and was a contributing body to the Government's decision to call off the proposed six year Management Plan in 1979, after the first year of the cull. The Trust also established a Save Our Seals campaign in response to the outbreak of the phocine distemper virus in 1988. Currently The Trust owns or manages by agreement a number of wildlife reserves on which seals breed; these include Linga Holm in the Orkneys, which is the third largest island-based grey seal colony in Scotland, and Shillay in the Sound of Harris.

Both grey and harbour seals are protected by close seasons that run from 1 September to 31 December for the former, and from 1 June to 31 August for the latter. However, the *Conservation of Seals Act 1970* allows for the killing of any seal to prevent it from causing damage to a fishing net or fishing tackle; such killing does not require a licence, nor is it bound by the close season. The Act also specifies that the Secretary of State can grant a licence to kill a specified number of seals for the prevention of damage to fisheries. There is no statutory requirement that the number of animals killed should be reported. The Trust believes this position to be unsatisfactory and that all killing should be licenced, with the numbers of animals killed reported to the Scottish Executive which should publish annual statistics on the matter.

The Trust accepts that occasionally there may be economic justifications for killing a rogue seal. It is essential that such a need is properly identified, and that the shooting is carried out, only as a last resort, by a suitably trained and experienced marksman. The Trust believes that all such killings should be reported to the Scottish Executive which should ensure that all correct procedures are carried out.

The steadily increasing population of grey seals and the depleted state of many fish stocks have resulted in repeated calls from the salmon and white fish industries for a seal cull. Although fish form most of the diet of seals there is no evidence that fish stock depletion in the North Sea can be attributed to the increase in seal population. Studies in the North Sea, reported in the Scottish Wildlife and Countryside Link (SWCL) Audit of Marine Environment (1997, ref 2.), estimate that the fishing industry removes 25 times as much fish as seals, while predation by other fish accounts for more than 30 times that from seals. The Trust believes that the evidence currently available does not justify calls for a cull of seals. Instead, The Trust believes that major changes to the current fisheries policy are needed, rather than seal culling, to reverse the drastic depletion of fish stocks in Scottish waters that is causing general concern; the aim must be to make sustainability a reality.

Calls from salmon and sea trout fishermen for a general cull of seals also appear to be unfounded. Research at SMRU using radio tagging indicates that seals appear to be bottom feeders and analysis of faecal remains shows that salmonids make up only a small proportion of the seal diet, although seals entering river systems are likely to be feeding on salmonids. The Trust believes that urgent research is needed to clarify whether such predation as does occur constitutes a significant loss of the wild salmon and sea trout populations compared with that from other sources.

Principles

The Trust is committed to conservation of the whole marine environment and will therefore continue to examine seal population dynamics on its reserves, in collaboration with SMRU. It will use such data to inform regular revisions of this policy.

The Trust believes that seals can play an important role in green tourism, attracting people to visit and develop a greater appreciation and understanding of the marine environment. A recent report (1998, ref 3.) indicated that there are at least 117 seal watching establishments in the UK and Ireland. In 1996 the number of visitors watching seals was estimated to be around 0.5 million and the total gross revenue of the industry was estimated at more than £36 million per annum. Employment was extrapolated to be 193 fulltime, 322 part-time/seasonal and 152 voluntary posts. In Scotland 79 operators indicated that seal watching was part of the wildlife package they offered to visitors. The Trust will support sound management that encourages controlled visits to areas rich in both grey and harbour seals.

Over the last 15 years or so there has been extensive development of Acoustic Deterrent Devices (ADD) to protect fish farms against predation by seals (1997, ref 4.). Such devices work by causing approaching marine mammals to experience pain or discomfort and to move away. It is recognised that the high energy noise output from the new generation of ADDs can cause significant pain or discomfort to marine mammals other than seals, notably harbour porpoises and other cetaceans. However, in many locations disturbance to other marine mammals is unlikely and use of ADDs may be effective in avoiding the need to kill predating seals. The Trust supports calls for the Scottish Executive to undertake a full environmental impact assessment of the use of such devices by the fish farming industry.

Recently there have been calls from the Fishing Industry for the creation of a Seal Commission. The Trust supports the Scottish Executive's stance that such a Commission is not necessary. However, The Trust would not oppose setting up an independent forum for discussing the issues and would wish to be involved.

This policy statement should be read in conjunction with The Trust's Fact Sheet on Seals, published 31 January 2001.

References

9. NERC Special Committee on Seals (2000). Scientific Advice on Matters relating to the Management of Seal Populations
10. Dr Susan Gubbay (1997). Scottish Environmental Audits No 1: The Marine Environment. A report for Scottish Wildlife and Countryside Link
11. K Young (1998). Seal Watching in the UK and Republic of Ireland. Report by the International Fund for Animal Welfare
12. Alison Ross (1997). Leaping in the Dark. A report for Scottish Wildlife and Countryside Link

Approved by Council on 21 March 2001

Agreed by Conservation Strategy Committee on 31 January 2001