



NOAA FISHERIES

Protected Resources Division

Share the Shore with Harbor Seal Pups

Frequently Asked Questions

There is a seal pup on the beach, what should I do?

Keep your distance. The Northwest Marine Mammal Stranding Network encourages you to "Share the Shore" with harbor seal pups. Pups are born in Puget Sound late June through September and use log booms, docks, and shoreline habitat on a daily basis to rest and regulate their body temperature. Please stay back 100 yards if possible, keep your dogs on a leash, and if you are concerned call our hotline at [1-800-853-1964](tel:1-800-853-1964). The best thing you can do is to leave the animal alone. You can also find the contact information for your local stranding network coordinator on our website at: http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/protected_species/marine_mammals/stranding_maps_and_contacts.html

Can I feed, touch, or pick up a harbor seal pup?

No, harbor seals (and all marine mammals) are protected by law under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Federal marine mammal regulations prohibit harassing or capturing seals on shore to reduce human disturbance of important life processes. Feeding seals in the wild is also prohibited and is considered harassment. What is harassment? It is when we disturb, injure, or interfere with its ability to hunt, feed, communicate, socialize, rest, breed, or care for its young. If you feed, touch, harass, pour water on or pick up a seal you may be investigated by NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement for violating the marine mammal regulations.

I can closely approach a harbor seal pup on the beach. Is it sick?

No, many harbor seal pups are too young to have developed protective wariness (escape response) and may not flee when approached while resting and warming up on shore. Some pups haulout in public areas and are not sensitive to human presence. Please Share the Shore and give the animal space. Adult seals are more wary and will escape to the water if approached. If the pup is still being attended by a female seal it is important to reduce human disturbance at the site so she can return to care for her pup. Remember, if you approach the pup, the mother will likely be able to see you, and may not return.

The pup is injured, what should I do?

Seals are wild animals and occasional minor injuries can be expected. If you think the pup is seriously injured call our hotline at [1-800-853-1964](tel:1-800-853-1964) or use our GIS maps to find the stranding coordinator in your area; http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/protected_species/marine_mammals/stranding_maps_and_contacts.html

Sometimes what you may think is an injury may be normal. For example, harbor seal pups are born with an umbilical cord that will fall off between 7-10 days. The first 0-4 days the umbilical cord is pink and fleshy, and has been mistaken for "intestines" or a cut. Harbor seal pups do get small wounds and cuts; this is normal and does not usually present a serious health concern. Pups also lie on their sides and commonly hold a foreflipper into the air. They are also very awkward on land since they cannot rotate their hindlimbs forward (like a sea lion can), so they move with a wriggling "caterpillar" like motion.

I'm concerned a harbor seal pup has been abandoned, what should I do?

A minimum undisturbed observation period of 24 to 48 hours is recommended to determine whether the pup is being attended by a female. Signs of an attendant female would include; sightings of seal(s) in the water nearby; tracks near the pup; movement of the pup up or down the beach, or in and out of the water. Harbor seal pups may haulout in the same place for several days or weeks at a time; this does not mean they are abandoned. An attendant female may be nursing her pup at night if there is human disturbance around the pup during the day.

How long do harbor seal pups nurse?

Nursing pups remain with their mothers for 4 to 6 weeks and are then weaned to forage and survive on their own. Pups are precocious at birth, capable of swimming and following their mothers into the water immediately after birth. Pups will call for their mothers until weaned with a sheep-like “m-a-a-a”; and will sometimes try and suckle on driftwood, boats, and other items when hauled out or swimming until they learn to catch fish on their own. Pups that are being weaned must learn to survive and forage for food. Weaned pups will spend extended hours on shore resting and regulating their body temperature. **Please respect nature’s role.** Up to 50% of the pups born will not survive their first year of life. Contributing factors to pup mortality within this first year are; conditions associated with fetal development or premature birth; disease; predation by shoreline predators or domestic dogs, infection; dehydration; or starvation. Please give all seals space on shore; it is vital to reduce human disturbance and give seals the best chance to thrive in the wild.

Is the harbor seal population healthy?

Yes, under the Marine Mammal Protection Act harbor seal populations have recovered to healthy numbers. The harbor seal population is at carrying capacity (maximum population size of the species that the environment can sustain indefinitely). The Washington Inland water stock of harbor seals is estimated to be 14,000 individuals and the Oregon/Washington Outer coast stock is estimated to be 25,000 individuals (Jeffries et al 2003). There are 3,000-5,000 harbor seal pups born in Washington inland waters each year.

What is the rehabilitation policy for harbor seal pups?

In the Pacific Northwest there are two NMFS authorized rehabilitation facilities that are available to provide clinical care to a limited number of sick or injured marine mammals. The decision to place an animal in a rehabilitation facility is made on a case by case basis by authorized Federal, state, or local officials, or by local Stranding Agreement holders who have been authorized by NOAA Fisheries to conduct live animal first response and triage. Our overall goal is to provide an appropriate response to ensure that animals have the best chance to survive on their own in the wild, which usually means leaving a pup on the beach. The harbor seal population is healthy, so we do not intervene in cases of natural mortality. Intervention to capture individual seals observed at harbor seal rookeries (where pups are born) is avoided to minimize the impacts and disturbance of other animals at the site including nursing females with pups. In some cases, pups with serious injuries or who have had negative interactions with dogs or humans are considered as candidates to be taken in for treatment. Rehabilitation can only be done by trained experts at an authorized facility; these facilities cannot accept illegally captured marine mammals delivered to them for treatment by unauthorized individuals. Rehabilitation of harbor seals is difficult and many will not survive; rehabilitation does not guarantee the long-term survival of the animal post-release.

I want to learn more about harbor seals, what resources are available?

For more information about harbor seals in the Pacific Northwest please visit our website at:

http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/protected_species/marine_mammals/pinnipeds/harbor_seals.html

To view the SealCam, harbor seal videos and follow a seal research blog visit ;

<http://wdfw.wa.gov/wildwatch/sealcam/>

You can also follow the Blubberblog and view a Share the Shore with Harbor Seals video at:

<http://www.blubberblog.org/>

There are also several published papers by Northwest Marine Mammal Stranding Network members on contaminant trends and rehabilitation studies that can be found at:

<http://www.cascadiaresearch.org/reports/Ross%20et%20al%202013%20Salish%20Sea%20seal%20FR%20trends.pdf> and <http://wdfw.wa.gov/publications/01439/>

References: Jeffries SJ, Huber HR, Calambokidis J, Laake J (2003) Trends and status of harbor seals in Washington State: 1978-1999. Journal of Wildlife Management 67:208-219