

The state of seals on the East Coast

Beth Thompson, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

East Marine Ecosystems

Reporting Annual Change in the
East Region & Building Social Capital



Seals in the UK



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Grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)



© Terry Whittaker/2020VISION

Harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina vitulina*)

| Species | UK Population | General trend | Percentage change (2023) | Global context | European context |
|--------------|----------------------|---------------|--------------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Grey seal | 162,000 (2022) | Increasing | +1.6% | 35% | 82% |
| Harbour seal | 42,900 (2016 - 2021) | Decreasing | -1% | 5% | 32% |



Viewing grey seals at distance in Yorkshire

© Bex Lynam / Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

- Weather, the tide, and season all need to **line up** for whole population counts.
- **Logistical** challenges and **financial** costs.
- Monitoring will continue to change with developing **technology**.
- Studying local abundance is **vital**.
- **Correction factors** are applied to national data to account for individuals who are missed as part of annual surveys.

The picture in the EASTME region: A 'normal' year 23/4

| Site | General trend (regional) | Rookery? | Pups | Observed pup mortality |
|----------------------|--------------------------|----------|---------|------------------------|
| Grey seals | | | | |
| Blakeney Point | Increasing | Y | ~5,000 | ~5% |
| Donna Nook | | Y | 2,207 | 6.8% |
| Flamborough Head | | Y | 6 | 33% |
| Gibraltar Point | | Y | Small # | No data. |
| Horsey | | Y | 3,632 | |
| Orford Ness | | Y | 130 | |
| Scroby Sands | | N | NA | NA |
| The Wash | | Y | | |
| Harbour seals | | | | |
| Blakeney Point | Decreasing | Y | Small # | NA |
| Donna Nook | | Y | Small # | |
| Gibraltar Point | | Y | Small # | |
| Horsey | | | | |
| Orford Ness | | | | |
| Scroby Sands | | N | NA | |
| The Wash | | Y | 1,417 | |



Threats to seals on the East coast: Natural

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© Justin Hart / Alderney Wildlife Trust

Threats to seals on the East coast: Anthropogenic



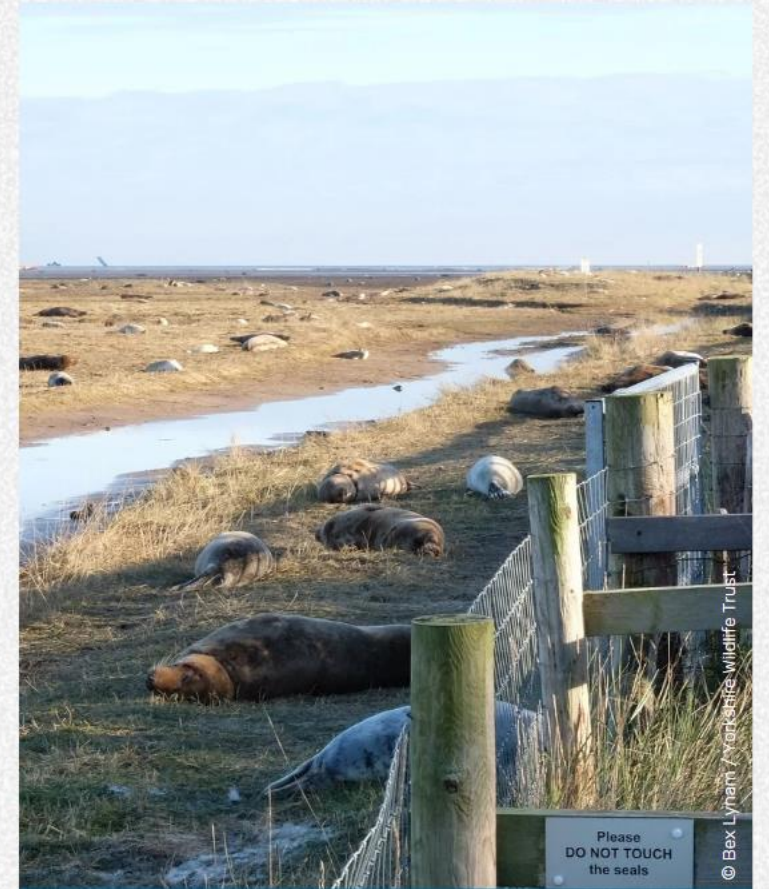
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Climate change



© Tom Marshall

Entanglement



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Disturbance



© BDMLR

Rescued pup "Buzzard"



© BDMLR

Rescued pup "Nuthatch"

Knowledge gaps



© Amy Lewis

Offshore wind development



© Ben Thompson / Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

© Terry Whittaker / 2020VISION

Interspecific interactions



© Chris Gomersall / 2020VISION

Cannibalism



© Ben Thompson / Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

Disease



Offshore wind development

- East coast has a relatively large number of offshore wind farms.
- Harbour seals **actively avoid** sites during construction. Range = 25km.
- Harbour seals have less flexibility in their haul out sites and foraging range, so are **more likely to be negatively impacted.**
- Fish availability will likely be impacted by turbines. Impact on foraging **yet to be determined.**

Knowledge gaps: Interspecific competition

- Overlap in **preferred prey species** - predominantly sandeel and large gadids.
- Sandeel fishery recently closed to vessels in the North Sea!
- Grey seals are more **flexible** in both their haul out sites and foraging ranges.
- Grey seal presence could be **reducing the carrying capacity** for harbour seals in the region.





Cannibalism

- Up to 50 dead **harbour seals** discovered at Blakeney Point in the early 2010's.
- Attributed to **male grey seals**.
- Cannibalism is **unlikely to be a widespread behaviour** - simply a handful of individuals.
- Extent is unknown, but **unlikely to be a major factor** in the decline of the national harbour seal population.

- Phocine distemper virus (PDV) caused a **52% decrease** in the harbour seal population locally in 1988; and then a further **22% reduction** in 2002.
- Avian flu has been detected in sea lions, elephant seals and fur seals in the Southern Hemisphere. Thought to be the cause of **mass die off events**.
- Baseline data for **seal strandings** important as an early warning signal.
- Strategy development **key**.



Looking forward...

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Thank you for listening!



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Seal pup at Donna Nook

A big **thank you** to those who attended, and contributed during the Marine Mammal (Seal) Community of Practice. As well as those who have provided data, images, thoughts and advice in the months since:

- British Divers Marine Life Rescue.
- Friends of Horsey Seals.
- Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust.
- National Trust.
- Natural England.
- Seal Research Trust.
- Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU).
- The Seal Alliance.
- Yorkshire Seal Group.
- Yorkshire Wildlife Trust.

Huge thanks also to the wonderful **volunteers** who give their time and energy to monitor seals, and engage with the public, on the east coast. We couldn't do what we do without you!

Ban the sale of plastic ring frisbees!



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