

SEALS

If you find a seal which is alive and in need of help, please call the British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) hotline on 01825 765546 and tell people to keep dogs away and not chase the seal back into the water.

Text from Facebook link:

"We're really pleased to be able to announce that the CSIP has been given further funding by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to extend our remit for seal mortality investigation in England and Wales. Running from 2023-31 alongside our core CSIP contract, this will allow us to learn more about wider threats to UK seals. We're appealing for help from the public and others with this now though- if you spot a dead seal in England and Wales, please report it to us by calling our strandings line on 0800 652 0333, so we can gain a better understanding of causes of mortality.

Seal necropsies have been conducted for many years in Scotland through the Scottish Marine Animal Strandings Scheme (SMASS). But apart from excellent work carried out by James Barnett and his Cornwall Marine Pathology Team in Cornwall and during a limited period over 2015/16 for Natural England, very few have been carried out in England and Wales since the last phocine distemper virus (PDV) outbreak 20 years ago. Very good seal mortality/stranding reporting networks already exist in Scotland, Cornwall and Wales- but few reports are received in the rest of England (see map from 2020 below). So as a first step, we need to increase and better coordinate reporting effort, mainly across much of the rest of England.

The picture for our UK seal populations is mixed, with the last set of Sea Mammal Research Unit SCOS reports indicating declines of harbour seals in some parts of England and Scotland- the potential drivers for these declines also need to be investigated further.

<http://www.smru.st-andrews.ac.uk/files/2022/08/SCOS-2021.pdf>

Many threats are faced by seals in UK waters- we need to learn more about the scale and extent of bycatch and also entanglement in discarded fishing gear and other forms of marine debris. Some horrendous cases have been studied by James Barnett and the fantastic volunteers of Cornwall Marine Pathology Team and the CWTMSN, who have voluntarily been investigating seal mortality for many years (e.g.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0021997522001128>). Where else is this an issue across the country and what can be done to try to mitigate their impacts?

The CSIP team have also previously investigated a small number of seals that have been shot, as with some of the photos below which show a pregnant seal shot in Essex in 2019 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-48880166>). We want to hear more about any potentially similar cases, in case it helps support the work of the National Wildlife Crime Unit and others.

We're also concerned about potential disease threats to UK seals- twenty years after the last PDV epizootic in UK and Europe, will there be others and what impact may they have if so? Recent reports of detection of avian flu in seals in Cornwall and Scotland are also a cause for concern (e.g.

<https://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk/news/avian-flu-discovered-carcasses-five-seals-cornwall>).

Monitoring and investigating seal mortality can help give early insights into disease threats to our seal populations.

In recent years we've also learnt more about the phenomenon of grey seal predation/interaction with various marine mammal species (example cases below). Help us and our friends at the Sea Mammal Research Unit and please do report any cases like these or where you may directly witness any interactions.

<http://www.smru.st-andrews.ac.uk/sealpred/>

As always, this work will be a massive collaboration with a group of excellent folk. Thanks to our friends at the Sea Mammal Research Unit Animal and Plant Health Agency Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals - RSPCA British Divers Marine Life Rescue for working with and supporting us. Thanks to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Manx Wildlife Trust Government of Jersey, The States of Guernsey and others for continuing to share your valuable data on strandings with us. Looking forward to working more with our friends at University of Liverpool and BDMLR to further the creation of a regional northwest strandings investigation centre for the programme. And very much looking forward to continued collaboration with Per Berggren and his excellent team at Newcastle University and other partners in BDMLR and elsewhere, to strengthen the links between ourselves and the northeast strandings community. Thanks as well to our partners in SMASS, their advice and experience will help!

Special thanks to our CSIP partners Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Strandings Network Natural History Museum, London Marine Environmental Monitoring and Cornwall Marine Pathology Team. Huge thanks to James Barnett/CMPT for doing so many seal necropsies in Cornwall over recent years on a voluntary basis! And many thanks to the wonderful Sue Sayer and team at Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust for all their advice and support too!

Finally, thanks to the public, local authorities, agencies and everyone who report strandings to us. Your help is vital and much appreciated. Please do call any future stranding reports through to us on 0800 652 0333, together we will learn more. See you on the beaches soon..."