



## Benefits of seal watching for UK coastal tourism

August 2021

The UK is home to two seal species, the grey seal and harbour seal. Despite precipitous falls in numbers to around 500 in the early 20th century, it is now estimated that there are in excess of 120,000 grey seals in Britain, representing 40% of the world's population.<sup>1</sup> The UK is also home to at least 33,400 harbour seals.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite a recovery by these charismatic marine mammals, they still face numerous threats including climate change, disturbances, marine litter, entanglement in fishing gear, and pollution, and their conservation can too often take a back seat to other priorities.

This briefing will show that there is a strong economic case for seal protection around the UK's coast. With many thousands of jobs in coastal communities dependent on tourism, the protection of seals is essential to growing the appeal of sustainable coastal wildlife tourism.

With the UK now an Independent Coastal State and the Fisheries Act marking a new era of marine management, there are real opportunities to deliver a new approach. Indeed, the next two years will be critical in determining both the future direction of marine policy and the future prosperity of coastal communities.

### A popular appetite for nature tourism around our coasts

In a normal year, coastal tourism in Great Britain is estimated to generate £17.1bn in spending, supporting 285,000 tourism related jobs.<sup>3</sup> These jobs are a vital source of employment in many coastal towns, which often suffer from high levels of deprivation and unemployment. For many of the 27m overnight visitors and 217m day visitors to the coast each year,<sup>4</sup> a key attraction is the opportunity to connect with the marine environment. Indeed, a 2016 Government report on coastal communities noted that 79 million people take a trip to the countryside or

<b>National Trust survey on Coastal Tourism</b>	
<i>Which, if any, of the following describe why you value visiting/being by the UK's coast or seaside?</i>	
	Total
For getting close to nature and wildlife	39%
YouGov / National Trust Fieldwork - 3rd - 7th July Sample size – 5047 <a href="https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/documents/yougov-and-national-trust-fieldwork-seaside-3-7-july-2015.pdf">https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/documents/yougov-and-national-trust-fieldwork-seaside-3-7-july-2015.pdf</a>	

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-explorer/marine/marine-mammals-and-sea-turtles/grey-seal>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hsi.org/news-media/scotland-bans-seal-killing/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://coastaltourismacademy.co.uk/coastal-tourism>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid



coasts to watch wildlife every year, demonstrating the widespread appeal of these trips in the UK.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of wildlife tourism is supported by survey evidence. Polling undertaken by YouGov for the National Trust, see box on previous page, asked people why they valued visiting the UK's coast. They found that 39% of respondents highlighted 'getting close to nature and wildlife'. Another survey undertaken by Visit Britain (a public body funded by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport) found that 71% of respondents listed watching wildlife as either the sole, a very or a fairly important reason for taking a recent trip. For 9% of people, watching wildlife was stated as the sole reason for undertaking their most recent UK holiday or short break.

<b>Visit Britain survey on Tourism Activities</b>					
<i>Thinking about the most recent UK holidays or short breaks when you took part in these activities, how important was being able to undertake these activities in your decision to take the holiday or short break...?</i>					
	Sole reason	Very important reason	Fairly important reason	Only a small reason	Of no importance at all
Watching wildlife/bird watching	9%	33%	29%	20%	8%
2,427 online interviews undertaken on TNS online omnibus between w/b 9th and 16th February 2015 – <a href="#">Visit Britain Valuing Activities Report 2015</a>					

## The potential for seal watching across the UK

Scotland demonstrates how seal watching can become a significant tourist activity. Research has found that seals were considered the third most influential draw for tourists wanting to see wildlife around the Scottish coast.<sup>6</sup> Seal spotting is a popular activity across Scotland, including the Isle of May on the Firth of Forth, Cromarty Firth near Inverness,<sup>7</sup> and in drawing international visitors to the North Coast 500 route on the West Coast.<sup>8</sup> Overall, it has been estimated that total visitor spending attributable to all nature-based tourism in Scotland is £1.4 billion per year, with 39,000 associated jobs.<sup>9</sup>

Academic research has shown that the characteristics of seal populations make them an attractive species for tourism; predictable activities and locations, somewhat approachable by boats, residing in an open habitat where they can be viewed, and possessing an element

<sup>5</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/603450/CCF\\_Report\\_2016.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/603450/CCF_Report_2016.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> McCarthy (1998) cited in E.C.M. Parsons (2003) [Seal Management in Scotland: Tourist Perceptions and the Possible Impacts on the Scottish Tourism Industry](#), , 6:6, 540-546.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/outdoors/6-best-places-spot-seals-scotland-1416865>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.northcoast500.com/2019/09/experience-autumn-on-the-north-coast-500/>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.outdoorrecreationni.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Assessing-the-economic-impacts-of-nature-based-tourism-in-Scotland\\_Scottish-Natural-Heritage-2010.pdf](http://www.outdoorrecreationni.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Assessing-the-economic-impacts-of-nature-based-tourism-in-Scotland_Scottish-Natural-Heritage-2010.pdf)



of rarity and novelty to the visitor.<sup>10</sup> In addition, research on the experiences of wildlife tourists suggests that seeing marine mammals in their natural setting evokes deep emotions, intense pleasure and even awe at the splendour and diversity of the natural world.<sup>11</sup>

The rest of the UK has the potential to emulate Scottish success. Indeed, in certain locations in England, seal watching is already a thriving tourist activity. In Norfolk, 80,000 people are estimated to visit the seal colony at Horsey each year, for what has been described as one of Britain's great wildlife spectacles<sup>12</sup>. In Brixham, in Devon, seals are a draw for many visitors to the area, with one headline declaring "Famous Sammy the Seal now has 40 friends and is becoming a major tourist attraction".<sup>13</sup> And in Wales, there are around 5000 grey seals around Pembrokeshire and thousands more around the coast of West Wales. Given that seals can be found across every coastal region of the UK, these success stories could be replicated across the country.

Such expansion in seal watching could provide an economic boost for coastal communities. The evidence appears to show that visitors place a high value on seeing seals in the wild. One study analysed individuals' 'willingness to pay', assessing how much they would personally pay for a change in the state of some good or asset, in this case seal conservation<sup>14</sup>. The researchers' model estimated the annual value of seals in South-West England as £526,000 per year in 2003, £850,484 in today's money.<sup>15</sup>

### **Increasing seal numbers to boost coastal tourism**

There is great potential for tourism linked to seal populations around the UK's coasts. However, there remain impediments to the flourishing of our seal populations and the wildlife tourism that follows. A report by Marine Scotland found that for "marine wildlife tourists and charterers their enjoyment and participation is sensitive largely to changes in fish predator populations (such as sea birds and sea mammals)".<sup>16</sup> So, it is clear that we need healthy seals to attract wildlife tourists. There are a number of key threats to seals in the UK's seas:

- **Bycatch.** There is heavy fishing in many of the coastal areas where harbour and grey seals live, meaning they are often caught as bycatch, where fishers incidentally catch

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<sup>10</sup> Reynolds and Braithwaite (2001), cited in Curtin, S., Richards, S., & Westcott, S. (2009). [Tourism and grey seals in south Devon: management strategies, voluntary controls and tourists' perceptions of disturbance](#), *Current Issues in Tourism*, 12:1, 59-81)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.countryfile.com/wildlife/marine-life/britains-best-seal-watching-spots/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/famous-sammy-seal-now-40-2596269>

<sup>14</sup> Bossettil, V., & Pearce, D. (2003) [A study of environmental conflict: the economic value of Grey Seals in southwest England](#). *Biodiversity and Conservation* 12: 2361–2392.

<sup>15</sup> Adjusted for inflation using Bank of England inflation calculator

<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/management-scottish-inshore-fisheries-assessing-options-change/>



a seal while fishing for another species. Recent estimates suggest 400 seals fall victim to bycatch each year.<sup>17</sup> Over-fishing and climate change may also impact on the wider food chains that seals depend upon for prey.<sup>18</sup>

- **Ghost nets and litter.** Another contributor to seal mortality is entanglement in litter and ghost nets. Ghost nets are lost or discarded fishing nets floating in the water or snagged on the seabed, with serious cases of seal entanglement in ghost gear reported every year. Because seals are very curious animals, they will investigate these nets and can subsequently become entangled in them. In one incident in 2019 near Boscastle in Cornwall, a seal was found washed ashore entangled in 35kg of nets, with local volunteers reporting that it was clear the seal had endured a horrific death<sup>19</sup>.
- **Noise pollution and development.** Research has found that underwater noise from boats and other noisy activities at sea may cause disturbance or even be temporarily deafening for seals, with the experience being compared to living amid the din of inner cities. With some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world off the UK's coast, underwater noise has been increasing over the last 30 years.<sup>20</sup> Human activities from offshore energy generation also pose a potential risk to seals and there is currently very little information upon which to judge potential projects. We need more evidence on whether such developments near to seal breeding areas would cause mortality or displacement or otherwise damage the suitability of the habitat to support these animals.
- **Disturbance.** Disturbance from human interaction is a significant and growing problem.<sup>21</sup> With increasing use of our coasts and seas, especially by recreational boats, kayaks and other activities, there has been a consequent rise in disturbance events. Seals need to rest on land to digest, socialise and feed their pups. Disturbance can change this behaviour, causing them to rush into the sea or across rocks. Impacts include injuries, aborted pregnancies, starved pups and disruption to metabolism which negatively impacts their health. All of these can have serious consequences for individuals and local populations.

### Delivering responsible tourism

Badly managed tourism and inappropriate behaviour can threaten seals. While most visitors who view seals are responsible, policy should ensure that people can enjoy the spectacle without endangering the very thing they have come to observe. Recent reports on the

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Link\\_bycatch\\_parliamentary\\_briefing\\_Feb2020.pdf](https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Link_bycatch_parliamentary_briefing_Feb2020.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.mcsuk.org/30species/harbour-seal>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.cornwalllive.com/news/cornwall-news/expert-issues-warning-over-deadly-3156446>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/02/seals-deafened-noisy-shipping-lanes-say-scientists>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2019-07-DO-NOT-DISTURB-public-report-for-release.pdf>



Yorkshire coast have highlighted examples of beachgoers getting too close to seals on the shore, dogs off their leads, low flying drones and people trying to take 'seal selfies'. These activities risk distressing the seals and could harm both the animals and beachgoers.<sup>22</sup>

The solution is the development of schemes which ensure responsible seal watching:

- Cornwall has set a strong example on addressing disturbances with a Marine and Coastal Code Group consisting of statutory and NGO partners. The group have developed awareness raising resources, undertaken training for boat operators and tourism activity providers, and logged all incidences of disturbance.<sup>23</sup> They encourage the public to report disturbances, accepting photos or videos of incidents and any registration or identification numbers which could help identify the individuals involved. This information is then shared with the relevant enforcement agencies to help with any investigations. It is an approach could be replicated across the country.
- The Pembrokeshire Coast National Park has developed codes of conduct which highlight the existing Agreed Access Restrictions that have been drawn up by conservation experts and coastal users. The codes call for boat users to avoid landing on pupping beaches on certain dates, to keep at least 50m from seals, and to keep speed to a minimum.<sup>24</sup>
- Another positive initiative is the UK-wide WiSe (wildlife safe) Scheme.<sup>25</sup> This scheme seeks to minimise unintentional disturbance and thousands of operators and marine professionals have attended their courses. WiSe teaches a better understanding of how best to approach and interact with marine wildlife species and outlines how people can help minimise any unintentional disturbance from their activities.

In general, the growing threat of disturbances puts the future of seal tourism at risk.<sup>26</sup> To ensure that tourism is delivered in a responsible manner, funding for monitoring and management schemes is badly needed to protect these seals from human disturbance.

## Conclusion

Millions of visitors flock to the UK's coast every year, in many cases to view seals in their natural environment. Wildlife tourism supports millions of pounds of spending and thousands of jobs, with the potential for even more.

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<sup>22</sup> [https://www.mcsuk.org/news/seal\\_safety](https://www.mcsuk.org/news/seal_safety)

<sup>23</sup> <https://cornwallmarinelifecode.org.uk/>

<sup>24</sup> For the full code of conduct see <https://www.pembrokeshiremarinecode.org.uk/code-of-conduct/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.wisescheme.org/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2019-07-DO-NOT-DISTURB-public-report-for-release.pdf>



However, the threats outlined in this report demonstrate why we cannot rest on our laurels when it comes to seal protection. While numbers have risen in recent years, we must act now to protect and enhance the UK's seal populations, delivering the tourism boost that coastal communities so badly need.

The UK population of some 124,000 grey seals represents approximately 40% of the world population, and 95% of the EU population. The UK population of harbour seals represents about 5% of the world population, approximately 50% of the EU population, and 45% of the European subspecies. So, we must ensure the protection of the UK's seals as part of our global responsibility to the natural world.

Moreover, this briefing has demonstrated that there are also strong economic benefits to seal protection. Seals present a golden opportunity for coastal areas to benefit from wildlife tourism and their true economic value should be recognised by decision makers, with action taken to better protect these much-loved and charismatic animals.

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