

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SEALS IN THE WADDEN SEA

Progress Report by the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat
to the 45th Meeting of the CMS Standing Committee,
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1. The Agreement on the Conservation of Seals in the Wadden Sea (WSSA), which was the first regional agreement under the Bonn Convention, was concluded between Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands on 16 October 1990 in Bonn, Germany, and entered into force one year later. The Secretariat for the Agreement and the coordinating institution for the Seal Management Plan is the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat (CWSS) in Wilhelmshaven, Germany.

2. The aim of the Seal Agreement is to promote close cooperation amongst the Parties in order to achieve and maintain a favourable conservation status for the harbour seal population, which was a particularly critical issue in 1988 and 2002. The population was reduced by about 60% in 1988 and 47% in 2002 as a result of two devastating Phocine Distemper virus (PDV)-epizootics.

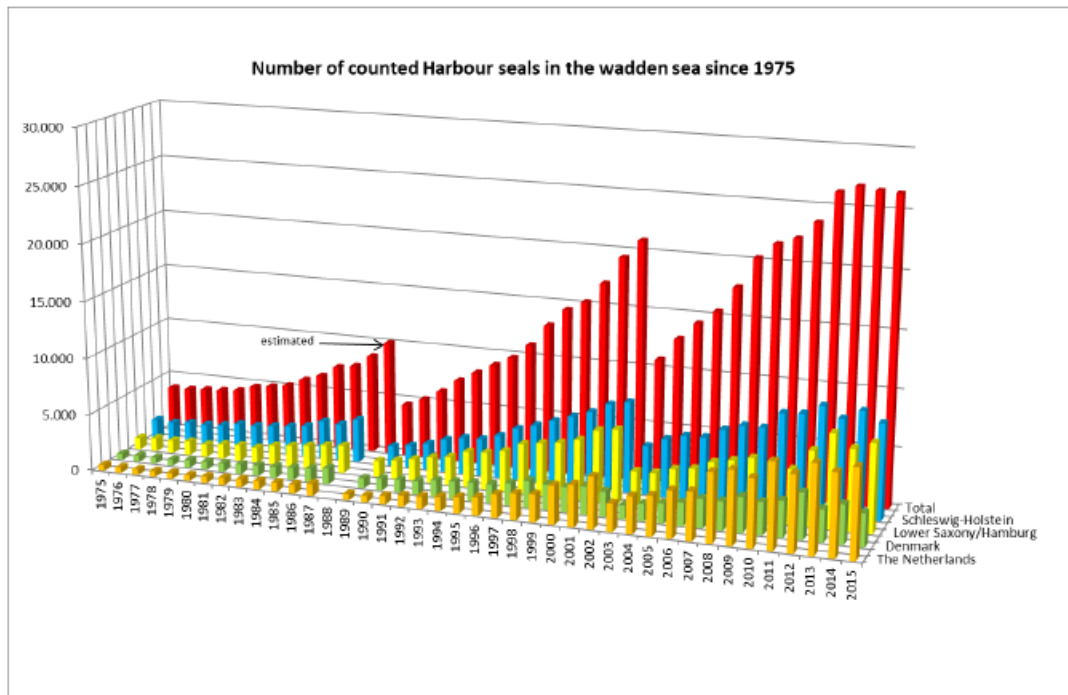
3. In the framework of the WSSA, the Parties adopt and continuously update so-called Seal Management Plans (SMP) building on the obligations of the Seal Agreement. The SMP contains objectives and action points on habitat protection, research and monitoring, pollution and wardening, taking and public information and is an essential instrument that seeks to strike a balance between conservation and management of the area with a view to contributing to achieving viable populations. The Parties continuously amend the plan in order to meet the challenges of protecting this flagship species of the Wadden Sea. The "Conservation and Management Plan for the Seal Population, 2012-2016", is currently under revision and the adoption of the 2017-2021 Seal Management Plan is slated for 2017.

4. The plan covers the Wadden Sea population of the harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina vitulina*) and has also been extended to include the breeding population of grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) in the Wadden Sea, which is not covered by the Wadden Sea Seal Agreement itself. The overall aim is to restore and maintain viable populations and a natural reproduction capacity, including juvenile survival of harbour seals and grey seals in the Wadden Sea.

5. Since the last epizootic in 2002, the population of harbour seals has recovered significantly. According to data generated by coordinated aerial flights in the entire Wadden Sea, a total of about 26,435 seals were counted in 2015, which is a small decrease of less than 1% compared to 2014. The population is therefore considered as stable, despite the outbreak of an avian influenza H10N7 epizootic in autumn 2014, which caused the death of an estimated 3,850 harbour seals. A total of 8,484 pups were counted in 2015, equivalent to an increase of less than 1% compared to the previous year's counts. Thus, the pup count for 2015 is the highest number of pups ever counted in the Wadden Sea in terms of absolute numbers, as well as relative to the total population. The Trilateral Seal Expert Group (TSEG) considered that the decreasing growth rate might be due to the fact that the harbour seal population is approaching its carrying capacity under the current environmental conditions in the Wadden Sea, or to the fact that the moulting peak has shifted over the years.

The estimate for the total Wadden Sea harbour seal population, including seals in the water during the survey, can be calculated using a correction factor which considers that an average of 32% of the seals were in the water during summer. By using this correction factor the total population size of harbour seals in the Wadden Sea in 2015 was calculated to be about 38,900.

http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/tmap/MarineMammals/harbour_seal_report_2015.pdf



6. For the grey seals, the upward trend in population development has continued. Originally native to the Wadden Sea region, this species disappeared almost completely. However, over the last three decades, grey seals have been recolonizing the Wadden Sea again. During the moulting period in spring 2015, 4,936 grey seals were counted in coordinated surveys in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, equivalent to an increase of 9 % compared to the previous year. Though there clearly is a variation between the countries, the continued increase in numbers indicates that this growth might be an actual trend. During the breeding period in 2015/16 a total of 1,113 grey seal pups were counted representing an increase of 34 % compared to the previous year. Even if this growth is supported by the pups recruited into the breeding population, there are certainly large numbers of new females migrating into the area, mainly from UK waters.

7. The successful protection of harbour and grey seals over the last decades is a protection measure which was also acknowledged in the designation by UNESCO of the Dutch and German Wadden Sea as a World Heritage Site in June 2009, and the Danish part in 2014,.

8. The discussion on taking and releasing seals is still ongoing, driven by the fact that the population is on the highest level ever reported. "Taking" is defined as the removal of living seals from the natural environment to check the health condition of the animals: as a result, the animals will be (1) released back into their environment, (2) euthanized if necessary or (3) kept for rehabilitation in appropriate nursery centers for a subsequent release into the wild. Most often "taking" relates to seal pups found without their mothers, or to weak or sick animals.

9. It is clearly stated in the first Seal Management Plan (1991-1995) adopted pursuant to the WSSA that the taking of seals is prohibited. This was later further defined and explicitly declared in the so-called Leeuwarden Declaration (LD § 60, Appendix 3) by the responsible Trilateral Management Authorities at their 7th Trilateral Ministerial Conference (Leeuwarden, Netherlands, 1994). They agreed "to reduce the taking of seals to the lowest level possible". A good health status of the seal population can only be achieved if natural selection processes can occur. From a biological and wildlife management point of view, human activities should not interfere with these basic processes. Even if animal welfare aspects are taken into account, human handling of seals should be restricted to a low level.

10. Overall, the conservation and protection of the Wadden Sea seal population is a success story. CWSS has been instrumental in reaching this success by joining and harmonizing the efforts of the Parties, including experts and managers and by enhancing the awareness of the conservation and protection needs of the population. The WSSA is also an excellent example of successful cooperation

between international instruments and bodies from within and outside of the UN system with a view to achieving a joint aim. The objective of the Agreement has been largely achieved and the Parties are now focusing on maintaining a favourable conservation by continuing the joint management of the population and extending the knowledge basis for management.

11. Further information on marine mammals in the Wadden Sea including harbour seals and grey seals can be found on the CWSS website (<http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/management/seal-management>) and in the final draft version of the Thematic Report No. 20: Marine Mammals, Quality Status Report 2009 (<http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/20-marine-mammals-10-03-05.pdf>):

Reijnders, P.J.H., Brasseur, M.J.M., Borchardt, T., Camphuysen, K.(C.J.), Czech, R., Gilles, A., Jensen, L.F., Leopold, M., Lucke, K., Ramdohr, S., Scheidat, M., Siebert, U., & J. Teilmann, 2009. Thematic Report No. 20: Marine Mammals. Quality Status Report 2009. Wadden Sea Ecosystem No. 25, Trilateral Monitoring and Assessment Group, Common Wadden Sea Secretariat, Wilhelmshaven, Germany.

Wilhelmshaven, September 2016