

Seals at Teesmouth

The Tees Seals Research Programme has been managed by the Industry Nature Conservation Association (INCA) on Teesside since 1989. The focus of this long-term project is to observe the status of the seal colony at Seal Sands, a 294 hectare tidal expanse of mud and sandflat situated in the River Tees estuary. The seal colony serves as an indicator of the health of the aquatic environment of the Tees.

Seals have probably lived around the mouth of the River Tees for many hundreds of years but had declined rapidly by the mid 1800s as a result of habitat loss and pollution. By the 1930s they had totally disappeared from the estuary. Improvements in environmental quality gradually led to the re-appearance of seals in the estuary and by the mid 1980s there was again a resident population of seals. Teesmouth is the only known estuary in Europe where seals have re-colonised as a direct result of environmental improvements and it is good to be able to say that the colony is once again breeding successfully.

The species present are the Harbour or Common Seal (*Phoca vitulina*) and the Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*). Both species are important but the Harbour Seal is the main focus of interest. It is the only species to breed at Teesmouth, the area being unsuitable as breeding habitat for the Grey Seal. The Grey Seal uses nursery areas on rocky foreshores above the high water mark because their pups, in contrast to those of the Harbour Seal, cannot swim at birth. The two species of seal generally, although not exclusively, haul-out in separate groups on Seal Sands, around the low tide period when the sandbanks are exposed.



Harbour Seal at Teesmouth

(courtesy John Bridges)

Seal monitoring takes place at Seal Sands between early June and September which includes the two week period from late June when the Harbour Seals give birth and the period in August when maximum numbers are observed as they gather for their annual moult. Seal milk is particularly rich so by mid August the pups are weaned and become independent of their mother.

In terms of the Harbour Seal pup births, it is encouraging to report that 2008 saw the birth of 12 pups, all of which survived to weaning. This surpassed the previous record of 8 pups, which was achieved in 2006

and 2007. The maximum and mean Harbour Seal count data suggests a current Harbour Seal population at Seal Sands of around 60 to 70 individuals. Assuming this to be reasonably accurate the colony is now producing pups close to the normal rate of 20-25% of the population.

Although the birth rate of Harbour Seals has increased, it appears that there has been a 10% decline in the overall size of the resident Harbour Seal population in 2008. It is not yet known whether this is an actual decrease or if the periods of wet, cool and windy weather during the monitoring season have affected the number of seals hauling out at low tide. Seals haul-out mainly to thermoregulate and are known to avoid hauling out in such weather conditions. The Harbour Seal has declined nationally by 40% over the last 5 years (Pers. Comm., 2008) and, although only 2% of the UK national total, the Teesmouth population is nevertheless important.

In terms of the picture for Grey Seals, there has been a smaller (5%) decline in numbers observed during 2008 but haul-out behaviour is also likely to have been affected by poor summer weather. The Grey Seal population is around 20 to 30 individuals. Unlike the Harbour Seal the national picture for Grey Seal is more positive with seal numbers increasing. Since this species does not have a breeding population at Teesmouth its numbers are likely to be more variable, being affected by migration.

All things considered this year has been a reasonable year for the seals, which continue to thrive amidst the industrial landscape of Teesside.

Reference

Pers.Comm.,(2008), Personal Conversation with Callan Duck of the Sea Mammal Research Unit at the University of St.Andrews.

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