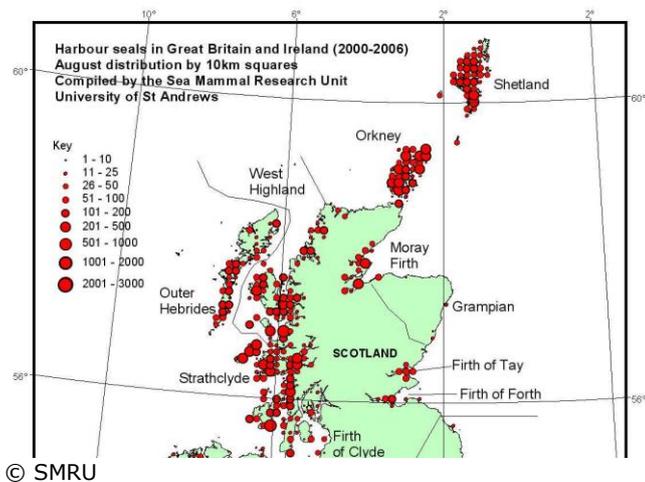


Harbour Seal

DESCRIPTION

Harbour seals are one of two UK seal species. They give birth in June and July and moult in August. They have a diet that includes a variety of species (sandeels, herring, octopus and squid) and feed up to 40 or 50 km from their haul-out site. Approximately 30% of European harbour seals are found in the UK; this proportion has declined from approximately 40% in 2002. Harbour seals are widespread around the west coast of Scotland and throughout the Hebrides and Northern Isles. On the east coast, their distribution is more restricted with concentrations in the major estuaries of the Thames, The Wash, Firth of Tay and the Moray Firth. Scotland holds approximately 79% of the UK harbour seal population, with 16% in England and 5% in Northern Ireland. Major declines have now been documented in harbour seal populations around Scotland with declines since 2000 of 66% in Orkney, 50% in Shetland, 36% in the Outer Hebrides, 46% in the Moray Firth and 84% in the Firth of Tay.

DISTRIBUTION MAP



THREATS

Harbour seals face a number of threats that combine to mean that their status in Scottish waters is declining. That they face these threats in combination makes it challenging to deal with them. However, where individual threats can be identified, these can be dealt with. In addition, great care is needed not to increase pressures on those populations that are declining, to give them the best chance of recovery. In the last 5 years, more than a hundred seals and porpoises were found on the coast of the UK with similar injuries consisting of a single continuous curvilinear skin laceration spiralling down the body (known as corkscrew injuries). The situation is critical in some parts of Scotland, and these cases are the tip of the iceberg.



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ACTIONS REQUIRED

1. Preventing 'corkscrew' deaths might prevent further declines and may enable these populations to slowly recover, so immediate efforts to reduce with a view to eliminating this significant issue
2. Regular beach monitoring in those areas worst affected (Tay and Orkney, for example) to understand level of impact
3. On-going collection of field survey data to inform wider management decisions and conservation efforts

FURTHER READING

SMRU SCOS report: <http://www.smru.st-andrews.ac.uk/documents/678.pdf>

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