



# Sharing the Shore with Harbor Seal Pups in Washington State



## Points to Remember

### *Haul-outs:*

Harbor seals utilize specific shoreline locations on a regular basis as resting places (haul-outs). Haul-outs include beaches, rocks, log booms, floats and buoys. Typically seals will return to these specific locations to haul-out, but any shoreline or floating feature with easy access to the water can serve as a resting spot.

Harbor seals rest out of the water (haul-out) for several hours every day to regulate body temperature, interact with each other seals and sleep. Harbor seals are vulnerable on land and are therefore wary of being approached while out of the water. Some seals, however, may tolerate activity close by. The most frequently reported encounters with seals out of the water involve pups that are too young to have developed protective wariness (escape response).

### *Pups and Pupping:*

Pups are born in the spring and summer and the timing of the peak birth period varies geographically. Pups are born in the coastal estuaries (Columbia River, Willapa Bay, Grays Harbor) from mid-April through June; Olympic Peninsula coast from May through July; San Juan Islands and eastern bays of Puget Sound from June through August; southern Puget Sound from July through September; and Hood Canal from August through January.

The majority of pups are born at protected haul-out sites, which are called rookeries, but a female may give birth anywhere that there is easy access to the waters edge.

Nursing pups remain with their mothers for 4 to 6 weeks and then are weaned to forage and survive on their own. A nursing pup may double its birth weight by the time it is weaned and uses it's some of its stored fat reserves as it learns to feed on its own.

Up to 50% of the pups born will not survive the first year of life. Contributing factors to pup mortality are; conditions associated with fetal development or premature birth; predation by shoreline predators or domestic dogs; infection; dehydration; or starvation.



### *Human Interference:*

Harbor seals are less mobile and therefore more vulnerable to disturbance or predation while out of the water. Adult seals are more wary and escape to the water more quickly than pups. Females will flee to the water if disturbed or approached and may leave their pups behind.

Although the percentage of successful female/pup reunions has not been documented, anecdotal reports indicate that pups have successfully reunited up to 48 hours after separation. A female seal is more likely to return to reclaim her pup once the disturbance near the pup goes away. If activity continues near the pup, the female may eventually give up trying to return. A nursing pup that is separated from its mother will not survive.

## Things You Can Do to Promote Responsible Wildlife Viewing

### Share the Shoreline

➤ If you see a seal on the beach, give it room. The NMFS marine mammal viewing guidelines recommend a **MINIMUM** approach distance of 100 yards. The approach limitation will minimize the potential for disturbing a resting animal and/or reduce stress for an animal that may be recovering from illness or injury.

➤ Observe from a distance using binoculars or a spotting scope if you want to see the animal close up.

➤ Keep pets away. Dogs are naturally curious about other animals in their environment. To avoid a possibly injurious interaction, dogs should be leashed and kept away from seals on the beach. Baby seals can easily fall prey to dogs. Older seals may bite in self defense. Some diseases are infectious to both dogs and seals, and may pose a risk to humans as well, if they come in direct contact with an infected animal.

## Share Information

➤ If the beach is regularly patrolled or maintained by a local agency, alert them to the presence of the animal so that they can check on it periodically to determine if there is a need for informational signs or to intervene in some way. A minimum undisturbed observation period of 24 to 48 hours is recommended to determine whether the pup is being attended by a female. Signs of an attendant female would include; sightings of seal(s) in the water nearby; tracks near the pup; movement of the pup up or down the beach, or in and out of the water.

➤ Advise neighbors of the animal's presence, note its location and when it was first observed.

➤ Remind others that seal pups need to use shoreline habitat to warm up (**DO NOT** pour water on seal pups; and rest (**DO NOT** handle, cover or attempt to feed seal pups).

➤ Feeding, or baiting seals in the wild is a form of harassment and is harmful. Seals that are fed by humans quickly learn to seek humans for feeding opportunities (**THE NEXT DEAD FISH THEY FIND MAY HAVE A HOOK IN IT!**)

➤ If the pup has been unattended for 48 hours, or is clearly in distress (injured), contact:

### **Marine Mammal Stranding**

#### **Network Hotline**

**1-800-853-1964**

**for the network responder in your area or Local Authorities at**

## Report Harassment

Seals are federally protected from harassment and capture by the public. If you observe incidents of people or pets tormenting, disturbing or attempting to remove a seal from the beach, contact the **NOAA Fisheries Enforcement Hotline (1-800-853-1964)** to report a violation.

