

What to do if you encounter a New Zealand sea lion or seal

New Zealand sea lions and seals are charismatic animals and people are encouraged to stop and take the time to enjoy them. However, they are wild animals and can be unpredictable. By following the simple guidelines below, you can enjoy your encounter without compromising your safety or that of the animals:

1. Always stay at least 10 m from sea lions and seals. Allow them more space if they are active, and be prepared to move away calmly.
2. Do not disturb sea lions or seals. Do not make loud noises or throw objects in their vicinity.
3. Keep dogs on leads, ensuring they are at least 50 m away from sea lions and seals.
4. Keep children under control at all times when around sea lions and seals, and ensure they do not throw anything, such as sticks or stones, at them.
5. Never attempt to handle sea lions or seals, as they can be aggressive and often carry diseases.
6. Do not drive vehicles any closer than 50 m from sea lions and seals.
7. Do not feed sea lions and seals.

If you are concerned about the safety of a sea lion or seal, or wish to report a tagged animal, please contact the Department of Conservation on **0800 DOC HOT** (0800 362 468).

Your effort to learn and share what you know about NZ sea lions will help facilitate their recovery.

Further information can be found on the DOC website: www.doc.govt.nz/sealion.

Photo: Tim Higham.

‘New Zealand sea lions are one of the rarest seal species in the world and they are only found in New Zealand. It’s our responsibility to ensure these precious animals are kept safe, and continue their road to recovery.’

All photos Crown Copyright: Department of Conservation *Te Papa Atawhai*.
Cover: New Zealand sea lion pup. Photo: Louise Chilvers.

Published by:
Publishing Team
Department of Conservation
PO Box 10420, Wellington 6143
New Zealand
© Department of Conservation
5th edition, May 2011

DOC HOTline
0800 362 468
Report any safety hazards
or conservation emergencies
For Fire and Search and Rescue Call 111

New Zealand Government



New Zealand sea lions

Sharing the mainland
with this rare native species



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

New Zealand sea lions

- Found only in New Zealand.
- One of the rarest seals in the world; total population is $\leq 10\,000$ individuals and declining.
- Listed as Nationally Critical, the highest threat classification in New Zealand—a status shared with kiwi and kākāpō.
- Breeding is mostly restricted to the New Zealand subantarctic, although a slow return to mainland New Zealand is now occurring.



Photo: Louise Chilvers.

Threats

- Drowning in trawl fishing nets.
- Disease.
- Human disturbance.

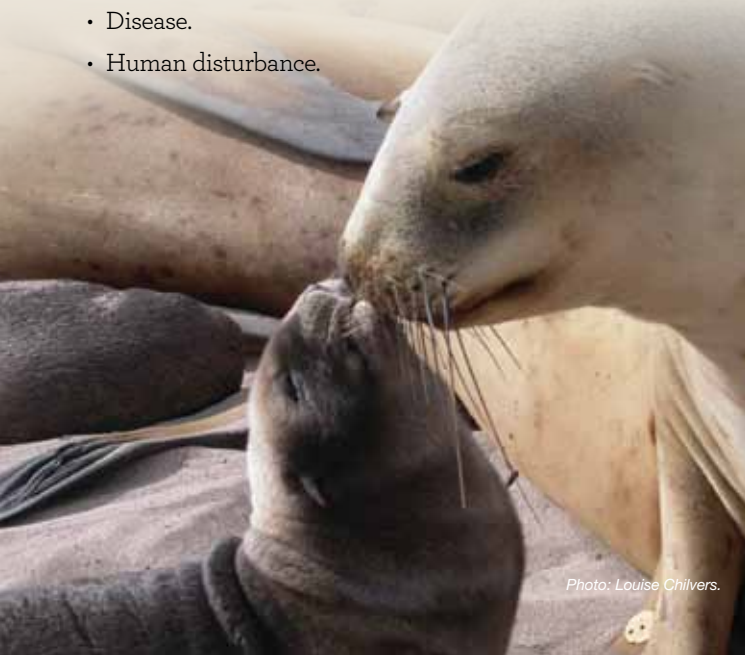


Photo: Louise Chilvers.

New Zealand sea lion ecology

- Sea lions eat a wide variety of prey species, few of which are important for commercial or recreational fishing.
- Sea lions can travel up to 175 km from the coast to feed, and dive to depths of up to 600 m.
- Sea lions come ashore to rest and breed. Some of them, especially mothers and young pups, may travel well inland.
- Females give birth to a single pup every 1 or 2 years. Pups are born in December or January each year.
- For the first year of their lives, pups are dependent on their mothers for milk and protection. While mothers are at sea feeding, pups are left alone. This is natural, but they are particularly vulnerable to disturbance during these periods, so please keep your distance.



Pup in rātā forest.
Photo: Louise Chilvers.

New Zealand sea lion behaviour

- Sea lions are generally quite confident around people. Their responses to people vary; they may completely ignore you if they are resting, but may chase people and dogs that approach too closely during more active periods.
- Sea lions are often perceived as being quite playful in the water. This 'play' can sometimes become boisterous, so people diving or swimming in the vicinity of sea lions should be observant and be prepared to move away.
- Sea lions are often seen with flies buzzing around their eyes and covered in sand. Sea lions flick sand onto themselves to keep cool, and the flies are attracted to the moisture (which looks like tears) around their eyes.
- It is normal for sea lions to cough, sneeze and vomit. They vomit to get rid of undigested food, such as fish bone fragments.

Then and now

- Archaeological evidence indicates that sea lions were once present all around the New Zealand coastline.
- Hunting by Polynesian settlers and European sealers led to their near extinction, following which they were absent from the New Zealand mainland for 200 years.
- New Zealand sea lions have been protected since 1893, but only started to breed again on mainland New Zealand in the 1990s.
- A small number now breed on the Otago coast. 45 pups were born between 1994 and 2011.
- Currently, New Zealand sea lions can be found on the south and southeast coasts of the South Island and at Stewart Island/Rakiura.

New Zealand sea lions and fur seals: what's the difference?

New Zealand sea lions

- Males: 350–500 kg; brown/black.
- Females: 100–160 kg; cream/silver.
- Blunt nose, short whiskers.
- Found on sandy beaches and surrounds.



Male (left) and female (right) New Zealand sea lions.
Photo: Rod Morris.

Sub-adult male New Zealand sea lion.
Photo: Karen Baird.

New Zealand fur seals

- Males: 90–150 kg; dark brown.
- Females: 30–50 kg; dark brown.
- Pointy nose, long whiskers.
- Found on rocky coastlines.



New Zealand fur seal adult and pup.
Photo: Rod Morris.