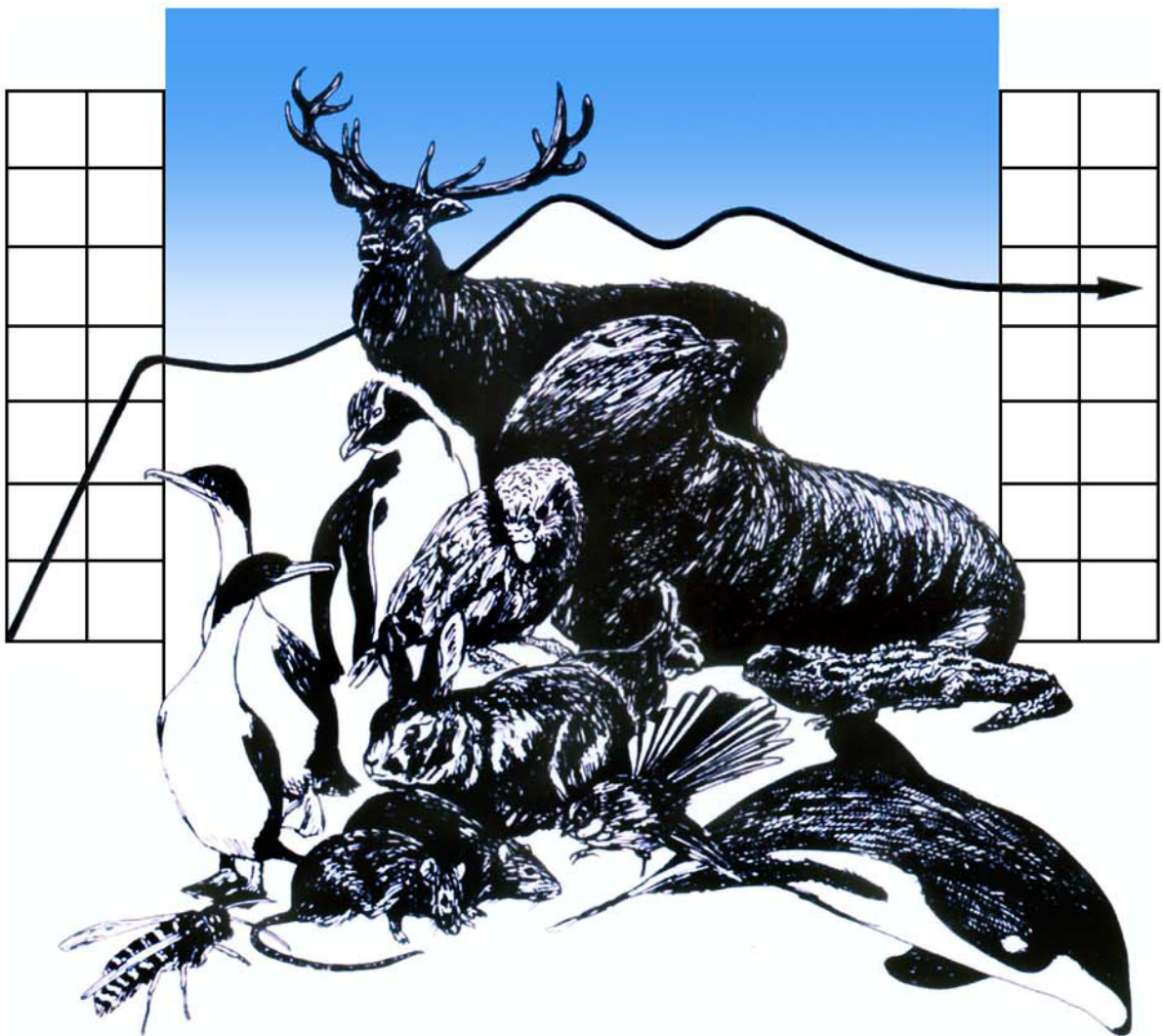




## DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY



## WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

**Community Relations Plan:  
For New Zealand Sea Lions in  
Southland  
2011-2016**

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**University of Otago**

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# **Community Relations Plan:**

## **For New Zealand Sea Lions in Southland 2011-2016**



Photo by Ros Cole

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## **Goal:**

The biology and behaviour of New Zealand sea lions is understood by the public and viewed as an asset in the Southern Coastal environment.

## **Background**

One of the most important components of conservation management today is to create 'genuine partnerships with community, voluntary and *iwi/Maori organisations*' (DOC 2003). By developing these relationships, the Department of Conservation can ensure widespread understanding, support and involvement in conservation initiatives. This Community Relations Plan for New Zealand sea lions provides a region-specific framework of objectives and initiatives to guide the Department of Conservation towards managing the coexistence of humans and sea lions in Southland.

The New Zealand sea lion is classified as "Nationally Critical" within the New Zealand Threat Classification System (Baker et al. 2010). Their present distribution is primarily on the New Zealand subantarctic islands, with breeding occurring mostly on the Auckland Islands (Chilvers et al. 2007). A restricted range and depleted population make New Zealand sea lions vulnerable to natural and human induced impacts (DOC 2009). The Species Management Plan (SMP) aims to recover the New Zealand sea lion to a non-threatened status by 'facilitating an increase in the *New Zealand sea lion population size and distribution*' (DOC 2009). As a result, the New Zealand sea lion's vulnerability would be reduced (Chilvers & Wilkinson 2008) and further colonisation of the mainland will be enhanced.

Successive breeding events in Otago are a promising sign that the species has already begun to re-colonise the mainland (McConkey et al. 2002a, Chilvers et al. 2007, DOC 2009). Sightings of hauled out sea lions are becoming more frequent in the Southland region, particularly at Porpoise/Curio Bay and Waipapa Point (Campbell J, in press; McConkey et al. 2002b; Ros Cole pers. com.). Frequent visitation by visitors and residents to Southland beaches mean that sea lion and humans are often interacting.

Although many of these interactions are a positive experience for both sea lions and humans, negative interactions are not uncommon. For instance, in Curio Bay, the Department of Conservation volunteer rangers in 2009 reported a sea lion related incident on 70 % of the 69 days they were present. These incidents included sea lions sitting on tents, lying on roads and chasing people. Similar incidents reported in the press have occurred in populated urban areas (Morgan J, in press; Campbell J, in press; Mark Oster pers. com.; Ros Cole pers. com.). Deliberate disturbances have also occurred (Edens J, in press.) and such incidents can result in habitat loss, injury and/or death to the sea lion (DOC 2009).

Although the presence of New Zealand sea lion on the mainland is becoming more common, the species is still in decline. Pup production at the Auckland Islands has declined by 50% since the mid-1990s (Chilvers et al. 2007). This reduction is believed to be a result of direct, and indirect, effects of fishing activities (DOC 2009). Under these circumstances, mainland breeding and haul out locations are likely to become increasingly important for the survival of the species. An increase in occurrence of New Zealand sea lions on the mainland will inevitably result in more frequent human interactions with sea lions. If not managed appropriately, these interactions will have the potential to cause considerable distress to both parties. As a result, long-term conservation of the New Zealand sea lion requires that their presence on the mainland to be widely accepted and supported by the public (DOC 2009).

## **Aims and Objectives**

Inexperience and lack of knowledge of the nature of sea lions by both Department of Conservation and the community has so far resulted in reactive actions being taken by both parties. This plan aims to provide the steps necessary to build relationships between the Department of Conservation and community stakeholders. These relationships can create an environment to develop proactive strategies that will effectively manage the coexistence of humans and sea lions in Southland.

To achieve the above, three main objectives should be considered and their goals implemented over the next five years.

These objectives are:

- Facilitate involvement of interested community members to become actively involved in sea lion management.
- Establish advocacy and educational programmes to increase public awareness and minimise adverse interactions.
- Promotion and involvement in research relevant to New Zealand sea lions in Southland

## **Objective 1: Facilitate involvement of interested community groups to become actively involved in New Zealand sea lion management**

In accordance with the department's Conservation with Communities Strategy (Department of Conservation 2003), a key component of developing public support is to recognise that a number of community groups have significant interests in the conservation of the New Zealand sea lions. Involving these groups in the management decisions is therefore more likely to result in a long-term solution that is widely accepted in the community (Forgie et al. 2001). Frequent communication and consultation with these groups is important to understand their interests in New Zealand sea lions conservation management. Listed below are some of the key community groups that should be approached to be actively involved in sea lion management in Southland:

- Local Iwi
- New Zealand Sea Lion Trust (NZSLT)
- Coastal residents
- Ecotourism companies
- Territorial authorities

### Local Iwi:

The Ngai Tahu Whanui association with the New Zealand sea lion is recognised in the Ngai Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998, regarding the species as taonga. As such, Ngai Tahu have an active interest in the conservation of this species. Cooperation and consultation with the relevant Murihiku runanga will help to ensure that management strategies are consistent with Ngai Tahu's viewpoints and customs.

### Coastal Residents:

Beaches are essentially the back yards of many people in Southland, therefore their participation in sea lion management is essential. Coastal residents, particularly local accommodation providers, have the potential to: ensure the correct information is portrayed to tourists; report on daily occurrences at the beaches; and, to ensure sea lion safety. Local farm owners also utilise land adjacent to coastal habitat and

therefore cooperation to maintain this habitat is important to maintain haul out areas for the sea lions.

The opportunity to involve keen residents of coastal areas should not be overlooked especially when Department of Conservation staff are limited in their time and resources.

Residents willing to complete voluntary work such as monitoring of beach activities and recording sea lion presence should be encouraged and supported as much as possible. With this in mind, establishment of an annual workshop would be ideal should volunteer numbers increase. The workshop would aim to ensure understanding of sea lion behaviour and characteristics, ensure the correct messages are being portrayed to the public, sightings are recorded consistently, and the limits in their ability to take action are fully understood.

The New Zealand Sea Lion Trust (NZSLT):

The NZSLT have expressed their willingness to have a representative in Southland, should a willing volunteer become available. The NZSLT would be unable to offer financial assistance at this stage, but has offered support wherever possible to help achieve the objectives in this community relations plan. The educational work done by the NZSLT in Otago has been greatly beneficial and resources developed for Otago may be useful in the Southland region. Therefore, any actions that may enable their increased involvement in Southland should be actively pursued.

Ecotourism companies:

Visitations to beaches frequented by sea lions are targeted by tourists hoping to sight these boisterous animals in their natural environment (Jackson 2006). The interactions between people and sea lions under these circumstances need to be carefully managed to ensure eco-friendly tourism is maintained. This can be achieved by ensuring that companies have appropriate permits and guides, and purveying the right messages to tourists. Tour guides can also provide a reliable sighting record of sea lions and be a valuable educational tool for tourists and therefore should be consulted and utilised. Tourism businesses also have an interest in the continued presence of New Zealand sea lions as they are a significant attraction for the area. Therefore, cooperation with tourism groups to promote the New Zealand sea lion as



an asset to the southern coastal environment is important. If the community can understand that this species is a treasure, people will be more inspired to protect it.

#### Territorial Authorities

Consultation with the appropriate Councils, Trusts and private land owners will be important to enable appropriate protection measures are put in place. These measures may include restricting public access, protective structures such as fencing or erecting permanent signs. Terrestrial Authorities also have the ability to enforce wildlife protections laws and beach access regulations. Authorities will vary according to the site and therefore consultation should be tailored accordingly.

## **Objective 2: Establish advocacy and educational programmes to increase public awareness and minimise adverse interactions**

The presence of sea lions in Southland has been met with a tentative response by the community. This may be attributed to the relatively recent increase in numbers of sea lions utilising the southern coastal areas (McConkey et al. 2002a). In November 2010, a sample of 39 visitors to Curio bay and Waipapa beach were interviewed about their knowledge of sea lions in the area (Unpub. data). The results found that 54% knew of regulations outlining how to behave around sea lions, but only 38% could distinguish between a New Zealand fur seal and a New Zealand sea lion. The survey also determined that sea lions were the most common reason to visit these two areas. However, sea lions were not perceived as being the most sought after attraction by the residents at Curio Bay. These survey findings indicate that New Zealand sea lions are a significant draw card to visit the area. However, it also revealed that opinions and perceptions surrounding sea lions may not be consistent with reality. Previous experiences and fear can often imprint negative and unrealistic perceptions into people. Education is a way to overcome these misguided perceptions by increasing awareness of sea lions and their behavioural characteristics. Education is achievable through the development of targeted education programmes and utilisation of advocacy material.

### **Educational programmes**

In order to have a positive effect on public perception and understanding, education programmes can aim to promote and build on the following core messages:

1. The conservation value of the New Zealand sea lion:
  - The world's rarest sea lion and endemic to New Zealand
  - Their 'nationally critical' status
  - Current threats to their survival
  - Significance of re-colonisation of the mainland

2. The behaviour and characteristics of New Zealand Sea lions:

- Their confidence around people and playful nature
- The need to rest, socialise and breed on land
- Differing characteristics to New Zealand fur seals

3. Regulations and guidelines on how to behave when encountering a sea lion:

- Maintaining a 10m distance from the sea lion
- Do not disturb the sea lion or harass it in any way
- What to do if approached by a sea lion
- Keep children and dogs under control
- The penalties associated with a protected marine species

The most effective audiences to promote these key educational messages to are: in the schools; and, towards groups most likely to encounter sea lions.

In Schools:

Education is likely to be most effective by targeting school age members of the community. Not only will the knowledge be filtered to their parents, but the next generation will become aware that sea lions are an important part of New Zealand's wildlife. These programmes should focus on creating a sense of ownership and appreciation for these children so that the Sea Lion can be viewed as a treasure.

For high encounter groups:

Education programmes should also target those groups that are most likely to encounter sea lions (e.g. tour operators, divers, fishers, accommodation providers, and surfers). Pre-conceived ideas, underlying issues, and past experiences may have caused negative attitudes towards sea lions amongst these groups and these attitudes may be difficult to change. Education programmes here should aim to identify these issues and perceptions, and attempt to address them through presentation of facts, descriptions of sea lion behaviours and best practice for avoiding conflict.

## **Advocacy materials**

Awareness in the wider community can also be promoted using advocacy materials. Advocacy materials have the potential to reach a wide audience and can therefore be very effective as educational and advocacy tools. Advocacy materials should aim to portray the same key messages as the educational programmes, and should include short and simple content. These materials should be actively encouraged to be present at visitor centres, museums and accommodation providers in Southland for easy accessibility.

Examples of such materials are as follows:

### **Pamphlets:**

The pamphlet: '*New Zealand Sea Lions: living together on the mainland*' should be distributed at any appropriate opportunity. A similar pamphlet with information specific to sea lion management in Southland should be considered for production in the near future. Sea lion encounters on the Southland coasts are mostly with juvenile males that haul out at Curio bay and Waipapa (Ros Cole pers com). Pamphlets should therefore be appropriately tailored to include the region-specific expectations of sea lion behaviour. Posters should also be considered for production should the resources become available, as posters have similar qualities to pamphlets but can be more cost effective as only a limited number need to be published.

### **Media:**

Any media production or exposure with a positive spotlight on sea lions should be encouraged and assistance provided where possible. Media has the ability to portray the conservation value as well as give the public a feeling of involvement in the work being carried out with sea lions. The '*Meet the Locals*' television series can be used to showcase the Department of Conservation's work in this way. Cooperation with the Southland Institute of Technology (SIT) Diploma in digital film, to encourage production of a natural history film showcasing Sea Lions in Southland, would be highly beneficial

#### Permanent Signs:

Permanent signs are a great on-site educational tool and should be used in areas frequented by sea lions. A permanent sign is already housed at Curio bay, in a strategic position to provide key information for visitors. It is also recommended that a 'beware of sea lion' sign be erected at the entrance to the camp ground so that visitors are instantly informed they may encounter a sea lion in the area. Waipapa point is in need of more signs dedicated solely to New Zealand sea lions. The increased numbers of sea lions at Waipapa and the frequent tourist visitation mean that it is important for visitors to be educated on the significance of the rare species they are encountering as well as be aware of regulations for how to behave around sea lions.

#### Temporary signs:

Temporary signs have been used in the past at Curio Bay, only to be stolen at great cost to the department. At present temporary signs do not seem to be a suitable solution to advising the public of sea lion presence and therefore permanent signs should take priority. However, should breeding occur in the Southland area in the future the use of temporary signs will be necessary. Breeding locations can change from year to year, therefore warning the public of sea lions in the area will only be possible with temporary signs.

### **Objective 3: Promotion and involvement in research relevant to New Zealand sea lions in Southland**

#### Habitat use and Distribution in Southland

Understanding of the significance of the Southland beaches for the sea lion population is relatively unknown. Therefore, it is necessary for cooperation with research institutions to encourage studies that increase understanding of Sea lion activities along the southern coast. With this understanding, various locations can be given priorities for conservation and management of public encounters. Consideration of the likelihood of encountering sea lions in coastal areas being developed will be essential and developments may need to adapt accordingly. As such the following research topics will be important to improve understanding of the habitat use by NZ sea lions in Southland:

- The relationship between habitat suitability and habitat selection at various coastal locations
- The potential for a breeding colony to establish in Southland and the likelihood of this occurring in the future
- The future distribution and population size of sea lions in Southland
- The age, sex and number of sea lions utilising beaches frequented by people
- Potential to alter habitat choice through use of decoy's or creating 'attractive' haul out sites.
- The possibility of restricting sea lion access to certain areas through the use of fences and/or deterrents

#### Public knowledge and perception

In order to appropriately tailor educational programmes and advocacy messages, it is essential to understand the knowledge and perceptions of the public. In addition, obtaining such knowledge will better enable Department of Conservation staff to build relationships with community groups. In order to improve this knowledge,

appropriate research needs to be carried out. Research topics that need to be addressed in this area are:

- Increased understanding of the ecotourism industry in Southland and the role that NZ sea lions play
- The views and opinions of coastal residents about sharing the beaches with NZ sea lions, and the reasoning behind these views
- Comprehension of the general public's attitudes towards NZ sea lions
- Knowledge and opinions of the visitors to beaches frequented by NZ sea lions
- The current level and range of educational resources available about sea lions in Southland, including the level of education in schools.

## **Action Plan**

### **To be achieved by 2013**

- Make contact with the appropriate community stakeholders:
  - Make arrangements for regular communication and consultation.
- Identify the current level and range of educational resources available about sea lions in Southland:
  - Investigate possible content for education programmes
- Begin research into public knowledge and perceptions.
  - Compose methods in a way that can track knowledge and perceptions in the years following implementation of this plan
- Begin research and trials to restrict sea lion access and possible deterrent methods
- Distribute advocacy material to locations that have regular and easy access by the public
- Erect permanent educational signs at Waipapa Point

### **To be achieved by 2014**

- Develop an educational programme and begin trials in schools
- Ensure tourist operators can purvey correct and consistent messages to the public and are all operating under the correct permit requirements
- Approach the Southland Institute of Technology with the possibility of a natural history film about sea lions in Southland.
- Begin research into habitat suitability and habitat selection in Southland



**To be achieved by 2015**

- Assess effectiveness school education programmes and make improvements accordingly.
- Begin adapting educational programmes to target high encounter groups
- Investigate the feasibility of establishing a volunteer workshop
- Produced a pamphlet for advocacy specific to sea lions in Southland.

**To be achieved by 2016**

- Have comprehensive understanding of the public's knowledge and opinions and use this information to adapt the actions in this plan more effectively.
- Have a cooperative relationship with coastal residents and ecotourism companies so that the presence of New Zealand sea lions in Southland is embraced
- Have An effective education programme for both schools and high encounter groups

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