



A publication by:

NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Northern Sea Lion

Eumetopias jubatus



Photo credit: Eliezg

Introduction

Northern sea lions are also known as Steller sea lions, are the largest of the eared seals. The world population of the northern sea lion is about 85,000. This number has decreased in the last 30 years. The northern sea lions have been listed as an endangered species.

Characteristics

Northern sea lions are a light tan to reddish brown colour. They have a blunt face with a boxy, bear-like head. They also have a big bulky build and a very thick neck that resembles a lion's mane.

Male sea lions average about 3 meters (10 feet) and weigh about 450-1,000 kilograms (1,000-2,200 pounds). During the mating season, males fast and lose about 200 kilograms (450 pounds). This weight loss enables the males to defend the breeding territories.

Female sea lions average about 2.4 meters (8 feet) and weigh about 180-230 kilograms (400-500 pounds).

Pups average about 1 meter (3 feet) and weigh about 20 kilograms (45 pounds) at birth and have pelage that consists of mainly coarse, tan colored guard hairs.

Lifecycle

The lifecycle of male northern sea lions is about 20 years. Females live longer at about 30 years. Females reach sexual maturity at 3-8 years of age, and males reach sexual maturity at 3-7 years.

Northern sea lions mate during the months of May and July along the bare rocks that are exposed to the open coast. Males arrive at the breeding grounds early and protect their territory for up to 60 days. Males build up their "harem" of females during this time.

Females impregnated from the previous year give birth about three days after arriving to the breeding grounds and nurse their pups from about one year to three years, but most pups are weaned before their first birthdays. Within a short time after giving birth, females mate again to ensure a pup will be born the next year.

Habitat & Behaviour

Northern sea lions are divided in two categories by genetics and range:

- The western population, which live in the Gulf of Alaska, Bering Sea, Russia and small numbers in Japan.
- The eastern population, which live from California, to Oregon, British Columbia, and Southeast Alaska

In BC, large colonies of sea lions are found off northern Vancouver Island and off the southern end of the Queen Charlotte Islands.

The sea lions gather together at four types of sites, these include:

- Rookeries - Exposed, remote islands where calving and breeding take place.
- Year-round haul-outs - Areas exposed to oceanic swells, close to large landmasses. Animal abundance does not fluctuate much throughout the year.
- Winter haul-outs - Exposed locations and sheltered inlets and bays. Used mainly, but not exclusively, in winter.
- Winter rafting sites - These sites exist where there are no suitable haul-outs. Rafting locations are usually found close to shore in sheltered inlets and channels. The location of rafting sites is dynamic - likely due to changes in the distribution of prey. Rafting behaviour occurs mainly in winter, but also in fall and spring.

Northern sea lions typically stay close to shore, but can be seen as far as 130 kilometres (80 miles) away from the shore. Although adult sea lions do not migrate, the juveniles can be found far from their birth home.

Their diet consists of fish, including blackfish, rockfish, greenling, salmon, squid, clams, and crabs. While breeding, the northern sea lions feed mainly on octopus and a variety of fish, most commonly rockfish. Outside of the breeding season, they mainly feast on schooling fishes (e.g., herring, hake, pollock, dogfish, and salmon). Salmon actually consists of a small percentage of their diet. Not only do these animals hunt off the shore, but they have also been known to take fish from commercial fishing nets.

The daily consumption of males differs from females. Males eat more per day at about 10 – 20 kilograms (22 – 45 pounds), while females eat about 5 – 10 kilograms (11 – 22 pounds).

Threats

The northern sea lions' only natural predators are sharks and orcas.

The BC population of the northern sea lion has changed very little from the 1960s and is about 7,000. Previous threats from 1912 to 1968 included commercial hunting of the sea lions for mink food and predator control by the Department of Fisheries.

Pollution of the oceans and declining fish stocks also plays a factor in the lives of the sea lions.

What we can do to help

In Canada, the Fisheries Act protects these animals from intentional killings. Although there are laws that protect the northern sea lions, programs have been put in place to maintain the population of the animals, so that they do not interfere with commercial fishermen.

Conclusion

Although the killing of the northern sea lions has been outlawed for a number of years, we must question why the government has allowed programs for killing these animals. Putting an end to the predatory maintenance-killing program would help the numbers of the northern sea lions increase rather than remain stable.

Becoming active in organizations and programs to help preserve these animals and clean up our oceans are the best methods in which people can help make changes.

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