



NOAA FISHERIES

**Marine Mammal Protection
Laws and Management
Greater Atlantic Regional
Fisheries Office of
Protected Resources
978-281-9328**

**Seal Research
Northeast Fisheries
Science Center
508-495-2000**

**Greater Atlantic Marine
Animal Reporting Hotline
866-755-6622**

Frequently Asked Questions About Seals in the Greater Atlantic

Are seals new to New England?

No, archaeological and historical evidence shows that gray and harbor seals once populated most of the northeast. Federal protections and a robust seal population in Canada have allowed gray seals to start reclaiming and recovering their populations in their historic U.S. range.

How many seals are there?

For harbor seals, the latest scientific assessments indicate that the minimum population is estimated to be around 66,884 animals. This includes animals distributed from the eastern Canadian Arctic and Greenland south to southern New England and New York (occasionally down to the Carolinas).

We don't have a good estimate of how many gray seals are currently in U.S. waters. Canadian population models estimate that there are likely around 505,000 in Canadian waters.

Are seal populations increasing?

Gray seal abundance appears to be increasing. Trends in the harbor seal population are uncertain; there is evidence to suggest that the population may be declining, or perhaps shifting its distribution.

Can I chase a seal off a beach or breakwater, or deter it from an area where I want to fish?

The Marine Mammal Protection Act does not allow private citizens to deter marine mammals from undeveloped property (e.g., a beach) or public property (e.g., a breakwater). Private citizens may **ONLY** deter seals that are exhibiting problem behavior resulting in, or that could result in, damage to private property, fishing gear, or catch. However, we are working to come up with a list of safe and legal deterrent methods for seals that approach fishing gear. Until this list is approved and published, we recommend recreational fishermen remove their gear from the water if a seal approaches.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act does provide some authority to city, county, state, and federal government officials or their employees to deter "nuisance" marine mammals that exhibit dangerous behaviors. Otherwise, all seals are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which prohibits harassment of the animals (harassment is any action that changes or has the potential to change the animal's natural behavior). Scaring seals back into the water is a form of harassment and is illegal.

Harbor Seals



Gray seals



Graphics by Uko Gorter

Are seals ruining the water quality on Cape Cod beaches?

According to research conducted by [Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute](#), there is no evidence that the presence of seals is contributing to water quality issues on Cape Cod.

Is the growing gray seal population bringing in the great white sharks?

Warming ocean waters are bringing the sharks further north for longer periods of time. Seals are a prey source for some sharks, so this and the growing gray seal population may be the reasons we are seeing more great whites closer to shore in Massachusetts during the summer. For safety, never swim near seals or seal resting sites. If you see a seal with shark bite injuries, please report it to the Greater Atlantic Marine Animal Reporting Hotline (866-755-6622), but do not push the seal back into the water.

If I see a seal while fishing, what should I do?

Until the list of approved deterrents is published, NOAA Fisheries recommends recreational fishermen remove gear from the water if a seal approaches to keep yourself, your gear, and the seal safe. Also, try to keep a safe distance of at least 150 feet, and never attempt to touch or feed the seal. Feeding seals, even if with leftover or unwanted fish, is illegal and can also be dangerous for you and the seal. Seals bite and can become aggressive if they become accustomed to receiving handouts from people.

If you accidentally hook, entangle, or injure a seal with your fishing gear or boat, please report the incident by calling 866-755-6622.

What should I do if I see a sick, entangled, or injured seal?

Call our hotline so authorized responders can assess and respond to the situation if necessary: 866-755-6622. Never attempt rescue efforts on your own. This is illegal and dangerous. Pups left alone on beaches are not necessarily in distress and may be waiting for their mothers to return. Never “help” a seal back into the water, or attempt to remove the pup from the beach yourself. Many times these well-intentioned actions result in the death of the seal pup.

How can I learn more about seals and seal protections?

Visit our webpages to learn more about seals, how you can view them safely, and what you can do to protect them. You can also request printed materials from our office by calling 978-281-9328.

- [Share the Shore With Seals](#)
- [Greater Atlantic Marine Mammal Viewing Guidelines](#)
- [Greater Atlantic Protected Resources Division](#)
- [Northeast Fisheries Science Center Seal Research Program](#)

Do commercial fishermen need to report seal catches?

Commercial fishermen are required to report any accidental injury or death of a marine mammal (including seals) that occurs during fishing activities within 48 hours of returning to port. Reports can be submitted online or by filling out the Marine Mammal Mortality/Injury Reporting form. Both the online and PDF of this form (with instructions on how to submit) are available on [our website](#).