

## IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SEALS IN THE WADDEN SEA

Progress Report by the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat



1. The Agreement on the Conservation of Seals in the Wadden Sea (WSSA), which was the first regional agreement under the Bonn Convention, was concluded between Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands on 16 October 1990 in Bonn, Germany, and entered into force one year later. The Secretariat for the Agreement and the coordinating institution for the Seal Management Plan is the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat in Wilhelmshaven, Germany. The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the agreement was acknowledged at the 10<sup>th</sup> Wadden Sea Day in Wilhelmshaven, Germany, on 27 August 2015, organized by the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat and the National Park Administration Wadden Sea of the Federal State of Lower Saxony.

2. The aim of the Seal Agreement is to promote close cooperation amongst the Parties in order to achieve and maintain a favorable conservation status for the harbour seal population, which was a particularly critical issue in 1988 and 2002. The population was reduced by about 60% in 1988 and 47% in 2002 as a result of two disastrous Phocine Distemper virus (PDV)-epizootic.

3. In the framework of the WSSA, the Parties adopt and continuously update so-called Seal Management Plans (SMP) building on the obligations of the Seal Agreement. The current "Conservation and Management Plan for the Seal Population, 2012-2016", contains objectives and action points on habitat protection, research and monitoring, pollution and wardening, taking and public information, which are continuously implemented. The SMP is an essential instrument that seeks a balance between conservation and management of the area, and contributes to achieving viable stocks. The Parties continuously amend the plan in order to meet the challenges of protecting this flagship species of the Wadden Sea.

[http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/smp\\_2012-2016\\_final.pdf](http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/smp_2012-2016_final.pdf)

4. The plan covers the Wadden Sea stock of the harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina vitulina*) and is also extended to cover the breeding stocks of the grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) in the Wadden Sea, which is not covered by the Wadden Sea Seal Agreement. The overall aim is to restore and maintain viable stocks and a natural reproduction capacity, including juvenile surviving of the harbour and grey seals.

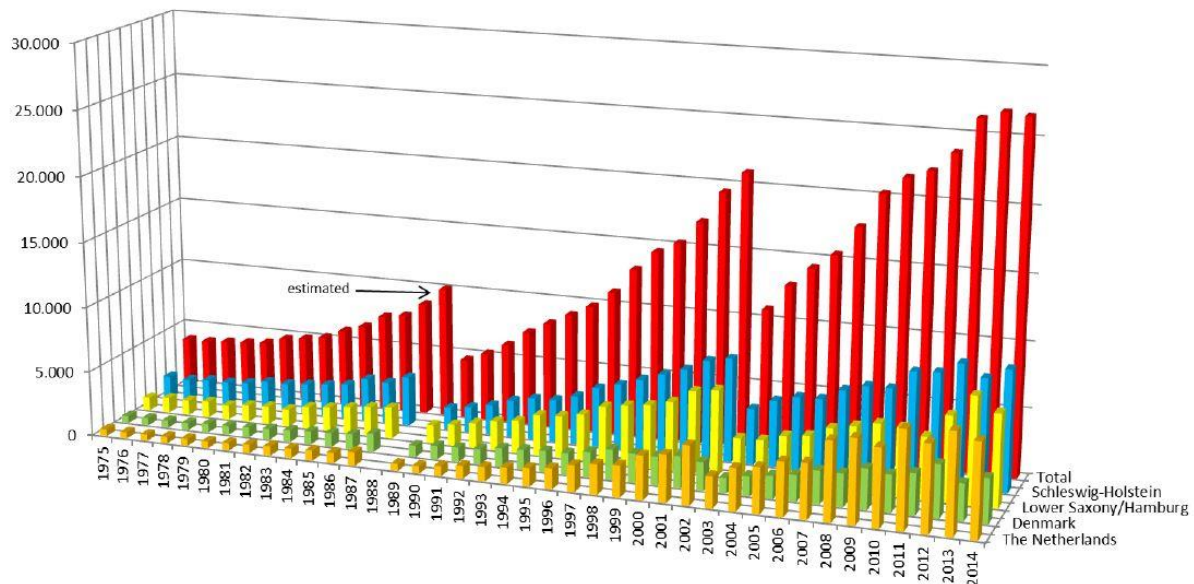
5. Since the last epizootic in 2002, the population of the harbour seals has recovered significantly. According to coordinated aerial flights in the entire Wadden Sea, a total of about 26,576 seals were counted in 2014, which is a small decrease of less than 1% compared to 2013. The population is therefore considered as stable, but is not reaching new record numbers as in former years. Of the counted animals 8,439 were pups, equivalent to an increase of 21% compared to last year's counts, which is the highest number of pups ever counted in the Wadden Sea in terms of absolute numbers, as well as relative to the total population. The Trilateral Seal Expert Group (TSEG) considered that the decreasing growth rate might be due to the fact that the harbour seal population is approaching its carrying capacity under the current environmental conditions in the Wadden Sea, or to the fact that the moulting peak has shifted over the years.

The estimate for the total Wadden Sea harbour seal population, including seals being in the water during the survey, can be calculated using a correction factor, which considers that an average of 32% of the seals were in the water during summer. By using this correction factor the total population size of harbour seals in the Wadden Sea in 2014 was calculated to be about 39,100.

The increased mortality in 2014 caused by the avian influenza H10N7 did not hit the Wadden Sea until after the completion of the annual counts and does therefore not have an effect on the data presented in this report. It is expected that more than 90% of the harbour seals survived the disease.

[http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/TMAP\\_downloads/Seals/harbour\\_seal\\_report\\_2014\\_b.pdf](http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/TMAP_downloads/Seals/harbour_seal_report_2014_b.pdf)

Number of counted Harbour seals in the wadden sea since 1975



6. For the grey seals, the upward trend in population development has continued. Originally native to the Wadden Sea region, this species disappeared almost completely. However, over the last three decades grey seals have been recolonizing again. During the moulting period in spring 2014 4276 grey seals were counted on coordinated surveys in Germany and the Netherlands, equivalent to an increase of more than 50% compared to the previous year. Though there clearly is a variation between the countries, the continued increase in numbers indicates that this growth might be an actual trend. Even if this growth is supported by the pups recruiting into the breeding population, there are certainly large numbers of animals immigrating into the area, mainly from UK waters.

7. The successful protection of harbour and grey seals over the last decades is a protection measure which was also acknowledged in the acceptance of the Dutch and German Wadden Sea as World Heritage Site in June 2009, and finally the Danish part in 2014, by the UNESCO.

8. The discussion on taking and releasing seals is still ongoing, driven by fact that the population is on the highest level ever reported. "Taking" is defined as the removal of living seals from the natural environment to check the health condition of the animals: as a result, the animals will be (1) released back in its environment, (2) euthanized if necessary or (3) kept for rehabilitation in appropriate nursery centers for a subsequent release into the wild. Most often "taking" relates to seal pups found without mother, or to weak or sick animals.

9. It is clearly stated in the first Seal Management Plan (1991-1995) adopted pursuant to the WSSA that taking of seals is prohibited. This was later further defined and explicitly declared in the so-called Leeuwarden Declaration (LD § 60, Appendix 3) by the responsible Trilateral Management Authorities at their 7<sup>th</sup> Trilateral Ministerial Conference (CWSS, 1994). They agreed "to reduce the taking of seals to the lowest level possible". A good health status of the seal population can only be achieved if natural selection processes can occur. From a biological and wildlife management point of view, human activities should not interfere with these basic processes. Even if animal welfare aspects are taken into account, human handling of seals should be restricted to a low level.

10. Overall, the conservation and protection of the Wadden Sea seal population is a success story. The CWSS has been instrumental in reaching this success by joining and harmonizing the efforts of the Parties including experts and managers and by enhancing the awareness of the conservation and protection needs of the population. The WSSA is also an excellent example of how various international instruments and bodies from within and outside of the UN system can join successfully

efforts to achieve a mutual aim. The objective of the Agreement has been largely achieved and focus is now on maintaining a favorable conservation by continuing the joint management of the population and extending the knowledge basis for management.

11. Further information on marine mammals in the Wadden Sea including Harbour seals and Grey seals are given on the CWSS website (<http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/management/seal-management>) and in the final draft version of the Thematic Report No. 20: Marine Mammals, Quality Status Report 2009 (<http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/20-marine-mammals-10-03-05.pdf>):

Reijnders, P.J.H., Brasseur, M.J.M., Borchardt, T., Camphuysen, K.(C.J.), Czech, R., Gilles, A., Jensen, L.F., Leopold, M., Lucke, K., Ramdohr, S., Scheidat, M., Siebert, U., & J. Teilmann, 2009. Thematic Report No. 20: Marine Mammals. Quality Status Report 2009. Wadden Sea Ecosystem No. 25, Trilateral Monitoring and Assessment Group, Common Wadden Sea Secretariat, Wilhelmshaven, Germany.

Wilhelmshaven, September 2015