

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

Progress Report by the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat

Version 12/08/2013



1. The Agreement on the Conservation of Seals in the Wadden Sea, 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.

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 particular 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. "The Conservation and Management Plan for the Seal Population, 2012-2016", the Seal Management Plan (SMP), builds on the obligations of the Seal Agreement and 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 challenge of protecting this flagship species of the Wadden Sea.

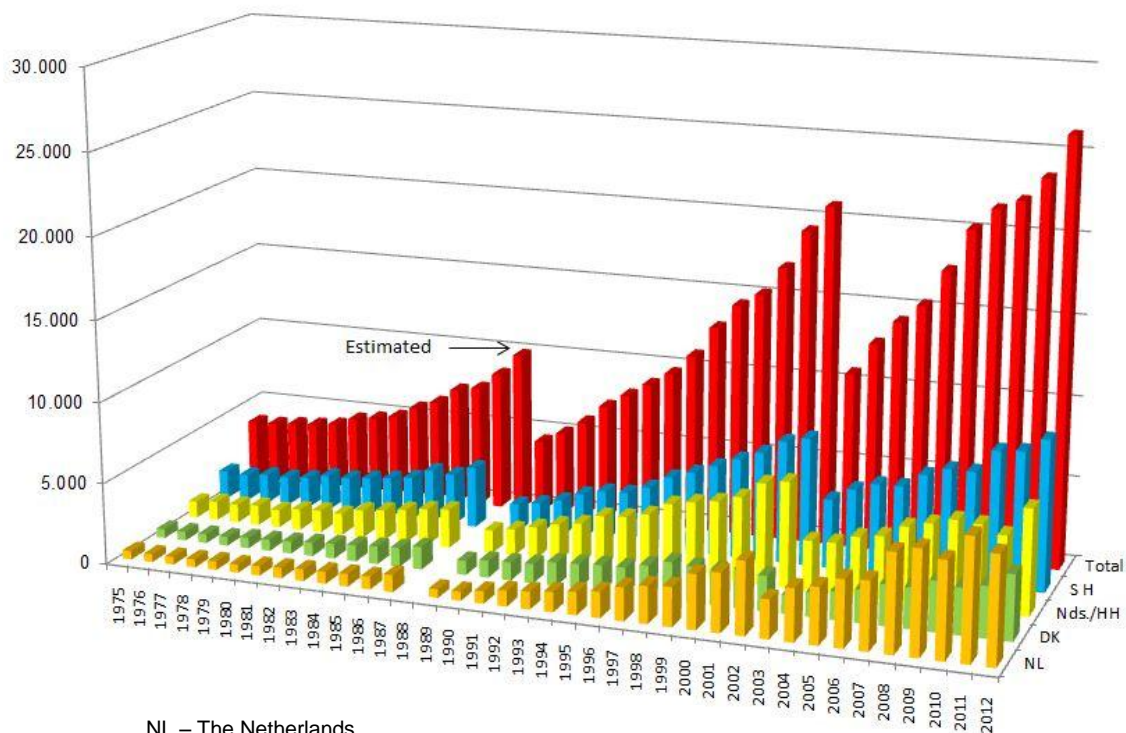
http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/smp_2012-2016_final.pdf

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, the latter one 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 26,220 seals were counted in 2012, which is a further increase to 2011 of 11%. From the counted animals 7,267 were pups, equivalent to an increase of 3% compared to last year's counts. This year's increase brings the average annual increase since the 2002 epidemic up to 10.4% not far from the theoretical maximum rate. Trilateral Seal Expert Group (TSEG) considered the Wadden Sea harbour seal population as still below the carrying capacity of the environment; although smaller growth rates in 2009 and 2010 gave rise to speculation that the population was approaching this carrying capacity.

http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/trilateral_seal_counts_report_2012.pdf

Number of Counted Harbour Seals in the Wadden Sea since 1975



NL – The Netherlands
 DK – Denmark
 Nds./HH – Lower Saxony / Hamburg, Germany
 SH – Schleswig Holstein, Germany

6. Also for the Grey seals, the increasing trend in the population development has continued. After this originally native species of the Wadden Sea region almost completely disappeared, over the last three decades they have been recolonizing again. During the moulting period in spring 2012 4039 Grey seals were counted on coordinated surveys in Germany and the Netherlands, equivalent to an increase of 22% compared to the previous year. Though there clearly is a variation between the countries, the continued increase in numbers for 2012 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 also found its recognition in the acceptance of the Dutch and German Wadden Sea as World Heritage Site in June 2009 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 here as the removal of living seals from the natural environment to check the health condition of the animal, and then decide to (1) release the animal in its environment, (2) to euthanize it or (3) to try to rehabilitate the animal and subsequently release it into the wild. Most often "taking" relates to seal pups found without mother, or to weak or sick seals.

9. It is clearly stated in the Seal Management Plan (1991-1995), pursuant to the Seal Agreement (concluded in 1991), that taking of seals is prohibited. This was later on further defined and explicitly declared in the so-called Leeuwarden Declaration (LD § 60, Appendix 3) by the responsible Trilateral Management Authorities at their 7th 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 Seal Agreement 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 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.