

**Cornwall Seal Group (CSG)** was set up in response to an interest expressed by people, who met by chance at various seal locations and events. The group held its first meeting in February 2004 and has held bimonthly meetings ever since – the next meeting will be our 22<sup>nd</sup>. 38 different members from all corners of the globe (Australia, France and Canada) have attended meetings, but most members live locally and share a passion for Cornwall's wild seals. Members of the Seal Group carry out 10 core tasks.

1. **Clifftop observation and recording.** Our volunteers go out onto cliff tops in all weathers to count, observe, record and photograph seals all round our coast. This takes hours of patience, persistence and a willingness to be at the mercy of tides and the weather. In our last annual report, 496 different observations were made on 315 different days (87% of days!) This represents a significant achievement and high degree of commitment by volunteers.
2. **Photo identification.** Most seals in Cornwall are Grey Seals. Despite their name, they vary in colour from white to black and cream to chocolate with all hues in between! Each one has a unique fur pattern that enables it to be identified from all other seals! The group has built up a catalogue of digital images of almost 500 different seals, who have all been observed at one haul out location. Each seal has a name reflecting its fur pattern (a bit like trying to see pictures in clouds or ink blots!)
3. **Learning more about Cornwall's wild seals.** We are beginning to realise that not all haul outs are occupied all year and that some are preferred by females, whilst others are male dominated. Haul outs may not have seals that are resident all year, it may be that many seals are just passing through and that haul outs may be more like 'service stations' on a seal motorway between France, SW Wales and Ireland. We regularly get a French seal visit Cornwall and seals from Cornwall are known to go to SW Ireland; one seal swam from Cornwall to SW Wales and back in the Summer of 2005. At a key Cornish haul out site, up to 227 different seals were identified in 1 year and we don't identify all the seals we see! For the last 2 years, it has been possible to use our past data to predict which seals will visit a haul out in which future month and this has proved surprisingly successful!
4. **Supporting research of Cornwall's seals.** More recently we have been able to encourage more Further and Higher Education students to do their research on Grey Seals. We help where we can by providing ideas, data, resources or moral support. There are currently 5 research projects underway into 'Seal Strandings'; A Cornwall 'Seal Census', 'What makes a good seal haul out'; 'Seal injuries' and 'A 10 year management plan for Seals in Cornwall.' The more we learn, the more we realise there is to know.
5. **Linking organisations.** The group has become a focus for all stakeholders with an interest in seals and meetings are regularly attended by representatives from Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Cornwall County Council, The National Seal Sanctuary, British Divers Marine Life Rescue and The National Trust. We have hosted visits to see seals by people from Dutch and Canadian rescue and rehabilitation organisations. More close to home, we contact British Divers Marine Life Rescue if we see a seal in trouble, help in rescues as trained BDMLR Marine Mammal Medics, respond to calls to observe seals when asked to do so by the National Seal Sanctuary, have assisted RSPCA West Hatch Wildlife Centre to release seals who are ready to be released and work with the CWT Marine Strandings Network to record the deaths of seals, when they occur round our coasts.
6. **Providing information for the public.** Our experience suggests that many people enjoy seeing seals, Britain's largest mammal, and are interested to find out more about them. We have a display board for events, 4 different Grey Seal talks and 3 free information leaflets available about Cornwall's seals, which are genetically distinct from Grey Seals in Scotland. Grey Seals are one of the rarest seal species in the World and between 30 and 50% of them live in UK waters. So, we have an international responsibility to conserve and protect our Grey Seals. We do all we can to help people

learn more about seals – the more people know and understand about seals, the more they seem to admire, respect and want to help seals.

7. **Reducing the impact of humans on seals.** People can have a negative impact on seals, but mostly this is unintentional. Key interactions people have with seals include seals being repeatedly disturbed from their haul out sites (sometimes as often as 7 times an hour), seals getting caught up in discarded or storm damaged nets and marine litter, seals suffering from poor quality water and seal haul out and migration behaviour being interrupted by noise pollution from ocean construction sites. We have worked with Cornwall County Council and the Cornwall Wildlife Trust to produce a local version of the Marine Code of Conduct aimed at reducing incidents of disturbance at key haul out sites and around the coast in general. We have liaised with the National Trust to erect low profile signs above a key haul out to reduce cliff top disturbance and have given talks to 771 Air Sea Rescue Squadron at RNAS Culdrose, who now avoid flying over key seal pupping coves during the peak of the breeding season.
8. **Representing the interests of wild seals.** Grey seals seem to be far too busy going about their business to worry about their future and what's going to happen about issues such as water quality and Global Warming! So they need our help! We record incidents of disturbance and net entanglement and provide interested organisations such as the EU Commission, the UK Marine Bill Consultation and the Cornwall Sea Fisheries Committee with this information, as appropriate.
9. **Raising funds to help volunteers help wild seals.** Our volunteers donate hundreds of hours of their time and energy for pup watches to assess if a rescue is needed, carrying out seal rescues, releasing rehabilitated seals, carrying out routine observation and identification work, designing leaflets, giving talks, writing articles and reports and supporting student research. We also work towards longer term aims for greater public access to information about seals, such as webcams, publications and educational experiences. All of this incurs unavoidable costs, for example printing, so we raise funds through donations, our wild seal adoption scheme, sales and events to cover our costs and we are a 'not for profit' organisation.
10. **Campaigning for change.** We are currently part of a coalition of 13 regional, national and international organisations who are actively campaigning for a review of the Conservation of Seals Act enabling it to become a more effective Protection of Seals Act, much more in tune with modern views towards animal welfare. This will more effectively protect seals from the random and illegal shooting incidents that occur now.

It is amazing that we still know so little about the seals that live in our seas. This was proved by a seal called Canvey. In 1996, Canvey was rescued as a pup by the National Seal Sanctuary. He was released in 1997 with a brown flipper tag number 50009. In 2000, Canvey was first identified by CSG members at a north coast haul out site. Between 2000 and 2006, Canvey returned to this haul out site just once annually. Despite not visiting in 2005, Canvey returned in 2006 and was last seen alive in the wild on 21/02/06. 6 months later, Canvey had made his way round to Porthleven, but sadly had washed up dead in the harbour. Fortunately his death was recorded by a CWT Marine Strandings Network volunteer. He was 10 years old when he died – almost middle aged for a seal. Whilst a sad event, we at least knew what had happened to Canvey and had been able to follow his life through from puphood. Despite this, we still knew relatively little about his life. As Canvey didn't stay at the haul out beach, he must have been passing through. Where did he come from? Where was he going to? Where did Canvey spend most of the year? Did Canvey father any pups? Whilst we probably know more about the life of Canvey than most seals in Cornwall, his death still raised more questions than it has answered. Perhaps we will never know where Canvey lived most of his life, but we hope that the continued monitoring and identification work by the Cornwall Seal Group will help us answer these questions for other seals in the future.