



Useful tips for sea kayakers encountering seals

Ocean kayaking is a hugely rewarding and environmentally sustainable way of exploring the wonders of our marine world that can present a few surprises! The most common marine mammal likely to be encountered is a seal. Also Britain's largest mammal, encounters can be a little scary, for both you and the seal, when unexpected!

Tips to get the most out of your trip around the coast!

Plan your route carefully and anticipate where you might see seals by researching sites on the internet or asking locals.

Keep your eyes peeled for the sight of seals hauled out on rocks, which they can do all year round to digest their food, or swimming at the surface. Seals are most vulnerable during their moulting season (Spring) and their breeding season (Autumn.) Often the first clue to their presence is the sounds seals make – howling across open water or snorts as they exhale explosively at the surface. Seals are very curious creatures that like to follow unsuspecting kayakers, so don't forget to look behind you too!

Once you have spotted a seal, aim to keep quiet, as human voices sound unusual and scary to seals! It is possible for you to creep up on an unsuspecting, snoozing seal, but this often results in the worst kind of disturbance, as you are too close by the time the seal wakes up and the seal will stampede surprisingly quickly, gashing its belly on sharp rocks and ripping out claws caught between boulders, in its careless haste to reach the safety of the sea.

Aim to keep your distance and paddle slowly, sideways on, to the seals (approaching them bow first makes you look like a predator!) Always observe a seal's reactions to your presence. Repeatedly looking at you in an alert way and moving nearer the water's edge, are signs that you are already close enough, so back away slightly, remain still and avoid eye contact, as this may be perceived as a threat. Leave the seal with an obvious escape route back to the sea. Please never attempt to land where you see seals and stay in the company of seals less than 10 minutes, remembering that you are unlikely to be the only people the seals have seen that day. Repeated disturbance off haul out rocks creates a double energy whammer for seals. They haul out to digest their food, so being prematurely disturbed into the sea reduces the amount of energy they can get from their food, whilst using more energy to rush into the sea and haul back out again. This is likely to upset their energy balance and long term healthy status.

Seals are curious marine creatures and interact intelligently with humans. This makes them susceptible to developing humanised behaviour to the detriment of their long term survival. You can help keep seals wild by resisting the temptation to get into the sea with them, not touching them and never ever giving them food. Feeding wild seals creates huge problems for people and seals, as seals soon learn to associate boats with a quick and easy meal, leading more seals in and around harbours and to increased conflict with the fishing industry.

Finally, other people like to know what marine life is about, so please report any sightings of seals to Cornwall Seal Group by emailing sue@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk giving the date, location and number of seals seen and any other relevant information and Cornwall Wildlife Trust by visiting their website http://www.ercis.co.uk/wildlife_recording/

Many thanks for being a seal friendly kayaker.

Enjoy your time out on the water!

www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk