

Sharing the beach with New Zealand sea lions

The return of New Zealand sea lions to Otago is a good news story for a threatened endemic species which was hunted to the point of extinction, first by Maori for food, and subsequently by sealers. New Zealand sea lion behaviour is very different from the fur seal behaviour most people are familiar with. It is worth taking time to reflect on this, because understanding sea lion behaviour will have a huge bearing on your experience during an encounter.

Firstly, sea lions have a strong preference for sandy beaches which they use to rest, sleep, mate and play. They will often interact with each other socially while ashore, but they also need to sleep. As people also frequent sandy beaches, many folk have now encountered sea lions, even though there are less than 150 of them in Otago.

Secondly, unlike fur seals, New Zealand sea lions are not afraid of people. Rather than run away, they will charge at you if you get too close. Keep a reasonable distance and they are unlikely to bother you, especially when they are resting. It is important to realise the charge is usually a bluff, indicating that you have invaded their personal space. Back off slowly and they are unlikely to pursue you far. It is also worth emphasising that you **CAN** walk between sea lions and the water. A widely known rule for **fur seals**, specifies not to get between them and the water **because** when fur seals are disturbed they will race back to sea.

New Zealand sea lions can move quickly and reasonably effortlessly on land, allowing them to roam considerable distances inland looking for that 'perfect quiet spot'. People can get a fright when they stumble on a sea lion unexpectedly. Be aware of the possibility that there might be sea lions when you are walking through the dunes.

Sea lions can be curious, and they like to play. This is particularly true of the younger ones. Try not to get into a situation where you are running away from a young sea lion; they think it is a game. Back away slowly, and get right out of their space. Often, with playful sea lions, the trick is about timing; they are easily distracted. If you wait out of view for five minutes they are likely to have moved on.

Sea lions are truly in their element when in the water, and those engaged in water sports will know you cannot hide from a sea lion that has taken an interest in you. Remember they are usually just curious. Sea lions approach people in the same way they would approach another sea lion, but they have a way of saying hello that tests your nerves. Once you are approached at close quarters it is important not to engage, even if they are just playing. Would you play wrestle with someone who weighed over 200 kg? Avoid engaging by not making eye contact and by moving slowly away. Do not race away in a panic, or try to push the sea lion. Stay horizontal in the water. The sea lion may try to mouth your fins (or the end of your booties); ignore him - this is his ploy to get you to engage. Be really boring. The sea lion will divide his attention between everyone in a group, so there will be more time to relax and enjoy the experience if you are swimming with others. Some surfers who are familiar with sea lion antics claim there is a local advantage when they turn up during surfing competitions.

Special care is needed not to encourage sea lions to view fishing boats as a source of food. Please clean fish well out to sea, or keep the offal on the boat until you get home. It is well known that feeding wild animals can lead to problems; spare a thought for people on smaller boats who get approached by a sea lion with high expectations of being fed. It is an offence to feed marine mammals.

And of course the usual rules apply in respect to dog control around sea lions as for other wildlife species. Unlike most other wildlife, sea lions may choose fight over flight – an added incentive for you to carry a lead and to ensure your dog is under close supervision when visiting the beach. Vehicles should also take particular care not to impact on wildlife. The use of trail bikes on the beach or in the dunes will disturb sea lion rest. It is an offence to harass sea lions, or to drive a vehicle within 50m of them.

To summarise, sea lions behaviour is different to that of fur seals, but is also quite predictable. They are New Zealand's own unique sea lion, recovering from near extinction, and this requires that they re-establish on the mainland. Your tolerance and willingness to learn about sea lions will help minimise conflict on the beaches. Please contact DOC if you do have specific concerns.

What should I do if I encounter a sea lion?

Please follow these simple guidelines:

- Always stay at least 10m away (10m from sleeping sea lions and 20m from active sea lions). If you come across sea lions on the track, back off and find a different route.
- Do not disturb sea lions – do not make loud noises, throw things at them or drive vehicles in their vicinity.
- Keep dogs well away from sea lions, preferably on a lead.
- Keep children under close supervision.
- If you are in a group, do not surround sea lions - keep a low profile.
- Be prepared to back away if a sea lion takes an interest in you.
- If a sea lion approaches you in the water, avoid looking it the eye and move slowly away.
- Never attempt to handle sea lions (they will bite if provoked, and can carry diseases such as TB and salmonella).
- Do not feed sea lions.
- Let the DoC know if there you are concerned about the safety of a sea lion, or to report inappropriate behaviour around them.
- Enjoy these impressive animals!

More information is available about sea lions from the New Zealand Sea Lion Trust website www.sealiontrust.org.nz

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