

It is time to know...

... where the sea lions feed off Otago. We have the wonderful opportunity to be watching the establishment of a new population of New Zealand sea lions along the Otago coast. Yet we know very little about their behaviours once they leave our beaches and disappear in the ocean. Considering the significant bycatch issues at their main breeding ground in the Auckland Islands, we should start determining what the future will bring for the Otago sea lions. There are already numerous threats to this population. Bycatch in fishery, disturbance or destruction of marine habitats, and pollution are all certainly on the list.

It is thus time to study the foraging behaviours of the Otago sea lions. This study is proposed to start in April this year supervised by Dr. Louise Chilvers, marine mammal scientist for DoC, with research conducted by Amélie Augé, PhD student in Zoology at Otago University, and in collaboration with the DoC Coastal Otago office and members of the Sea Lion Trust. Four nursing females will be captured and fitted with SPLASH tags (combined satellite and dive tags) and VHF transmitters. From these devices, we will know where they go to forage, how deep and long they dive and their attendance patterns onshore. By analysing these data with marine habitat maps and fishing activities, we should gain of good understanding of their habits, needs, critical habitats and threats. We hope to be able to keep you updated soon.

Legend for Photo 1: Two female New Zealand sea lions equipped with SPLASH tags (satellite linked location/temperature/depth/light recorders) and VHF transmitters.



Photo 1

News from the South!

The annual expedition led by DoC in the Auckland Islands to monitor the population of New Zealand sea lions is now back with good news and lots of data. This summer, another expedition also went to Campbell Island to find out what is going on with the sea lions down there. They came back with amazing results.

At the Auckland Islands, the total number of pups born was similar to last year with only a 2% decrease in pup numbers. We had the chance to tag all 417 pups born on Enderby Island this year and another 400 at Dundas Island from a total pup number of 1635. We have more reassuring news concerning the Figure of Eight Island colony with 74 pups counted this year (compared to the lower

70 and 62 from the last 2 years). In relation to the Otago sea lions, brand 169 was once more back on the breeding beach at Enderby Island and held a territory around the harem towards the end of the season. Brand 509, who is now a beautiful big boy, was holding a territory in the harem for a few weeks.

At Enderby Island this year, we satellite tagged several juveniles of both sexes. A male yearling regularly dived up to 160m even if his mother was still nursing him! A shark bite survey was also conducted, following our observation of a great white shark killing two adult males last year at Sandy Bay. “Stuffy”, our taxidermied bycaught female, was used to study the social behaviour of the sea lions. All data is currently being processed. As exciting sightings, we had the chance to witness a huge male elephant seal coming ashore on the beach at Sandy Bay on the side of the harem... One of the big male sea lions decided to defend the females (even if the elephant seal probably just wanted to rest without any bad intention!). Brave... but dumb male – see photo. A young female (blue coffin 4116) who was found entangled in a net in January 2006, and was then saved by the team, came back very healthy this year. The injuries from the net were deep but the scars are now clean.

The expedition to Campbell Island gave fantastic results. For the first time, the team went down early in the season and confirmed that a large harem of New Zealand sea lions is formed at Davis Point. They even found another smaller harem at another site. The team tagged more than 450 pups but this number cannot be compared to earlier pup production estimates. This expedition was previously running in March or April when the females and pups have already dispersed and cannot be easily found.

These were the brief news of our summer down South. We had an amazing season with lots of good and interesting information. We left the wonderful environments of the Auckland Islands and Campbell Island with some regret but are happy to be back to be able to share our findings and memories. Till next time...

Legend photo 1: Adult male sea lion protecting (trying to?!) the females against a pacific elephant seal at Sandy Bay.



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Photo 1

Legend for photo 2: The young female (blue coffin 4116) who was entangled in a net 2 years ago came back to Sandy Bay, Enderby Island, this year looking healthy but bearing large scars.



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Photo 2

Legend for photo 3: Part of the New Zealand sea lion colony at Dundas Island in January 2008.



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Photo 3