



ANIMAL CONCERN

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Wednesday, 31 January 2007

Ross Finnie MSP,
Minister for the Environment and Rural Development,
The Scottish Parliament,
Edinburgh EH99 1SP

Dear Minister,

I write concerning the recent announcement that common seal numbers have plummeted around the Northern Isles and in the Tay estuary. I understand that in the last five years numbers have dropped by nearly 50% in some areas.

The reason for this is unknown and could involve a large number of factors including food stock reduction because of depletion by commercial over-fishing and/or fish population migration due to global warming. Legal and illegal persecution of seals by fishery interests has most likely also played a part. There could also be some residual effect on breeding success due to the phocine distemper epidemics of past years. It is possible pup production could have reduced naturally as the recovering common seal population falls back to optimum sustainable levels.

Natural predation of seals by Orcas may also have played a small part in population reduction. Over the last few years a bit of a tourist trade has been created in watching Orcas take seals close to the Shetland shore. Only yesterday there were reports of a pod of Orcas taking seals in the Forth estuary near the bridges. Seal numbers have not declined in the Forth and the whales may have been forced south and inshore to find a better food supply.

The one thing we do know is that no-one yet knows for sure what has caused this drastic reduction in the globally important population of common seals which inhabit Scottish waters and which you have an international duty to protect.

I ask you to take urgent and immediate steps to protect common seals along the whole eastern coast and Northern Isles of Scotland. In particular I request that you close the fisheries defence clause loophole in the Conservation of Seals Act. Section 9(1)c of the Act permits anyone with fishing nets or creels to shoot, without the need for a licence, any seal at anytime including during the breeding season. This is a ludicrous situation at the best of times but it amounts to total negligence of our duty to protect common seals when we know their numbers are in serious decline.

To offer common seals real protection it would be best to ban killing of all seals to ensure commons are not mistaken for young greys and shot.

The situation off our West Coast should also be carefully monitored. Indeed it might be best to take precautionary action to protect seals there before any problem is detected.

I hope you agree that this is an extremely urgent matter and I look forward to an early response.

Yours sincerely,

John F Robins,
Campaigns Consultant to Animal Concern

*Copied to Ian Walker Esq.,
Wildlife & Habitats Division, SEERAD.*