



Harbor Seal Monitoring

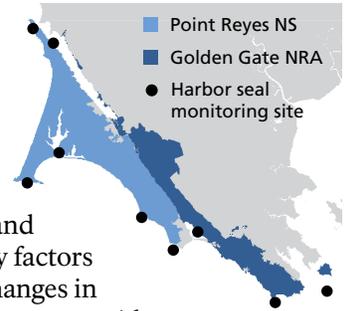
Golden Gate National
Recreation Area

Point Reyes National
Seashore

Resource Brief

Why Are Harbor Seals Important?

Of more than 30 marine mammals known to visit Point Reyes National Seashore and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, harbor seals are the most numerous and widespread. They are also the only year-round residents. In fact, Point Reyes is home to the highest concentration of harbor seals in mainland California. These key coastal predators are affected by factors such as El Niño events, sea level rise, storm surges, changes in prey availability, and human activities. As a result, they can provide important insights into the health of the larger marine ecosystem.



The National Park Service, with the help of many dedicated volunteers and collaborators, has been monitoring harbor seals at sites in Golden Gate and Point Reyes every year since 1995. At some of the larger colonies, monitoring has been undertaken by various groups since the mid-1970's.

Why Do We Monitor Harbor Seals?

- To detect long-term trends in harbor seal population size and pupping success
- To identify human activities or environmental factors that may affect seal population trends and pupping success

How Do We Use the Monitoring Data?

- To better understand how harbor seals are affected by changes in ocean conditions, including those associated with climate change.
- To guide park management such as protection of colonies
- To combine data with larger regional surveys to determine the status and trends of the California population of harbor seals.

What Have We Learned?

The harbor seal population at Golden Gate and Point Reyes has increased since their exploitation was curtailed by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. Numbers have been mostly stable in recent years, although El Niño years have been associated with declines in pups born at colonies. Climate change models predict that El Niño events will increase in number and intensity, which may have longer-term negative impacts. Disturbances by hikers and boaters are also an ongoing concern at some sites, though at Point Bonita there has been a significant reduction in disturbances after the colony was protected from visitors in 2007.

To learn more, visit www.sfnps.org/harbor_seals
Summary by Jessica Weinberg McClosky, May 2014.

Above: Harbor seals rest on a sandbar in Bolinas Lagoon as the tide comes in. These shy but charismatic creatures require sites that are close to food sources and mostly free of predators and people in order to haul out and rest. Photo by Jessica Weinberg McClosky.

Below: Harbor seals are monitored during their breeding and molting seasons (March-July), when protected haul-out sites are critical to successfully give birth, nurse, and molt (when the seals lose their worn fur and grow a fresh coat). Disturbances during these times can disrupt crucial resting periods or cause pups to be separated from their mothers. Photo by Dan Linehan, NOAA.



For More Information

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SF Bay Area National Parks Science and Learning
http://www.sfnps.org/harbor_seals

San Francisco Bay Area Network
<http://science.nature.nps.gov/im/units/sfan/>

