

Fishermen calling for seal cull to save limited local resources

Marine mammals will take fish right off of anglers' lines

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The growing number of harbour seals in local waters is getting mixed reviews. Many tourists and eco-friendly residents see the proliferation of the intelligent mammals as a positive development that adds to the appeal of Nanaimo's marine environment. Commercial fishermen and charter companies are calling for a cull of the seals, which they see as competitors for the increasingly limited fishery resources in Nanaimo's waters.

The latest survey on the numbers of harbour seals in the Georgia Strait is scheduled to be released by the end of the month.

Peter Olesiuk, a marine biologist at Nanaimo's Pacific Biological Station who specializes in harbour seals, said he doesn't expect the numbers to exceed the 41,000 that were recorded in the last survey completed in 2008.

That's still more than a tenfold increase from the 4,000 seals in the strait in the 1960s. That was before the department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada discontinued its \$5-per-seal bounty, put in place to minimize their effect on commercial fisheries.

"The decision made by DFO years ago to provide a bounty on seals was driven by public attitudes of the time," said Olesiuk.

"The general consensus is that the public want the seals protected but, with some calling for some kind of controls to protect fishery stocks and fishery tourism in the area, the pendulum might be swinging back towards the middle," he said.

HARBOUR SEALS BY THE NUMBERS

4,000: Approximate number of harbour seals in the Georgia Strait in the 1960s

41,000: Approximate number of seals in the strait today.

127,000: Approximate number of seals currently in B.C. waters

1.6 metres: Average length of a harbour seal

70 kilograms: Average weight of a harbour seal

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Harbour seals in Nanaimo have drawn the ire of fishermen and charter companies.

"However, from an ecological perspective, the fish seals mainly depend on for their existence, including hake and herring, are currently in healthy numbers in local waters. But seals tend to take the larger fish in these species and that may have implications for their fisheries. My role is to provide as much factual information as I can from the data collected from the surveys and other data and provide it to officials."

Under the perception that many fish stocks in the strait are hurting due to the larger number of seals that feed on them, many recreational and commercial fishermen are wondering if it's time for a limited cull of the mammals.

Garth Mirau, a retired commercial fisherman from Nanaimo and a former executive member of the United Fishermen, has stated that the number of harbour seals in the strait are beginning to reach a point where they are "having negative impacts on their environment."

"I think it's time that the health of our fish stocks take precedence over our concerns for the seals," Mirau said.

"Seals are doing a lot of damage and it's known that when chum salmon begin travelling up local rivers each year to spawn, a lot of them are taken by seals who eat just the eggs and leave the other 9/10th of the carcass to waste."

A number of charter companies that operated salmon fishing tours in Nanaimo's waters have even pulled up stakes and moved in recent years due to their problems with seals eating their customers' catch right off the line.

A new acoustic device to discourage seals from taking salmon off the lines of recreational anglers is being received with cautious optimism by fishermen in Nanaimo.

The device, called the Orca-Stra and developed in Courtenay by Ron McDonough, uses the sounds of a pod of transient killer whales to scare away seals and sea lions that have become habituated to following fishing boats to steal away fish that are on the lines before they can be reeled in.

But Olesiuk, who has talked to McDonough and studied the Orca-Stra device, said he's "skeptical" about its effectiveness to deter harbour seals from stealing salmon off of fishing lines.

He said while the device may be effective in initially discouraging seals from their activities, harbour seals are very intelligent mammals that would quickly "figure out" that they are in no immediate danger and continue with their poaching activities.

"Harbour seal populations in the strait have fully recovered since the bounty was discontinued but, while their numbers can increase by 12% per year in ideal conditions, they are limited by the availability of their food sources and the health of the predators, like killer whales, that prey on them," he said.

"Whale numbers are increasing along with the growing population of harbour seal in the strait, but the population of the killer whales only increases by about 3% per year. It's taking a while for the orca numbers to catch up with the growing number of their main prey. Until that happens, we just don't know what will happen with the population of harbour seals in our waters."

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