

# The Seal Deal

Caring for kekeno together



Department of  
Conservation  
*Te Papa Atawhai*

## A seal SOS?

Kekeno are resilient and usually best left to themselves. You can help by understanding their habits and appreciating their quirks – many behaviours that seem unusual have straightforward explanations.

### Is the seal ...

#### ... regurgitating, sneezing or coughing?

It is probably getting rid of undigested food like squid beaks and fragments of fish bone.

#### ... crying?

Seals don't have tear ducts. Those weepy eyes are damp with normal moisture secretions.

#### ... alone?

A young seal spends days at a time without its mother (often in winter), playing and waiting for her to return from foraging so that it can suckle. It's also common to see yearlings on their own, which aren't much bigger than a pup.

#### ... playing in the fishpond at the bottom of your garden?

Seals turn up in unexpected places. They usually move on when they are ready but in some cases may need help. Call the DOC HOTline, they will know what to do. You cannot keep a kekeno, though its eyes may beg you to do just that – possessing a seal without a permit is illegal.

#### ... drifting in the waves?

A sea-sleeping seal floats on its side.

#### ... flapping its flippers in the air as if stranded?

Seals don't beach like whales and dolphins. When at sea, seals regulate their body temperature by lifting a flipper out of the water.

#### ... immobile?

Lying down, resting is the number one behaviour of seals on land.

#### ... fighting?

Territorial wrangles are common during the breeding season, when males challenge each other for superiority.



There are times, however, when calling DOC's HOTline is a priority.

### Is the seal ...

#### ... wearing unusual jewellery?

This marine debris may tighten as the seal grows, causing injury or death.

#### ... being harassed by people who don't understand the Seal Deal?

The safety of both the seal and those involved is at risk.

#### ... relaxing on the road?

DOC will safely remove a seal to prevent road deaths.

#### ... severely injured?

Seals can rarely be rehabilitated, so it is best to let nature take its course. If an animal is clearly suffering, you can call DOC to euthanise it.

## You are part of the Seal Deal

Remember that kekeno are wild animals, so enjoy them from a distance and give them plenty of space. Look but don't touch, keep your food for yourself and take extra care if you have dogs with you.

DOC's relationship with kekeno is based on 'minimum intervention'. Unless the animal is in obvious trouble, DOC leaves its management to the original expert, nature.

Please contact us if a kekeno is being harassed, is entangled in marine debris or is severely injured.

**DOC HOTline 0800 362 468**

## Ear flaps and flippers

It's summer. High above a rocky beach, the sea breeze carries a strong animal scent. Look down and watch quietly. This is a rookery - the maternity ward of kekeno, our most common native pinniped.

Pinnipeds are fin-footed, carnivorous marine mammals, and kekeno / New Zealand fur seal (*Arctocephalus forsteri*) is in the Otariidae family, which is distinguished by external ears and hind flippers that rotate forwards. Kekenos are excellent swimmers and skilful divers. They feed mainly at night on squid, octopus, lanternfish and barracuda - a diet which, according to scientific studies, they prefer over the fish sought by recreational and commercial fishers.

We are fortunate to share our coastline with kekeno. Through the Seal Deal, the public and the Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai (DOC) can work together to understand and take care of these fascinating mammals.

Kekenos / New Zealand fur seal. Photo: Shaelie Evans



## Recovery on the rocks

Centuries ago, about two million kekeno made their home on our islands. But there was a time when Aotearoa New Zealand was in danger of having a coastline without them. This is hard to imagine now, when you can look down on a crowded rookery or haul-out area and spot nearly as many seals as rocks.

Europeans began hunting this animal they called the sea bear in the late 1700s, by which time the species was already under threat due to the high value placed on its meat and pelt by Māori. When Europeans slaughtered kekeno not by the dozens or hundreds but by the thousands, one colony after another, the population dived almost to the depths of extinction.

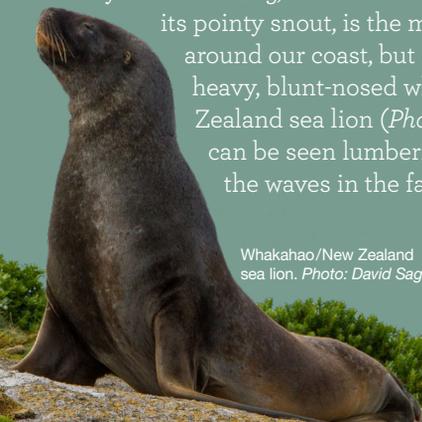
In 1894, the New Zealand Government gave kekeno full protection - and in 1978, the Marine Mammals Protection Act reinforced that status. Today, increasing numbers of kekeno live and breed around our coast, and the population, while still only a fraction of what it was before the arrival of humans, continues to grow.



## Which seal is that?

When it comes to identifying the kind of seal you're watching, the nose has it. Kekenos, with its pointy snout, is the most common seal around our coast, but occasionally a heavy, blunt-nosed whakahao / New Zealand sea lion (*Phocarctos hookeri*) can be seen lumbering out of the waves in the far south.

Whakahao / New Zealand sea lion. Photo: David Sagar



An ihu koropuku / southern elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*) will appear now and then, unmistakable with its short, trunk-like nose. Rāpoka / leopard seals (*Hydrurga leptonyx*) also haul out infrequently on southern beaches, resting their spotted bellies in the sand.

Ihu koropuku / southern elephant seal. Photo: Leon Berard



## On the beach

Although kekeno are marine mammals, they spend much of their time on land. Their breeding grounds are known as rookeries, while their rest areas – usually rocky shores providing shelter and easy access to the sea – are called haul-outs. Kekeno that are still young or have not managed to defend a breeding territory gather as juveniles and bachelors at haul-out sites for most of the year.

The breeding season is a busy time for both males and females. Dominant bulls rule in the rookeries, defending their territories by glaring and posturing and going without food while they keep watch. Eventually they must fight. Fierce chest-to-chest power struggles take place in early summer, ending only when one combatant shuffles, defeated, into the sea.

Most adult kekeno in a rookery are females, which are about half the weight of the shaggier and more heavily muscled males. Each female delivers and suckles one pup and, even before her first foraging trip, mates to become pregnant with the next.

Kekeno are sociable creatures of habit, returning annually to the same rookeries and haul-outs. And the female gives birth close to the place where she pupped the previous season, often within days of the first birthday of that pup.



## Getting along

Kekeno are now protected from the hunting that decimated their numbers in the past. Left to themselves, they manage as they should – but human disturbance and activity create threats. Kekeno face tangles not only with fishing gear and carelessly discarded marine debris, but also with well-meaning members of the public.

Kekeno are wild animals and will defend their territories aggressively. They carry infectious diseases and their teeth can inflict serious injuries.



**For your own safety, and to help our kekeno thrive, follow the Seal Deal and don't get too close to these mammals.**

- **Enjoy seals from a distance – at least 20 m away.** Their hearing, vision and sense of smell are excellent and they can move as quickly as you, so don't get between a seal and its escape route to the sea.
- **Look but don't touch.** Don't let those large mournful eyes tempt you to try patting or stroking a seal.
- **Keep your picnic for yourself.** Dead fish and high-energy human food are not treats – they disrupt the seal's natural diet and behaviour.
- **Lose the loop.** Help remove potential entangling hazards from beaches by disposing of rubbish properly, cutting items with loops and avoiding single-use plastics.
- **Take extra care if you have dogs with you.** One panicked seal can start a chain reaction in a rookery, where pups are at risk of being crushed by adult seals rushing to safety in the sea. Always keep your dog on a lead when around seals and other coastal wildlife.

You are most likely to see kekeno en masse at their rookeries in mid-summer and in haul-out areas through the winter. The calendar below shows their yearly cycle.

Month	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July
Fur seal yearly cycle	Spring: weaning and dispersal				Summer: pup birth and mating		Pup nursing					
												Winter: haul-out



## Further information

For more information on Aotearoa New Zealand's marine mammals, visit the DOC website.

[www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz)



Kekeko pups in Kaikōura. Photo: Katherine Clements ©

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**DOC HOTline**  
**0800 362 468**

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or conservation emergencies**  
For Fire and Search and Rescue Call 111



**Te Kāwanatanga  
o Aotearoa**  
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