Kekeno / New Zealand fur seal

Marine life

The Māori name for fur seal is kekeno meaning ‘look-around’. It describes a behaviour which anyone who visits a seal colony will recognise. History tells us that kekeno had every reason to look around – hunters and sealers had all but wiped them out by the end of the 19th century.

Kekeno or New Zealand fur seal (*Arctocephalus forsteri*) now live all around the New Zealand mainland, offshore islands and along the southern Australian coast. Their New Zealand population has climbed back to perhaps 100,000 and is generally increasing. The population of a new rookery increases rapidly at first, slowing down after a few years as breeding sites in the rookery become fully occupied. In the 1990s kekeno started to breed again in the North Island for the first time in over 100 years.

**Life at sea**

Kekeno forage up to several hundred kilometres beyond the New Zealand continental shelf, feeding on fish, squid and octopus. Some prey species swim up toward the surface at night and retreat to the depths during the day. The seals follow these prey migrations at night, often diving continuously from sunset to sunrise. Kekeno dive deeper and for longer than any other fur seal: Although most dives are 1–2 minutes long, researchers tracked one female diving to 240 metres over a period of 11 minutes.

The seal’s main predators are large sharks and orca. Hooker’s sea lions occasionally take fur seal pups. Fur seals are sometimes caught unintentionally by trawl nets and long-lines.

**Life in the colony**

Breeding colonies are typically on rocky shorelines, often with boulders that provide landing spots, crevices for shelter, and tidal pools to cool off in.
The males arrive in late October or early November, at which time they begin defending a territory against other males. This is such a constant task that they do not feed again until mid-January. Large males are more successful, a form of selective breeding that has resulted in males being about four times heavier than the 40-kilogram average for females.

Female kekeno arrive at the rookery to bear their single pup in late November – December, having conceived the previous year. They mate a week after the birth of their pup, but implantation of the fertilised egg is delayed by another 3 months. This delay of her 9 month gestation enables the female to give birth and to mate during the same period ashore. Females breed after about 5–6 years of age and give birth to a single pup most years until their death, on average 16 years. After the pup is born, females alternate between foraging at sea for up to 10 days and returning to the rookery for one or two days of suckling. They suckle their pups until September – October, when they return to the sea to gain condition before the next breeding cycle.

Pups start to eat solids before weaning, and spend a large proportion of their time playing with other pups and objects such as seaweed and reef fish. After weaning, juvenile kekeno disperse, sometimes several thousand kilometres from their place of birth. Young males are not able to hold a territory until the age of 8 or 9, after which they may occupy it for more than 5 years. The dominant male usually mates with many females in a single season, hence the intense competition between rival males.

By the time Europeans visited in the early 1700s, kekeno colonies were restricted to the sparsely populated south-west coast of the South Island and to off-shore islands.

Sealers arrived in force during the 1790s, having already exploited the Australian stocks of fur seal to near extinction. In New Zealand, one island population after another was wiped out to meet the demand for seal-fur hats, seal-leather shoes, and seal-oil for lighting. By the end of the 19th century, after 700 years of human settlement, kekeno had been hunted almost to extinction. The remnant was saved by falling returns, closed seasons after 1875 and finally a complete ban on sealing after 1894.

Kekeno are making a come-back, with expanding colonies throughout the South Island and the first breeding colonies returning to the North Island in the 1990s. New Zealand fur seals once bred right around New Zealand. They may yet do so again.

The Department of Conservation is responsible for the protection and conservation of seals, which are fully protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act 1978.

Enjoy seals safely

Seals are charismatic animals and people are encouraged to stop and take the time to enjoy them. However, they are wild animals and can be unpredictable. By following the simple guidelines below, you can enjoy your seal encounter without compromising your safety or that of the animals:

- Always stay at least 10 m from seals.
- Do not disturb seals. Don’t make loud noises or throw objects near them.
- Keep dogs and children under control around seals.
- Never attempt to handle seals as they can be aggressive and often carry diseases.
- Do not drive vehicles any closer than 50 m from seals.
- Flies are often attracted to the natural secretions around the eyes of seals. This does not mean the seal is sick and is not a cause for concern.
- It is natural for mothers to leave their pups alone while they return to sea to forage. Please do not disturb or move solitary pups.
- If you are concerned about the safety of a seal, please contact the Department of Conservation immediately on 0800 DOC HOT (0800 362 468).

Want to know more?

Try www.doc.govt.nz or the New Zealand online encyclopaedia www.teara.govt.nz.

Humans and kekeno

Māori hunted kekeno for meat, skins for clothing and for their teeth, used as fish hooks. They were a particularly important food source for early Māori (c 1300), with evidence of kekeno found in middens (scrap-heaps of discarded shells and bones) from Northland to Fiordland.

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