



Ear Flaps and Flippers

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

Pinnipeds are fin-footed carnivorous marine mammals. Kekeno (*Arctocephalus forsteri*) are members of the *Otariidae* family of pinnipeds, distinguished by external ears and hind flippers which rotate forward. They are excellent swimmers and skilful divers. They feed mainly at night on squid, octopus, lantern fish and barracuda – a diet which they prefer, according to scientific studies, to the fish sought by recreational and commercial fishers.

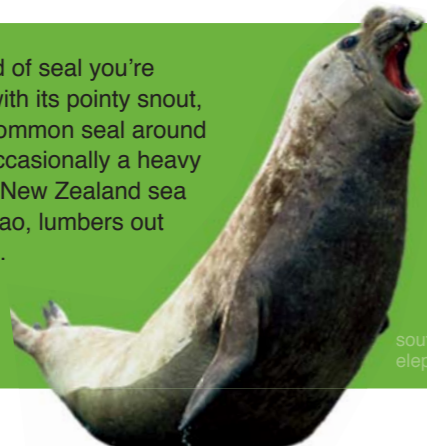


We are fortunate to share our coastline with kekeno. Through The Seal Deal, the public and the Department of Conservation can work together to understand and take care of these fascinating mammals.

When it comes to identifying the kind of seal you're watching, the nose has it. Kekeno, with its pointy snout, is the most common seal around our coast. Occasionally a heavy blunt-nosed New Zealand sea lion, whakahao, lumbers out of the waves.



sea lion



southern elephant seal

The southern elephant seal, ihipuku or ihu koropuka, appears now and then, unmistakable with its short trunk-like nose. Leopard seals, pakaka, haul out infrequently on southern beaches, resting their spotted bellies in the sand.



leopard seal

Recovery on the Rocks

Centuries ago about two million fur seals made their home on our islands. But there was a time when New Zealand was in danger of having a coastline without kekeno.

This is hard to imagine now, when you can look down on a crowded rookery or haul-out area and have difficulty telling rocks from seals until the mammals move.

Europeans began hunting the animal they called the sea bear in the late 1700s. By that time kekeno – its meat and pelt valued by Maori - was already under threat. When Europeans slaughtered the fur seal not by dozens or hundreds but by thousands, one colony after another, the population of this mammal dived almost to the depths of extinction.

In 1894 the New Zealand Government gave kekeno full protection. In 1978 the Marine Mammals Protection Act reinforced that status. Now, increasing numbers of fur seals live and breed around our coast. The population, currently about 15 per cent of what it was before the arrival of humans, continues to grow.



On the Beach

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



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



Breeding season is a busy time for the female, who delivers and suckles one pup and, even before her first foraging trip, mates to become pregnant with the next.

Most adult fur seals in a rookery are females, about half the weight of the shaggier and more heavily muscled males. Dominant bulls rule, defending their territories by glaring and posturing, 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.



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

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



The Seal Deal



The Seal Deal



Remember that kekeno are wild animals. They carry infectious diseases. Their teeth can inflict serious injuries. And they will defend their territory aggressively. Enjoy fur seals from a distance. Look but do not touch. Keep your food for yourself and take extra care if you have dogs with you.

You are part of The Seal Deal - caring for kekeno, our native fur seal.

DOC HOTLINE 0800 362 468

If you find a seal that is severely injured, or entangled in marine debris, or being harassed by people or dogs, help is available. Call the Department of Conservation.

Regurgitating, sneezing and coughing are common kekeno habits. Seals sometimes look as though they are crying. They drift in the waves, flap their flippers, fight, and lie immobile for long periods. Pups happily spend time alone while their mothers fish. These behaviours are completely normal.

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Getting along

Fur seals are protected now from the hunting which decimated their numbers in the past. Left to themselves, they manage as fur seals 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.

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For your own safety, and to help our kekeno thrive, follow the Kekeno Care Code and don't get too close to these mammals.

- **Enjoy seals from a distance – at least 20 metres away.** Their hearing, vision and sense of smell are excellent. They can move as quickly as you. 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.

- **Keep your picnic for yourself.** Dead fish and high-energy human food are not treats: they disrupt the seal's natural diet and behaviour.

- **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.



A Seal SOS?

The Department of Conservation's relationship with kekeno is based on 'minimum intervention'. Unless a fur seal is in obvious trouble, DOC leaves its management to the original expert, nature.

Kekeno exhibit some odd but completely normal behaviours. 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 his mother (often in winter), playing, waiting for her to return from foraging so that he can suckle.

... 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 they 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?

Kekeno don't beach like whales or dolphins. The seal is trying to cool off.

... 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 when calling DOC's HOTline is a priority. Is your seal ...

... wearing a plastic necklace?

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

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

The safety of both the fur 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. It is best to let nature take its course. If an animal is clearly suffering, you can call DOC to put it down.

Seals are resilient and usually best left to themselves. You can help by understanding their habits and appreciating their quirks. Many behaviours which seem unusual have straightforward seal explanations.

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DOC HOTline 0800 362 468



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai