

7. SEALS AND WALRUS STOCKS - STATUS AND ADVICE TO THE COUNCIL

7.5. Harbour seal

Iceland

Catches and regulatory measures

Traditional hunting of harbour seals has decreased from around 3,000-4,000 in the 1980s to around 300 per year during the last decade. In Iceland, seal hunting does not require a specific hunting license, and no specific quota system has been established. Seal hunting is managed by land owners and there are no special protected areas or protected periods (e.g., breeding season) of the year for seals except those imposed by land owners and general regulations on hunting. It is not mandatory to report direct seal catches to the government.

Management

In 2006, the Icelandic government published a management plan where a minimum population size of 12,000 harbour seals was recommended (NAMMCO annual report, 2006). The management plan states that management actions should be initiated if the population dropped appreciably below that number, but no specific population regulating method was mentioned, nor a definition the term “appreciably.”

Current research on biological parameters and stock identity

A study on haulout patterns of harbour seals in Iceland has confirmed that the timing of surveys is appropriate (3 weeks from the end of July). Body condition of the harbour seal population was investigated by comparing blubber thickness measurements from 1981, 1995 and 2009. The results showed that blubber thickness was lower in 2009 compared to the two other years, both for female and male seals which indicate that the body condition of the seals has decreased. Use of infrared cameras on drones for monitoring seal haulout sites is being developed. The importance of harbour seals as prey species for killer whales is being investigated using stable isotope analysis.

Stock identity

Andersen et al. (2011) found that Icelandic harbour seals were significantly differentiated from harbour seals in Greenland, Northern Norway and Svalbard.

Recommendations for Iceland

- An assessment survey of the entire population should be conducted as soon as possible
 - o Surveys should then be conducted every 2 years while the population is lower than the target level

- All removals should be reported (e.g., hunting, by-catch, etc.)
- A Management Plan should be developed including outlining the frequency of surveys and legislation of seal hunting
- The target population level objective should be re-evaluated and be based on biological criteria.
- Reproductive rates should be collected
- The effects of disturbance from tourism should continue to be investigated
 - o Develop mitigation measures

- The method of catching pups in nets should be investigated. In NAMMCO, killing methods should be immediate. This issue should be referred to the NAMMCO Hunting Committee.

Discussion

Iceland updated the SC that there has been new welfare legislation that may affect the use of nets for seal hunting. The SC noted that this may make the last recommendation unnecessary, but this situation should be clarified.

A full survey was completed this summer, and although the analysis is not yet complete, the preliminary results confirm the decreases seen from the survey completed in 2014 (30-40% decrease). This is of concern, as the population level will be below the target population level. The new information on the preliminary results of the survey this summer confirm the conclusions of the WG.

The SC **endorsed** the recommendations of the WG and stressed the need for obtaining catch statistics. There is a system of collecting catch statistics on other species in place, and this system could be used to collect statistics on harbour seals. There is a hunt for harbour seals in Iceland, with over 80% of the hunt occurring around the river mouths with the aim of reducing predation on salmon. However, new data indicates that harbour seals are not eating salmon.