



NOAA FISHERIES

Protected Resources Division

Lanugo Harbor Seal Pups

Frequently Asked Questions, Washington State

What is a lanugo harbor seal pup?

There are 3,000-5,000 harbor seal pups born in Washington inland waters each year, a very small portion of these pups are born prematurely and are known as lanugo pups. A lanugo pup is born with a long, fine, white fur that is normally shed in utero before being born. These pups may have been prematurely born due to disease, birth defects or high contaminant loads. Lanugo pups are not typically fully developed, have underdeveloped muscles and lungs and have other health problems. The chance these pups will survive is very low and the attending female may abandon her pup.

What is the survival rate for premature lanugo pups?

Lanugo harbor seal pups have a very low survival rate in the wild. Approximately 90% of lanugo harbor seal pups do not survive and this condition is considered natural mortality.

There is a lanugo pup on the beach, what should I do?

The best thing you can do is to keep your distance to allow the mother to return. If the pup is being nursed by its mother she is unlikely to come on shore if people or other disturbances are close by. Please leave the pup undisturbed. Stay back 100 yards if possible, keep your dogs on a leash, and let other concerned citizens know the animal has been reported.

I'm concerned a harbor seal pup has been abandoned, what should I do?

A minimum undisturbed observation period of 24 to 48 hours is recommended to determine whether a female is attending the pup. Signs of an attendant female would include; sightings of seal(s) in the water nearby; tracks near the pup; movement of the pup up or down the beach, or in and out of the water. Harbor seal pups may haul out in the same place for several days or more at a time; this does not mean they are abandoned. An attendant female may be nursing her pup at night if there is human disturbance around the pup during the day. Do not be surprised if the pup tries to approach people or suckle on the sand, driftwood, other objects, etc. The West Coast Marine Mammal Stranding Network encourages you to "Share the Shore" with harbor seals. If you would like to report the animal you can call our hotline at [1-866-767-6114](tel:1-866-767-6114). You can also find contact information for your local stranding network coordinator at:

http://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/protected_species/marine_mammals/stranding_maps_and_contacts.html

Should I feed the pup, put it back in the water, pour water over it or move it to a "safer" spot?

No. Offering food to a pup isn't a good idea because it is likely to be more harmful than helpful. Nursing seals have a specialized diet (harbor seal milk) and the pup is unlikely to survive if separated from its mother. Attempting to feed any wild animal can condition the animal to seek food from people, place the animal at increased risk, and interfere with its best chance for survival in the wild. Handling or moving the pup decreases the likelihood of the pup reuniting with its mother. Harbor seals (and all marine mammals) are protected by law under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Handling seal pups or feeding them is prohibited and is considered to be a form of harassment. Complaints of

harassment may be investigated by NOAA's Office for Law Enforcement for violating the marine mammal regulations. If you would like to report a violation to Office for Law Enforcement please call: 1-800-853-1964

I can closely approach the pup on the beach. Is it sick?

No. Some seals haul out in public areas and are not sensitive to human presence. Please Share the Shore and give the animal space. Many harbor seal pups are too young to have developed protective wariness (escape response) and may not flee when approached while resting and warming up on shore. Adult seals may be more wary and will escape to the water if approached. If a pup is still being attended by a female seal it is important to reduce human disturbance at the site so she can return to care for her pup.

Are premature lanugo pups good candidates for rehabilitation? What is the policy for rehabilitation?

No. Lanugo harbor seal pups are not candidates for rehabilitation. Our overall goal is to provide an appropriate response to ensure that animals have the best chance to survive on their own in the wild, which usually means leaving pups on the beach. In some cases if a lanugo pup is in a public location and a female is clearly not attending the animal it may be removed from the site and humanely euthanized. Euthanasia is not available in all areas throughout Washington State and the animal may be left for nature to take its course. Intervention to capture individual seals observed at harbor seal rookeries (where pups are born) is avoided to minimize the impacts and disturbance of other animals at the site including nursing females with pups. In some cases, pups with serious injuries or who have had interactions with dogs or humans are taken in for treatment. Rehabilitation can only be done by trained experts at an authorized facility; these facilities cannot accept illegally captured marine mammals delivered to them for treatment by unauthorized individuals. Rehabilitation of harbor seals is difficult and many will not survive; rehabilitation does not guarantee the long-term survival of the animal post-release.

Is the harbor seal population healthy?

Yes. Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act harbor seal populations have recovered to healthy numbers. The harbor seal population is at carrying capacity (maximum population size of the species that the environment can sustain). Harbor seal population reproductive rates are sufficient to offset cases of natural mortality, including normal pup mortality and low survival of premature lanugo pups.



Lanugo harbor seal pup, photo credit: R.Lindsey



Full term harbor seal pup, photo credit: R.Lindsey