

Dead Common Seals in the Kattegat/Skagerrak Area 2002

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Between the beginning of May 2002 and June 5th, in total about 250 dead common seals (*Phoca vitulina*) were found in the Danish Kattegat, of which 50% are pups respectively adults. The carcasses were found on Anholt (160), Laesø (60), Hesselø and the north coast of Sealand (30).

Since the end of May, also from the Swedish coast in the Kattegat/Skagerrak dead common seals were reported. About 39 dead common seals have been found until now, most of the seals were found south of Gothenburg, between Falkenberg in the south, and the island Tjaernø, Skagerrak in the north, near the Norwegian border. A systematic organization of the reporting, collection and sampling of the carcasses just started at the Swedish coast and further results will be available in some days/weeks.

In the area of Thy, in the Danish Limfjord area, some dead seals were found around Whitsun in May 2002, however, the found carcasses were mostly old and interrelation between the dead seals of Anholt and Thy could not be stated. The Limfjord common seal population consists of about 800 animals.

In all other areas in Denmark, as well as in the Danish-German-Dutch Wadden Sea, no unusual mortality of seals has been registered until now.

Population in the Kattegat/Skagerrak

On Anholt, about 800, on Laesø about 900 and on Hesselø about 700 common seals were counted during the last regular count in August 2000. It can be estimated that the total populations of the islands are twice as big. (Reference to DMU-Report No 350, 2001).

In total, about 11,000 common seals are living in the Danish and Swedish area of the Kattegat, and about 7,000 seals mostly in the Swedish part of the Skagerrak (pers. com. P. Reijnders).

Investigations of the dead seals

Pathological findings in the dead seals in Denmark showed Bronchopneumonia, Parasites and Bordetella bronchiseptica, a bacteria which causes pigs to sneeze.

Already in mid May 2002, five samples of nine dead seals found in Denmark were examined with the Polymerase-Chain-Reaction-method (PCR) with positive results of the phocine distemper virus (pdv) at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Investigations at the Danish State Veterinarian Institute in Aar-

hus in the beginning of June 2002 confirmed that the pdv is the cause of the mortality of common seals in the Danish Kattegat.

Regarding the Swedish dead seals, until now, 7 of the 39 seals have been taken for dissections to the Swedish Museum of Natural History. In three dissected animals the pathological findings showed the same symptoms as found in the pdv infected seals in 1988. Investigations to test the animals for distemper have been initiated.

Information regarding Anholt

The area of seal sites of common seals on Anholt are reserves with no access and it is far away from the inhabited parts of the island with about 150 inhabitants and some 1,000 summer guests. There are only some sheep and cows on the island, however, nothing special such as fur farms. There are also grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) on Anholt, which migrate far away/around and rest on Anholt (no rearing area). During the 1988 disease only some grey seals were infected on Anholt. In spring 1988, harp seals (*Phoca groenlandica*) also visited Anholt, however, this was not the case in 2002. On Laesø, there are three seal sites and on the small island Hesselø, which is a seal reserve too, beside the seals only a few summerhouses can be found.



Figure 1:
Map of the Kattegat/
Skagerrak area.

The maximum number of counted seals in the Danish waters in 1999 and 2000. In 1999, only the seals in the Wadden Sea and Limfjord were counted, whereas counts in the other regions are carried out every two years. From: DMU-Report No 350, 2001.

Conclusions

Nearly 300 dead seals in the area of the Kattegat/Skagerrak, the same area in which the 1988-mass mortality of seals started in April 1988, and the confirmation of the outbreak of the pdv causes serious concern and the development in the next days and weeks has to be followed cautiously. Rangers/institutions/labs are on alert to look after seals not only in the concerned Danish and Swedish area, but also in the surrounding areas as well as in the Wadden Sea. Status Reports regarding dead seals in 2002 are being compiled by the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat in case of new developments, and will be published as of now on the homepage of the Secretariat: www.waddensea-secretariat.org

A trilateral meeting with Danish, German and Dutch seal experts and managers is in preparation.

	1999	2000
Wadden Sea	2183	2145
Limfjorden	1631	886
Laesø		857
Anholt		794
Hesselø		702
Sjællands Odde		2
Bosserne		225
Tunø Knob		36
Svanegrunden		0
Møllegrunden		600
Saltholm		31
Børgestrømmen		32
Aunø Fjord		74
Rødsand		127
Vitten / Skollen		33
TOTAL		6544