

Common Seals in the Wadden Sea in 1998

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The common seal population in the entire Wadden Sea continued to grow between 1997 and 1998 at nearly the same average annual rate as had been observed in the years since the epidemic in 1988. A maximum of 14,400 seals was recorded during coordinated trilateral aerial surveys in the four subareas Denmark, Schleswig Holstein, Lower Saxony and The Netherlands in 1998. This number exceeded the maximum count in 1997 by 11.4%, whereas the mean annual increase since 1989 had been 13%. This, somewhat lower figure in 1998, is most probably caused by a rather low maximum count in Lower Saxony, which amounted to only 6.2% instead of the average 16% until 1988. That low maximum is assumed to have been caused by bad weather conditions during the counts in the pupping season. See figure 1 "Number of Counted Common Seals in the Wadden Sea since 1975".

The total number of pups in 1998 was 2,706 and is less than in 1997, when 2,783 were counted. The maximum number of pups counted in the entire Wadden Sea expressed as percentage of the total maximum count, amounted to 18.8%. This is slightly lower than the average of 19.6% counted since 1988. This could also be explained by bad weather conditions due to longer stormy periods in most areas in the Wadden Sea. The haul-out sites were only dry very shortly during low tide with only a few chances for the pups to suckle, and very bad conditions for new born pups and mothers to build up their very important contact. Due to the bad weather, several flights had to be cancelled in most sub-areas.

It is emphasized that fluctuations in aerial survey results are a common phenomenon as well as natural variability in pup production and popula-

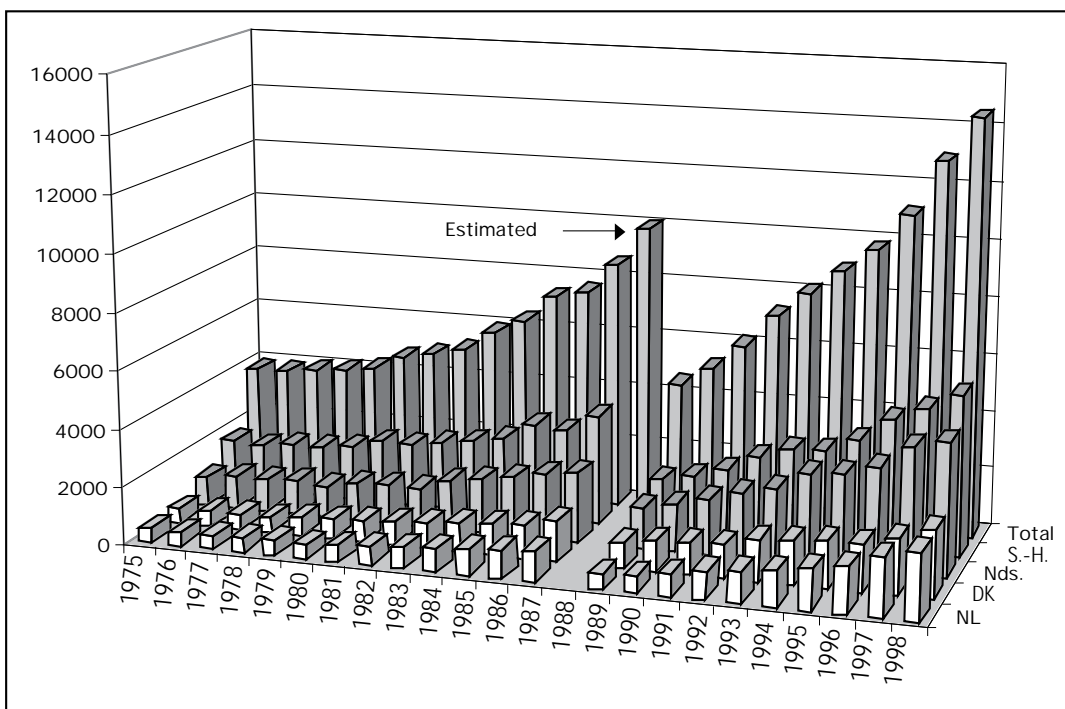
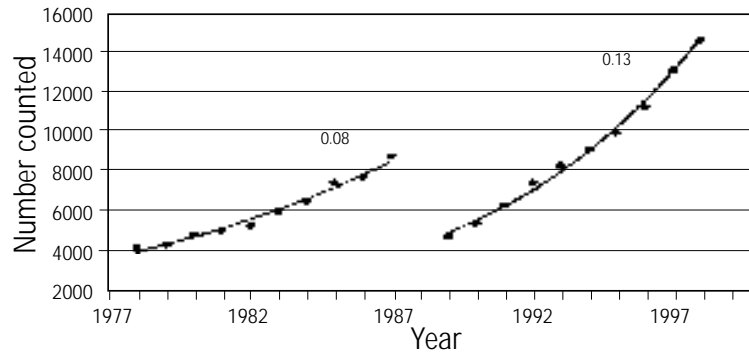


Figure 1
Number of Counted Seals
in the Wadden Sea since
1975

Figure 2
Common Seals in the
Entire Wadden Sea –
Annual Increase 1978 –
1998



tion growth. Trends in population dynamic parameters and, reliable interpretation thereof, can only be given if longer time series are considered. These do not indicate a significant change in the population increase as can be seen in figure 2.

A probable consequence of the longer storm periods that summer could well have been the reason for the unusual high number of "heulers", abandoned pups, found during the breeding period and soon thereafter. These animals were weak, ill and with a low bodyweight - less than half the weight for a normal pup of the same age. Whether the high number of "heulers" was a natural event, or a recurring situation, will become clear during the coordinated aerial surveys in the years to come.

The data in this note was provided by the following participants in the coordinated surveys:

- Institute for Forestry and Nature Research, Dept. Aquatic Ecology, Texel, NL;
- Bezirksregierung Weser-Ems, Nds;
- Landesamt für den Nationalpark Schleswig-Holsteinisches Wattenmeer and Forschungs- und Technologiezentrum, FTZ, Büsum, SH;
- Fiskeri- og Søfartsmuseet, Esbjerg, DK.

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