

# Seal Sitters to the Rescue!

**A GROUP OF VOLUNTEERS BAND TOGETHER TO KEEP HARBOR SEALS SAFE**

**E**arly one morning, a harbor seal and her pup swim through the cold waters of Alki Beach near Seattle, Washington. The two animals glide over a **kelp** forest, where there are plenty of fish to eat. The mother seal wants to dive in, but she knows she'll lose her pup in them kelp forest if she takes it along.

To solve this problem, she leads her pup onto a nearby beach. No one is around, so it seems safe. She leaves her pup there to nap, and will come back for him after she has eaten.

Soon the beach becomes crowded with people. Some spot the napping seal pup and rush over for a closer look. Brenda Peterson, a volunteer

from a group called Seal Sitters, acts quickly. "Stand back!" she cries. Peterson knows that if the people are still surrounding the pup when its mother returns, she'll likely abandon it.

Fortunately, the crowd obeys. Peterson calls other Seal Sitters. They work in shifts to make sure the young pup is undisturbed until its mother comes back.

## CURIOUS CROWDS

Peterson recognized the need to protect harbor seals about 10 years ago. "Seals have always been a common sight on Alki

Beach. But about a decade ago, the human **population** in the area began to increase," she says. More people meant more trouble for the seals.

According to Peterson, some people wrongly assume a lone pup has been abandoned by its mother. They might try to "rescue" the animal by taking it home or trying to feed it. This is actually harmful for the seal. It can even result in the pup's death.

Why? Harbor seals are **mammals**. They feed on their mother's milk until they

can learn to eat on their own. This milk is packed with **antibodies**—proteins that help fight disease. A pup that's kept apart from its mom can't get the nourishment it needs to survive.

To keep this from happening, Peterson formed Seal Sitters. The group protects the seals and teaches the public about why the pups are temporarily beach bound.

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Seal Sitters prevent beachgoers and their dogs (inset top) from disturbing seal pups left temporarily alone on Seattle-area beaches (inset bottom).



Seal Sitters Anasophia Smith, 11 (right), and Anie Horstman, 10 (left), watch seal pups in shifts. They keep a close eye on them to make sure they look healthy and safe.



SUZI LESZTERHAS/MINDEN PICTURES (SEAL PUP ON BEACH); DAVE KING/DORLING KINDERSLEY (KELP); ROBIN HULSE (SMITH AND HORSTMAN); SMITH AND HORSTMAN (WALKING WITH DOG); SEAL PUP ON BEACH



Anasophia Smith sets up a protective area on Alki Beach near Seattle, Washington.

# Super Sitter

Anasophia Smith, 11, is one of the youngest Seal Sitter volunteers. "If Seal Sitters don't keep the pups safe, they could be injured or killed," she says.

Anasophia is so passionate about her work with the group, that she's taken her involvement one step further. She has used her drawing skills to create a wildlife calendar.

"By selling my calendar, I raise money for the PAWS Wilderness Center, [a facility that] helps injured seals heal and then releases them to their home in the sea," says Anasophia.



## TROUBLE AT SEA

Unfortunately, crowds aren't the only threat to these seals. Sometimes the animals are injured in boating accidents or from run-ins with fishing equipment.

These clashes with humans often result in seal deaths. But sometimes a watchful Seal Sitter notices a seal in distress—and calls for help.

If a Sitter sees a sick or injured seal, he or she contacts an expert at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "The expert often tells us to keep a close eye on the seal," says Peterson. "Sometimes the expert arranges for the seal to be taken to a local animal hospital."

The Seal Sitters have also found success in helping the seals help themselves. "One of our volunteers had created inflatable platforms on which the animals could rest while in the water," Peterson says. When the Seal Sitters spotted a seal that had been struck by a boat propeller, they thought the animal wouldn't make it.

But then, something unusual happened. "The injured animal climbed onto one of these platforms and remained there for several days. It was able to [rest] and soon healed," Peterson says.

## SEAL OF APPROVAL

Peterson knows that she and her fellow volunteers can't save every seal. "My

main goal is to build trust between the human and animal species," she says. "I want the seals to know that we're here to help."

As she sits on the beach, Peterson observes a mother seal dropping off her pup. The mother soon disappears into the sea, but moments later, pops her head above the water's surface. She checks on her pup—and the Seal Sitter, who is sitting nearby. Satisfied that the pup is safe, she dives back into the water.

Peterson laughs, realizing that her work is paying off. "I guess we've become a seal daycare."

—Nancy Honovich



A seal rookery, like this one, is a place where the marine mammals breed, give birth, and nurse their young.

## Words to Know

**Kelp**—Any of the various brown, and often very large, seaweeds that live in colder ocean regions.

**Population**—A group of individuals of the same species occupying a specific habitat.

**Mammal**—A group of warm-blooded animals whose young feed on milk produced by their mothers. Dogs, whales, and humans are examples of mammals.

**Antibodies**—A protein produced in the body as a defense response to foreign substances like toxins, bacteria, and viruses.



Seal pups nurse on their mother's nutrient-rich milk until they are about 6 weeks old. They grow and gain weight quickly, about half a kilogram (1 pound) per day.

## quick quiz

- Which of the following can threaten harbor seals?
  - (A) fishing equipment
  - (B) boats
  - (C) curious people on beaches
  - (D) all of the above
- Which of the following is a characteristic that's unique to mammals?
  - (A) having a backbone
  - (B) nursing offspring with mother's milk
  - (C) laying eggs
  - (D) having lungs
- Why is it best to leave seal pups undisturbed?
  - (A) Their mothers won't come back to them if there are people around.
  - (B) They might want to follow people home.
  - (C) They won't learn how to catch fish properly.
  - (D) all of the above

ROBIN LINDSEY (SMITH; SEALS ON SHORE; SEALS ON SAND); ANASOPHIA'S CALENDAR: COURTESY OF PAWS WILDERNESS CENTER; PHOTOGRAPHY: GUY LAWRENCE (SEAL)