Early 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 the 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. Paterson 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. 

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

To make sure the young pup is undisturbed until its mother comes back, Peterson formed Seal Sitters. The group protects the seals and teaches the public about why the pups are temporarily beach bound.
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

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**Words to Know**

**Help**—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.

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**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.**