

# Long-nosed fur seals FAQ

In twenty years, commencing in the early 1790's over 300,000 seal pelts were shipped through NSW colonies. This decimated the seal population in South Australia. By the early 1800's the seal industry ceased because seals had become so difficult to find. Over the following century, the number of long-nosed fur seals in South Australian waters has recovered, to an estimated population of around 100,000 animals. This is probably still below the population before white settlement. South Australia has approximately 83% of Australia's fur seal population.

## Why change the name from New Zealand fur seal to long-nosed fur seal?

The name was changed to long-nosed fur seal to clarify that these seals are not from New Zealand and are not feral. The name change was called for by two prominent scientists from the SA Museum and SA Research and Development Institute (SARDI). Common names of animals and plants regularly change as scientists understand more.

## Is it normal for seals to be in the River Murray?

It is an unusual occurrence to have seals in the River Murray at Murray Bridge, however this phenomena it is not unheard of – there are anecdotal stories of Blanchetown, Mannum and Tailem Bend. Seals are known to explore areas of fresh water from time to time and the presence of seals in the Lower Lakes has been noted for the last few years.

Young males and sub adult males are more likely to explore at this time of year, with the peak exploration period being around August.

## Will they stay?

It is unlikely that long nosed fur seals will take up permanent residence in the river near Murray Bridge or further up-stream because the physiology of the animal does not enable it to live permanently in fresh water and its feeding, social and breeding requirements would not be met. However, it is entirely likely that more young males will venture this far up the river.

The natural behaviour of seals can be drastically altered (very often negatively) by people feeding wild seals. Feeding these animals may encourage them to change their natural behaviour (habituate them) and make them more likely to stay in an area.

## Will they breed in the river, lakes or Coorong?

It is highly unlikely, as the key requirement for pup colonies are haul outs or rock shelves that are suitable habitat. A recent field tour with marine mammal scientists in the Coorong found that there were no easily identifiable areas suitable for pup colonies.

## Are long-nosed fur seals eating native bird life?

Long-nosed fur seals are a natural part of the marine ecosystem and not an environmental pest.

Long-nosed fur seals do sometimes eat seabirds, including penguins, but they form only a minor part of a seal's diet. Most of a fur seal's diet is made up of arrow squid, redbait, lantern fish and small bait fish that have no commercial fishery in South Australia. In the river and lakes seals are most likely eating carp and callop as the major part of their diet. Further research into seals diets in the Coorong is occurring.

Expert scientists in marine life believe that it is highly unlikely that a seal would prefer to eat a pelican. This is due to the pelican's size and the difficulty in trying to digest the feathers. Seals do harass and chase birds, and potentially a slow pelican could be a target.

Fairy Terns (a threatened bird species) and seals are currently in different locations, it is highly unlikely that seals are eating Fairy Terns.



## How do seals impact our fisheries?

Long-nosed fur seals spend upwards of ninety per cent of their time at sea fishing. Adults do most of their fishing 100-150km from shore and juveniles travel further, fishing 500-1,000km from shore, well away from penguin colonies and most commercial fishing off SA. The seals we see on shore around the State are not primarily fishing. They are breeding, caring for pups, exploring or simply resting after their long fishing trips. Nevertheless, it is understood that this behaviour may be altered by the presence of freely available food, such as eating dead fish caught in static fishing nets in the Coorong.

SARDI is currently undertaking research into the impact of seals on the commercial fisheries of south Australia, this research has been occurring for a year already and SARDI is working closely with Primary Industry and Regions SA, the fishermen and the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources.

This is not a new conflict, recently the tuna fishermen at Port Lincoln had similar problems. Through collaboration with DEWNR, PIRSA and by changes in industry practises the industry was able to successfully live with wildlife and maintain their "premium food from a clean green environment" marketing edge.

## Is culling as an option?

The South Australian Government does not support culling long-nosed fur seals.

Marine industries such as aquaculture and the Coorong and Lower Lakes fishery understand that they should invest in socially acceptable solutions. The reputation of these industries is central to their ability to market their produce domestically and internationally.

The South Australian Government, PIRSA and DEWNR, is currently working closely with industry to identify solutions, everything will be considered except culling.

Attempts interstate and overseas to manage the impacts of individual fur seals and sea lions, using relocation or sterilisation, have not been successful. Any benefit gained from relocating seals is quickly lost because the seals return to their home range within days or, if they cant reach their home, new seals will move in. Seals that were translocated 350 km away in Tasmania managed to return to their place of capture in three to four days.

## Are there too many seals?

Long-nosed fur seal populations were decimated by sealing and their numbers are only now starting to return to what they were before the sealing era.

## If I see a seal, what should I do ?

Enjoy it, photograph it, tell your friends, show tourists and keep a safe distance between you and the animal.

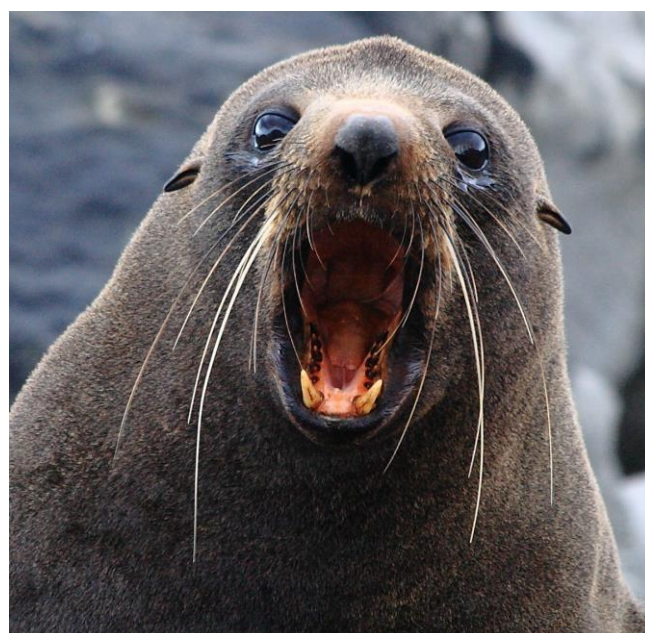
**Do not approach seals.** They are wild animals and they may bite if they feel threatened. it is an offence under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972* to harass or molest wildlife. Breaches of this requirement may result in expiations or prosecution with significant penalties and imprisonment.

**Do not feed the seals.** Incorrect food may kill them and seals are smart and habituate easily, so they become dependant on human feeding; become less likely to move on and, in some cases, become very aggressive if they expect food and none is offered.

If the seal is further up the river or tributaries, let the Murray Bridge Natural Resources Centre know.

Begin the conversation about the opportunity these animals bring to our community. In other states and the west coast of SA there are Swim with the Seals tours, the Coorong already has Canoe with the Seals tour. Perhaps there are opportunities in our region as well.

**As per normal river use watch for all river hazards** - swimming, skiing and boating is all still fine, just watch out for seals, be careful and sensible and obey the rules of the river.



## For more information

**Contact the Murray Bridge Natural Resources Centre.**

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