

What do you know about harbor seals at Children's Pool – take the quiz. ([Or download the pdf](#))

1. What kind of seals are we looking at?

At Children's, you will see Pacific Harbor Seals. (*Phoca vitulina richardsi*) They range from Baja to Alaska. <http://www.pinnipeds.org/species/harbour.htm> If you get lucky you might see a sea lion. Really, really, lucky would be to see a young elephant seal. If a guy just says, "seal" around here, he might mean harbor seals or sea lions or both. Northern California has both, and elephant seals, northern fur seals, stellar sea lions and Guadalupe fur seals.

2. Are harbor seals and sea lions endangered?

They are protected, but not endangered, not ESA (Endangered Species Act) listed nor depleted under MMPA (Marine Mammal Protection Act). They were hunted commercially until 1938, and fishermen were allowed to kill them if they interfered with fishing operations until 1994 when the MMPA gave them complete protection in the water.

3. If not endangered, are harbor seals still rare then?

Annual surveys are made, and DFG as of 1995 estimated there were 23,000 harbor seals in California. Ten years later, the NOAA 2005 census estimated over 34,000. By now it would be 40,000. (<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/pdfs/sars/po2005sehr-ca.pdf>) Harbor seal population in Alaska is 180,000+. The Seal Conservation Society at <http://www.pinnipeds.org/species/harbour.htm> 3rd paragraph, quotes 285,000 of our "Eastern Pacific" harbor seals from Alaska to Baja. Certainly one of the more remarkable species recovery stories.

4. If I go down on the beach, is that breaking the law?

Children's Pool is a public beach. Anyone can swim, dive, spearfish, etc. You may not "harass" the seals. Federal law prohibits pursuit, torment or annoyance of a seal.

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/education/viewing.htm> Crossing a rope is not illegal. Read the sign.

5. Are there people who hate seals and want to hurt them?

There are some commercial fishermen, sport fishing operations or fishnetters who feel they are overprotected. They find seals to be relentless thieves (well,..yeah) who endanger their livelihood.

<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/06.20.96/cover/seals-9625.html> They can legally use 'seal bombs' (big firecrackers), to make seals go away, for a while. <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Marine-Mammals/Seals-and-Sea-Lions/Detering-Pinnipeds.cfm>

6. Do divers scare seals underwater?

Though seals avoid people on land, they have never been afraid of divers in water, as they find them amusingly slow and clumsy. Divers love seals, enjoy their antics and certainly wish them no harm. Every experienced diver has a story about a seal playing with him. http://www.coldwaterimages.com/harbor_seal.html

7. Who protects these seals?

The Federal National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is responsible for marine mammal protection, census and studies. Nobody else. NOAA does not allow states to enforce laws concerning protection of marine mammals. (MMPA section 109(a))

8. If Children's pool were disturbed, where would the seals go? How would they pup?

They also go to Seal Rock, the offshore islands, small isolated beaches hidden in sea cliffs off Point Loma and Pendelton, etc. Where wild seals go.

http://www.friendsofthechildrenspool.com/legal_la_jolla_seals/051805_Hanan_dec.pdf "Harbor seals utilize specific shoreline locations on a regular basis as resting places called haulouts. Sites for haul-outs include beaches, rocks, log booms and floats. Some haulouts are used regularly, year around, while others may be used

seasonally or intermittently.” http://www.palomar.edu/oceanography/harbor_seals/facts.htm#HAULING-OUT%20TRENDS

9. What should I do if I see a distressed seal or abandoned pup?

Get back. "Helping" can be harmful.. A pup can be waiting for mom to come back with breakfast.

http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/ole/news/news_SWD_052406.htm Let someone know who can notify NOAA after 48 hours have gone by to be sure Mom had a chance to return. If injury is obvious, call Marine Mammal Rescue Center at (707)465-6265.

10. What should I do if I see someone harass a seal?

There is a hotline to NOAA 800-853-1964, however, there have been so many unwarranted calls from La Jolla that NOAA has notified San Diego that it does not have the resources to respond any more, and the City should handle Children’s. (Not a legally binding request) NOAA has not seem reason to issue a citation at Children’s Pool in 6 years.

11. How can I not bother seals if I am on the beach?

From experience of the lifeguards: Look like you are minding your own business. Do everything at the same slow pace. Do not stare directly. Keep your arms at your side. Do not advance directly on a seal. Keep a grip on kids. In the water, seals know you are a pathetic swimmer and no threat.

12. Harbor seals live near where they were born?

Many do. Adult harbor seals do tend to remain within an easy swim (15 miles) of favored hauling sites. Pups are weaned in about 5 weeks and no longer depend on their mothers. Juveniles may then disburse 100 miles or more to seek their fortunes.

http://www.palomar.edu/oceanography/harbor_seals/facts.htm#II.%20%20HABITAT%20AND%20DISTRIBUTION A radio tag study like Herder, 1982, Humbolt State University, defined a 25 km range “site fidelity”, but it is seasonal, with some long excursions. Selenium stained seals from San Francisco have been seen in Children’s Pool.

13. Is Children’s Pool is the only seal rookery in Southern California?

Children’s is just our only “rookery” on land for tourists to observe with no effort. Another tourist-viewable is in Carpinteria. One can view seals from the sidewalk at Seal Rock too. Wild seals prefer inaccessible places, but if one seal is getting away with sitting on a beach, others will follow, just as we will do something seemingly risky if somebody else goes first, until we get used to it.

Harbor seals do not migrate annually back to specific breeding grounds, but can move freely about, so it is not an applicable term, (<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/pdfs/sars/po2005sehr-ca.pdf> 1st paragraph), but the term is used anyway. It has no legal meaning.

14. So how many rookeries, pupping sites, whatever, are in California?

From page 1 of <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/pdfs/sars/po2005sehr-ca.pdf>, NOAA can estimate 600 haulout sites in California. Another scientist says 1200+.

http://www.friendsofthechildrenspool.com/city_san_diego_seals/cpoolfaq.shtml From the first document 2nd page, the 2005 census showed about 5,900 more seals than 2004. They had to come from somewhere. The haulout sites can be different than pupping sites. Harbor seals to not even need to have a “haulout” site to sleep, breed, pup, or nurse – they can do all that in the water, but they prefer a flat spot for birthing and nursing – very secluded if they are wild seals. A ‘beach’ to them, can be a 8’ wide. Figure how many little beaches there are surrounded by cliff all along Point Loma, Pendelton, Sunset Cliffs, etc.

15. What caused wild seals to take to a beach where humans go?

San Diego had rehabilitated harbor seals from Sea World Reclamation Center over the county secretly released near Children’s after being cared for, hand or bottle fed. <http://www.seaworld.org/animal-info/info-books/rescue-&-rehab/results.htm> They had no fear of humans. This went on from 1994 to 2005 and created the

colony. http://www.friendsofthechildrenspool.com/legal_la_jolla_seals/Childrens_082505.pdf (Pages 22 and 30) Rehab seals have been identified at children's pool by their orange rear flipper tags. Others are wild. Like people, wild seals will go someplace that should seem scary, if somebody else goes first. The fearlessness was passed on to pups.

16. Have seals used Children's Pool forever?

Children's pool did not exist before 1931. The sea wall was built to protect a huge tide pool where Children could swim safely, but the City has allowed it to fill with sand. The present "beach" is a sand dune. Sea lions played on the reef behind it, which stuck out of the water 100 years ago and was once called Seal Rock, now the name of a different rock, just a few hundred feet north of Children's Pool.

Harbor seals first regularly visited Children's Pool Beach in early '90s, though they might have used it at night before that. The city closed the beach to the public because of seal coliform bacteria in the water in 1997, roped off the beach, and numbers began to increase on the "abandoned" beach.

http://www.friendsofthechildrenspool.com/legal_la_jolla_seals/Childrens_082505.pdf (Last complete paragraph in page 30).

17. Any attempt to move the seals at Children's would violate their federal protection.

No. The city had obtained the needed permits to remove the seals and restore Children's Pool in 1999. Since then, NOAA has told the city it needs no permit, and could have gone ahead anyway.

http://www.friendsofthechildrenspool.com/federal_la_jolla_seals/101705_noaa.pdf "NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service has preliminarily determined that excavating and removing beach sand at the La Jolla Children's Pool will not result in more than the incidental harassment of small numbers of harbor seals and possibly one or two California sea lions and elephant seals, and would have minimal impact on these stocks."

<http://www.publicaffairs.noaa.gov/releases99/feb99/noaa99r110.html> San Diego values the seals for a tourist attraction too much to repatriate them to the wild. It will never happen now.

18. I came to see the only colony of seals in California, but I only see a few, not 200.

Any group of seals that have been seen to haul out together is a 'colony', like the Harbor Island bait barge. There were counted almost 200 seals on the beach one day in molting season. Someone concluded there is a colony of 200 living there all the time. According to <http://marinebio.org/species.asp?id=158> 5th paragraph, harbor seals are found in groups only during haulouts for breeding and molting, but from a better source (Dr Doyle Hanan) "seals are found in groups of 1-1000+ at all times of the year, but the greatest numbers occur during pupping and moulting." They do not form harems and "Although they assemble in groups of up to several hundred, they do not form breeding

colonies". http://www.palomar.edu/oceanography/harbor_seals/facts.htm#XII.%20%20REPRODUCTION

19. Colony, shmolony! If there were 200 seen once, where are some for me to see?

Is the sun out? Look over on the rocks. Come back tonight. Or sign up for the SEAL Amphibious bus tour of the bay. Pretty sure you will see seals when it goes by the bait barge. <http://www.destination-store.com/tour/san+diego/sealtour/> It is true seals average 7 hours a day of rest, but so do you. That doesn't mean they will sleep on hot sand in a fur coat. They can sleep in the water if they choose. The number of seals hauled out peaks during the molt (May, June) when they like to be warm on the sand. The heat helps dry and shed their hair. After that, as true summer hits, they are in the water, hunting and exploring.

20. There are 80,000 tourists a month at Children's.

That number is an estimate made by lifeguards of how many people come under the protection of the Children's Pool lifeguard station. It includes swimmers, divers, and everyone within sight of the station, including 4 blocks of street and 5 beaches. The number of seal watchers is not known.

21. Has human encroachment on the coast driven seals from all the other beaches?

Other way round. Human encroachment is what allowed a modification of normal seal behavior so some would haul out on an open white beach instead of tiny isolated nooks under cliffs. Before a couple hundred years ago,

seals were prey to cougars, bears, coyotes, and Indians, but only if they were on land. Pups could be snatched by an eagle too. Brush grew right up to the sand, where predators could hide. No seal in his right mind would haul out on an open beach where he would be a target. The density of human acclimated harbor seals here is explained in question #15. Human encroachment on the area has removed every predator, and barriers erected at Children's taught generations of harbor seals that humans are harmless and uninclined to get too close at this beach.

22. Children's does not seem like much compared to 70 miles of beaches

70 miles of beach in San Diego is a real whopper. Look at a map. From Mexico to Oceanside is a distance of 70 miles. Parks and Recreation dept. finds 13.6 miles of oceanfront shoreline, NOT beach (Excluding State and military areas). <http://www.sandiego.gov/park-and-recreation/pdf/fastfacts.pdf> Bottom of page 1. That includes the inaccessible cliff sides in PB, and the sea walls in Mission Bay and lots of other unusable coastline. In 26.2 miles of Mission Bay shoreline, for instance, there is very little public beach besides Fiesta Island. City Lifeguard Service lists 11 beaches in San Diego, and 3 are rated for beginner divers, La Jolla Shores, La Jolla Cove, and Children's Pool. <http://www.sandiego.gov/lifeguards/beaches/>

27. Will my going on the beach frighten a mother seal into premature birth?

No mammal is capable of being startled into spontaneous premature birth. Mammalian birth is not like emptying a bucket. Cervical dilation alone takes hours. A person may see a seal give birth after being startled, but the 2 events are unrelated. Stillborn pups in the wild are common. "Mortality at study sites in the Strait of Juan de Fuca was related to premature parturition; 19 of 49 (39%) of the pups found dead were born prematurely." <http://www.jwildlifedis.org/cgi/content/abstract/25/3/319>

28. What keeps the seals from taking other beaches?

Seals are homebodies, creatures of habit, but Children's Pool is about up to capacity and some go to the adjacent beach every year. The City has not thought through any policy to deal with wayward seals. There are now sea lion colonies on each side of La Jolla Cove, so it may go next.