



Seal numbers, tensions growing

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NANTUCKET — Crocker Snow Jr. is at the epicenter of a seal invasion.

His family has owned a good portion of Muskeget, a small island of about 320 acres just west of Tuckernuck, since 1948. In 1994, Snow said, there were 19 adult seals on the island. Last year, an aerial census estimated there were between 3,500 and 3,800 seals.

"It's a complete explosion," said Snow, the director of the Edward R. Murrow Center for Public Diplomacy at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

In 1980, Muskeget was listed as a National Natural Landmark by the National Park Service and is the only home to the rare Muskeget vole. Sometimes, it's very exciting, like being on the Galapagos Islands, but Snow said the fragile environment is being trampled by these lumbering visitors who weigh up to 800 pounds and have been moving inland as the beaches become too crowded.

"It's quite a scene. The smell, the sound, the numbers, the overall commotion," Snow said of the winter mating season. At least two small freshwater ponds on the island have been polluted with their feces, and fishing is non-existent, Snow said. About the only good news is that he believes the island's extensive sandbars have kept the great whites from coming close to shore.

By the 1960s, the gray seal population had been virtually wiped out in the region. Thanks to the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, which forbids harassing or harming all marine mammals, gray seals — the most numerous of the seal species in this area — returned in relatively large numbers. The Muskeget population spike mirrors the growth of gray seals on the Cape and Islands, whose estimated numbers went from 5,611 in 1999 to 15,756 in 2011. That has created problems for Snow and others who believe water quality, public safety and fish populations have all suffered.

They are now questioning whether these seals still need that protection.

"We'll become a stop on some eco-tour. There'll be no fishermen here," predicted Peter Krogh, spokesman for the [Seal Abatement Coalition](#), a Nantucket group that has about 60 core members and has collected more than 1,200 signatures on a petition asking the federal government for an amendment to the law that would allow for the dispersion of gray seals.

That's not an unprecedented request. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is in the process of developing guidelines for nonlethal, non-injurious methods for deterring California sea lions and harbor seals that damage property, fishing gear or catches in California, where there has also been explosive growth in those populations. Last year, NOAA also allowed the killing of California sea lions that were eating an endangered species of salmon on Oregon's Columbia River.

'Aggressive' seals

Great Point, a prime Nantucket fishing spot where strong rips attract bluefish and striped bass, is also now home to between 500 and 600 seals, Krogh said. When they are all beached and settled in, they virtually close down the area to fishing. Their excrement fouls the water, and the seals are aggressive in pursuing fish hooked on lines, even coming up to fishermen cleaning their catch. The Trustees of The Reservations, which controls access

to the site, has posted warnings to fishermen on its website on the aggressiveness of the seals: to not approach within 50 yards and watch children closely near the water.

Krogh claimed seals now ring the island and that the charter fleet has a tough time avoiding them at sea. That is a tale Chatham fishermen can relate to. They claim their nets and hooks routinely get stripped of fish by hungry seals.

"It's like having 15,000 unregulated fishermen, do-what-you-want fishermen out there," said Chatham fisherman John Our. A commercial fisherman for 32 years, Our said the seal problem wasn't bad until three years ago. "This summer, they have been very aggressive," he said. "They can eat up 3,000 pound of skates overnight." When they do, they also destroy costly nets and other gear.

Even going far out to sea doesn't help.

"I was 58 miles east of Chatham in January, and they ate them up overnight," he said. Worse, Our and other commercial fishermen worry the seal population might be eroding the recovery of critical groundfish stocks, such as cod and flounder.

"Wherever they take up residency, fish stocks can't be maintained or they disappear."

The Canadian department of Fisheries and Oceans determined in a report last year that cod stock recovery was significantly jeopardized by gray seals. Although the population growth rate slowed in recent years from nearly a 13 percent annual increase to about 4 percent, there are estimated to be between 260,000 to 320,000 gray seals on Sable Island. That's a lot of hungry mouths to feed, and the Canadians are contemplating the culling of large numbers of the seal population to help bring back the cod.

Local fishermen have no such plan in mind at this point.

"We have no position on what to do with the seals," said John Pappalardo, former New England Fishery Management Council chairman and chief executive officer at the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association Inc. in Chatham.

Pappalardo said he has been hearing from a lot of fishermen in recent years with complaints similar to Our's. The hook association is in the process of raising money through its newly established Fishermen's Fund to pay for a more extensive census of the Cape and Islands seal populations than what is available through the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Complex ecosystem

The New England council and the NMFS have not incorporated the increase in seal population and predation into estimates of naturally caused mortality in groundfish stocks because they say they don't have solid numbers that would establish a seal population trend and that they lack estimates for how much fish seals consume.

Gordon Waring, head of the NMFS seal research program in the Northeast, said the federal agency doesn't know what constitutes the maximum population growth for gray seals, but there are no signs — such as starvation, illness or disease — they have reached that point yet.

Pappalardo sees his organization's role as one of getting solid population numbers, then initiating the conversation on what to do next.

"Our fishermen said we need to figure out how many there are and how many we can expect," he said. "We will put planes in the air (to do survey work), and we are looking for a project coordinator in the next few weeks."

Although they don't have the technology to determine whether the bacterial contamination that occasionally closes Cape beaches comes from seals, health and environmental officials agreed it's likely there is little effect from seal excrement outside the immediate area where they haul out in great numbers. In those spots, the smell and the bacterial contamination in the water is enough to discourage swimming, as well as the possibility that sharks are lurking nearby.

"There's plenty of current and dilution. I wouldn't expect to see it as an issue," said Robert Duncanson, Chatham's director of health and environment. Beth Sadlowski, Barnstable County's beach water quality program coordinator, said that despite the seal population explosion, there hasn't been any corresponding increase in the number of beach closures annually.

Although Nauset Light, Marconi and Race Point beaches all recently went through multiday closures for bacterial contamination, longer term analysis of testing data showed no recurrent problem indicating that seals were causing any chronic pollution of the beaches, said Shelley Hall, the Cape Cod National Seashore's natural resource director.

The big unknown might well be public safety and how many sharks a resurgent seal population could attract. Hall felt the seal populations were just coming back from nearly being wiped out and that their relationship to sharks and people was still in flux. "It's getting back to a more natural situation with seals and sharks now."

Shark experts said they don't know how many sharks could ultimately be drawn to an area with 15,000 seals. State shark expert Greg Skomal said he doesn't know how many great white sharks are actually in Cape waters now, although the research boat he's hired has tagged 10 sharks this year already, far more than the two previous years.

A 2003 research paper published in the journal Science looked at fishing data for gear that had caught sharks in the past and found that great whites in the Northwest Atlantic might have suffered a 79 percent decline between 1986 and 2003. In 1985, researchers had identified 380 great white sharks in the Northwest Atlantic but didn't know how much of the total population this represented.

In their petition this week to list the Pacific great white as an endangered species, three environmental groups cited scientific studies that concluded there may be as few as 350 great whites in the population, including just 100 females. This is despite that West Coast seal populations are booming to more than 400,000 individuals.

There is the possibility that great whites might be lagging behind the curve of the seal explosion. They take 10 years to become sexually mature and produce relatively small litters. As apex predators, they are not built to handle big fluctuations, experts say.

The bottom line is that no one knows with any certainty what the Cape could be looking at in terms of the numbers of sharks and seals in our waters and their effects. "It's a very complex ecosystem with complicated interactions," Hall said. "It's hard to know what the natural equilibrium will be."

GROWING POPULATION

Estimated numbers of gray seals on the Cape and Islands

1999: 5,611

2011: 15,756

Source: NMFS Draft 2012 Marine Mammal Stock Assessment

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