

## Common Seals in the Wadden Sea in 2000

Trilateral Seal Expert Group (TSEG)

Again in 2000, coordinated counts of common seals in the entire Wadden Sea were carried out. During simultaneous aerial surveys, the following results were obtained. The maximum total number of counted seals amounted to 17,000, of which 2,140 were counted in Denmark, 6,300 in Schleswig-Holstein, 5,230 in Lower Saxony and 3,330 in the Netherlands. The total maximum number of pups counted was 3,610. The percentage of pups per total number is similar to the average of 20% found in preceding years. The increase in the total number compared to last year's is about 13%, but the increase is not the same in all areas. Particularly in Denmark, the increase seems to have leveled off in 1999 and 2000. It has to be mentioned that adverse weather conditions through extended periods hampered surveys in some areas. Particularly, the maximum figure for Schleswig-Holstein is less complete than in other areas and therefore the total maximum number in that area had to be extrapolated. The surveys next year may show whether this was a good expert's estimate.

The observed increase between 1998 and 1999 was 6%. This has been lower than the average 13% found in the years since the virus-epidemic in 1988. This low increase prompted questions about the possibility whether this was the start of a change

in the population trend observed so far, or just a one-off event. Lower pup production and/or higher pup mortality were discussed as possible factors explaining the lower increase. At the time, it was not possible to conclude about a possible change in trend.

Under the assumption that the estimated number for Schleswig-Holstein is a roughly correct estimate, the survey results lead to the conclusion that the increase this year has been similar to the average annual increase of 12-13% found from 1989 onwards. However, the numbers observed this year are lower than predicted if the increase from 1989 onwards had continued. Although at present the question of what could have caused the lower increase last year remains unsolved, it is clear that the strong population growth of the last decennium has continued, but at a slightly lower rate than before. Surveys in the coming years will elucidate in which direction the seal population develops.

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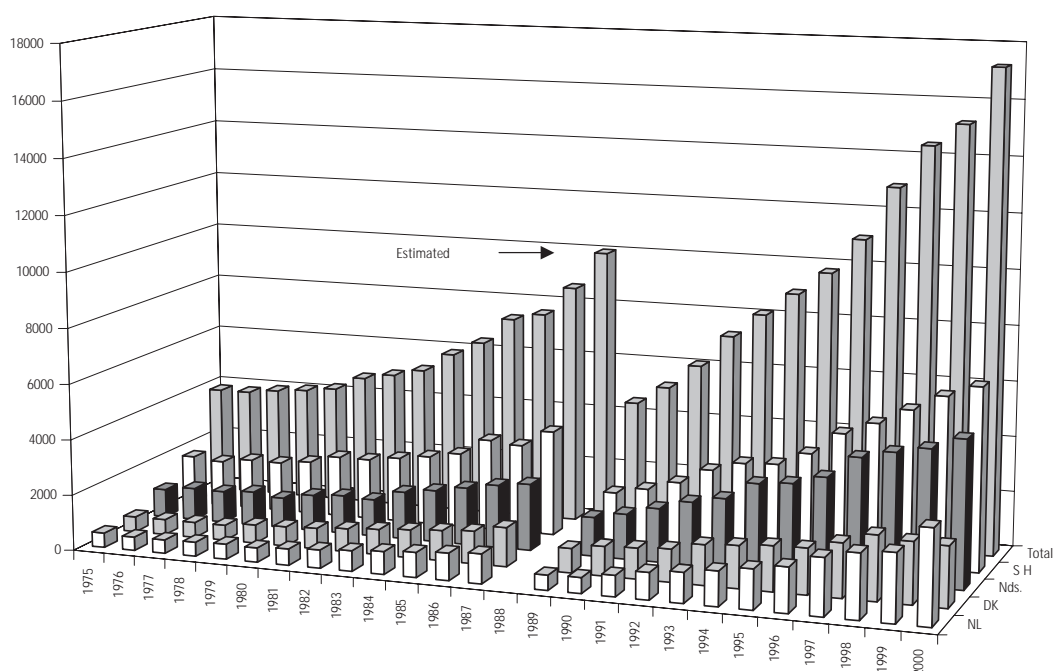


Figure 1: Number of counted common seals in the Wadden Sea since 1975