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**PROGRESS REPORT OF THE AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SEALS IN
THE WADDEN SEA (WSSA)**

Summary:

The Secretariat is circulating herewith, for the information of participants in the 12th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Migratory Species, the report provided by the Secretariat of the Agreement on the Conservation of Seals in the Wadden Sea.

The Report is provided unedited in the format and language that it was submitted.

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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SEALS IN THE WADDEN SEA

*Progress Report by the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat to the
12th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Migratory Species,
Manila, Philippines, 23-28 October 2017*

1. The Agreement on the Conservation of Seals in the Wadden Sea (WSSA), which was the first regional agreement developed under the auspices of the Bonn Convention, was concluded between Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands on 16 October 1990 in Bonn, Germany, and entered into force one year later. The Secretariat for the Agreement and the coordinating institution for the Seal Management Plan is the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat (CWSS) in Wilhelmshaven, Germany. In August 2015, the 25th anniversary of the agreement was acknowledged at the 10th Wadden Sea Day in Wilhelmshaven, Germany, , organized by the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat and the National Park Administration Wadden Sea of the Federal State of Lower Saxony. CWSS and the WSSA mother convention, CMS, as well as other relevant Agreements of the CMS family (AEWA, ASCOBANS) cooperate closely and successfully on a number of issues of joint concern.

2. The aim of the Seal Agreement is to promote close cooperation amongst the Parties in order to achieve and maintain a favorable conservation status for the harbour seal population, which was a particularly critical issue in 1988 and 2002. The population was reduced by about 60% in 1988 and 47% in 2002 as a result of two devastating Phocine Distemper virus (PDV)-epizootics. A flu epidemic in 2014 also had a negative impact on the population, but nowhere near the extent of the two previous virus outbreaks.

3. In the framework of the WSSA, the Parties adopt and continuously update so-called Seal Management Plans (SMP) building on the obligations of the Seal Agreement. The “Conservation and Management Plan for the Seal Population, 2012-2016”, is currently under revision and expected to lead to the adoption of the 2017-2021 Seal Management Plan by 2017. The SMP contains objectives and action points on habitat protection, research and monitoring, pollution and wardening, taking and public information and is an essential instrument that seeks a balance between conservation and management of the area contributing to achieving viable populations. The Parties continuously amend the plan in order to meet the challenges of protecting this flagship species of the Wadden Sea.http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/smp_2012-2016_final.pdf

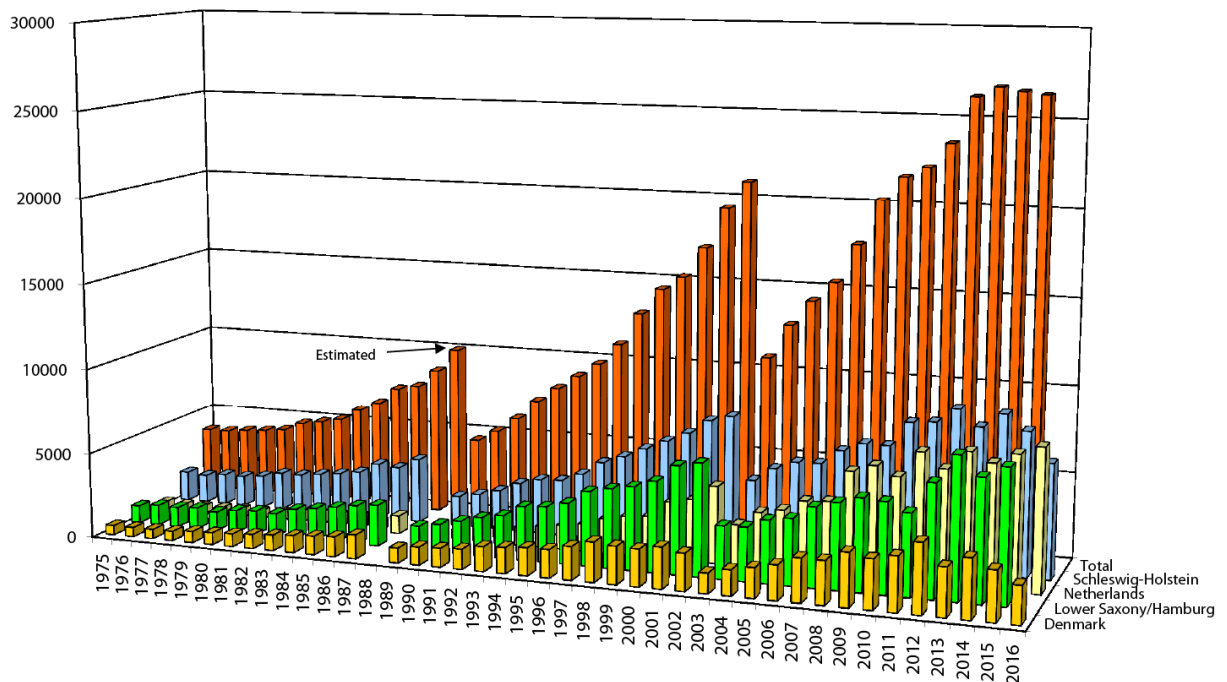
4. The plan covers the Wadden Sea population of the harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina vitulina*) and is also extended to cover the breeding population of grey seals

(*Halichoerus grypus*) in the Wadden Sea, which is not covered by the Wadden Sea Seal Agreement. The overall aim is to restore and maintain viable populations and a natural reproduction capacity, including juvenile survival of harbor seals and grey seals in the Wadden Sea.

5. Since the last epizootic in 2002, the population of harbour seals has recovered significantly. During the 2016 survey campaign, unfavourable weather conditions resulted in insufficient harbour seal monitoring data. Since numbers had been fluctuating significantly over the previous years, it was not possible to calculate a resilient trend. However, during pupping, adults were counted and it was possible to use those numbers as indicative figures, especially because they were on a similar level as those recorded in 2015. Hence, the trend from recent years could be an indication of an actual population decrease, however at different rates in different areas, but may also indicate a change in behaviour with different proportions of seals hauling out in the different regions. Large decreases in certain areas could be seen as the consequence of the flu epidemic in 2014, which led to a high mortality in two particular regions. However, it could also be read as further evidence in support of the hypothesis that the harbour seals in the Wadden Sea may be reaching carrying capacity (van Neer et al. 2015).

The estimate for the total Wadden Sea harbour seal population, including seals being in the water during the survey, can be calculated using a correction factor, which considers that an average of 32% of the seals were in the water during summer and indicated a population of 38,900 harbour seals in the entire Wadden Sea in 2015.

http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/TMAP_downloads/Seals/aerial_surveys_of_harbour_seals_in_the_wadden_sea_in_2016.pdf
Annual numbers of counted harbour seals in the Wadden Sea since 1975



6. For grey seals, the upward trend in population development has continued. Originally native to the Wadden Sea region, this species disappeared almost completely. However, over the last three decades grey seals have been recolonizing again. During the moulting period in spring 2016 5445 grey seals were counted on coordinated surveys in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, equivalent to an increase of 10 % compared to the previous year. Though there clearly is a variation between the countries, the continued increase in numbers indicates that this growth might be an actual trend. During the breeding period in 2016/17 a total of 1279 grey seal pups were counted representing an increase of 15 % compared to the previous year, which means about half of the growth rate of the year before. This lower growth rate, might still be supported by the pups recruiting into the breeding population, with high numbers of females migrating into the area, mainly from UK waters.

7. The successful protection of harbour and grey seals over the last decades is a protection measure which was also acknowledged in the acceptance of the Dutch and German Wadden Sea as World Heritage Site in June 2009, and finally the Danish part in 2014, by the UNESCO.

8. The discussion on taking and releasing seals is still ongoing, driven by fact that the population is on the highest level ever reported. “Taking” is defined as the removal of living seals from the natural environment to check the health condition of the animals: as a result, the animals will be (1) released back in its environment, (2) euthanized if necessary or (3) kept for rehabilitation in appropriate nursery centers for a subsequent release into the wild. Most often “taking” relates to seal pups found without its mother, or to weak or sick animals.

9. It is clearly stated in the first Seal Management Plan (1991-1995) adopted pursuant to the WSSA that taking of seals is prohibited. This was later further defined and explicitly declared in the so-called Leeuwarden Declaration (LD § 60, Appendix 3) by the responsible Trilateral Management Authorities at their 7th Trilateral Ministerial Conference (CWSS, 1994). They agreed “to reduce the taking of seals to the lowest level possible”. A good health status of the seal population can only be achieved if natural selection processes can occur. From a biological and wildlife management point of view, human activities should not interfere with these basic processes. Even if animal welfare aspects are taken into account, human handling of seals should be restricted to a low level. Further studies on the potential impact of animals released into the wild population after treatment from nursery stations are needed. Overall, the conservation and protection of the Wadden Sea seal population is a success story. The CWSS has been instrumental in reaching this success by joining and harmonizing the efforts of the Parties including experts and managers and by enhancing the awareness of the conservation and protection needs of the population. The WSSA is also an excellent example of how various international instruments and bodies from within and outside of the UN system can successfully join efforts to achieve a mutual aim. The objective of the Agreement has been largely achieved and focus is now on maintaining a favorable conservation by continuing the joint management of the population and extending the knowledge basis for management.

11. A new chapter on “Marine Mammals” will be published later this year, as part part of the Wadden Sea Quality Status Report 2017, issued by the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat. Further information on marine mammals in the Wadden Sea including

harbour seals and grey seals are given on the CWSS website (<http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/management/seal-management>) and in the final draft version of the Thematic Report No. 20: Marine Mammals, Quality Status Report 2009 (<http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org/sites/default/files/downloads/20-marine-mammals-10-03-05.pdf>):

Reijnders, P.J.H., Brasseur, M.J.M., Borchardt, T., Camphuysen, K.(C.J.), Czech, R., Gilles, A., Jensen, L.F., Leopold, M., Lucke, K., Ramdohr, S., Scheidat, M., Siebert, U., & J. Teilmann, 2009. Thematic Report No. 20: Marine Mammals. Quality Status Report 2009. Wadden Sea Ecosystem No. 25, Trilateral Monitoring and Assessment Group, Common Wadden Sea Secretariat, Wilhelmshaven, Germany.

van Neer A, Jensen LF, Siebert U. (2015). Grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) predation on harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina*) on the island of Helgoland, Germany. *J Sea Res* 97:1–4. doi: 10.1016/j.seares.2014.11.006

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