

## Estuary harbour seal... less common than one would think

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Parc national du Bic is an ideal place to observe seals. This may be explained, in part, by the presence of huge boulders exposed during high tide and found in the many coves and bays. These boulders are used by seals as haulout sites and are essential for the species' survival. Seals come to rest here, to give birth (from late May to early July) and to moult (until mid-September). On the periphery and inside the park's boundaries, the grey seal and the harbour seal are the main seal species observed. Indeed, the harbour seal is the park's emblematic species. With a harbour seal population evaluated at some 150 specimens, the park sector is home to one of the largest concentrations of this species in the St. Lawrence Estuary.

Since 1999, the park has been teamed up with the Réseau d'observation de mammifères marins (ROMM) to collect observation data on the presence and behaviours of seals. Carried out systematically by park wardens-naturalists, this collection of data takes place during observation periods within the context of the discovery activities program. For several years now, this meticulous work has allowed the park's Conservation and Education Service and researchers to obtain invaluable information on seals. Moreover, this work has helped make up for certain shortcomings in our knowledge. In fact, this new scientific contribution could allow the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) to reassess the protection status attributed to the Estuary harbour seal.

Facing the same threats as the beluga whale, the Estuary harbour seal is a source of concern. Several stakeholders, including the park, mobilized to create a St. Lawrence Estuary Harbour Seal Concertation Committee. The aim of this concertation committee, overseen by the ROMM, is to ensure this species' protection and development. The drafting, in March 2004, of the *St. Lawrence Estuary harbour seal action plan* was the first achievement of the ROMM. This plan highlights the main concerns regarding the harbour seal's survival: poor knowledge of the specific situation of the harbour seal in relation to that of other seal species, lack of knowledge in general, pathogens and diseases, accidental and intentional harvests, disturbances at sea and at haulout sites, and deterioration of the habitat.

The coastal habits of the harbour seal as well as its distribution around the globe suggest that this species is common everywhere. In fact, based on the recent surveys carried out by Fisheries and Oceans Canada (Robillard *et al.*, 2005), the harbour seal population could number between 4,000 and 5,000 in the Estuary and Gulf of St. Lawrence. These figures are low in comparison with those of other seal species found in these same sectors. For example, there are more than 5 million harp seals in eastern Canada.

When seals are out of the water, they are particularly vulnerable to disturbances. Believing them to be in difficulty, some well-meaning individuals try to put young seals that are on the shore back into the water. This intervention can result in a serious problem. Once back in the water, the young seal, having absorbed human odours, risks being abandoned by its mother and not surviving. That is why it is best to keep one's distances from seals.

It is up to us to make known this species, its characteristics and the types of behaviour that should be adopted in its presence. With this objective in mind, the park is carrying out research activities and an awareness promotion and education program to actively protect the harbour seal.

Note: The Estuary harbour seal action plan is available on the web site of Parc national du Bic au [www.parcsquebec.com](http://www.parcsquebec.com)