

Report by the Welsh Partnership of MPA's on behalf of Welsh Government

Review of Seal Pup Awareness Panels in the Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau, Cardigan Bay, Pembrokeshire Marine and Carmarthen Bay and Estuaries Marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)



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Introduction

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) cover more than 35% of Welsh territorial waters; a well-managed network of MPAs can enhance the health of the marine environment as a whole, helping it to recover from past impacts and mitigating the effects of current pressures. MPAs are of central importance to marine conservation; European Marine Sites (EMS) make up the majority of our current MPA network in Wales; along with RAMSAR sites, SSSI's, UNESCO Biosphere reserves etc. European Marine Sites were firstly designated and protected under European legislation, this legislation then became ratified and adopted into UK law. These sites include Special Protection Areas (SPAs) which are protected for bird species, and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) which are designated for other habitats and species.

The MPAs in Wales are multiuse sites, with the management of activities being defined by the features and objectives of the site. Management authorities have established Relevant Authority Groups (RAGs) a voluntary working collaboration between the authorities with management responsibilities to deliver their obligations for the site. Special Area of Conservation (SAC) Officers work closely with the RAGs in the management of some of Wales' largest MPAs (SACs). There are fifteen SACs within Welsh marine waters, including two cross border sites with England (the Severn Estuary SAC and the Dee Estuary SAC). The Welsh Partnership of MPAs was formed to ensure coherence and collaborative working across the Wales MPA network on sites where SAC Officers are in post, these are; Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau SAC, Cardigan Bay SAC, Pembrokeshire Marine SAC, Carmarthen Bay and Estuaries SAC, and a cross border site – the Severn Estuary SAC. The SAC officers from these five sites work together closely and collaboratively to share resources, good practice and to ensure consistent messaging between the sites.

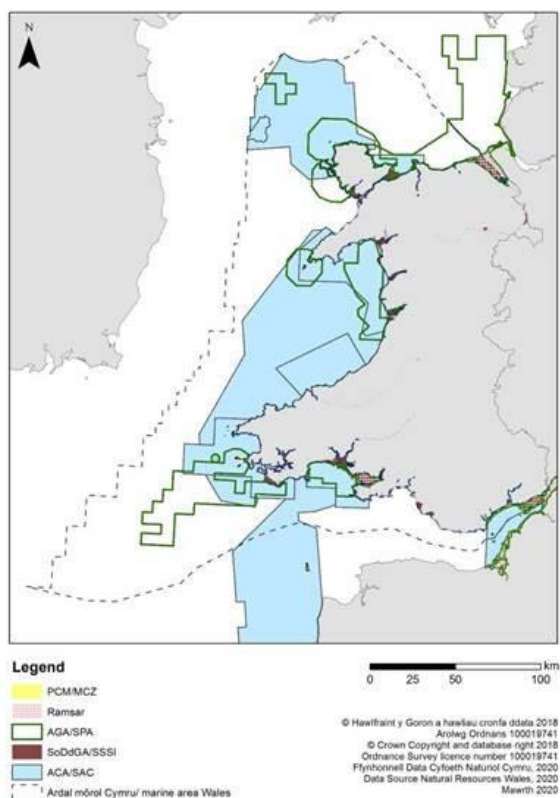


Figure 1: Map of Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)/Special Protection Areas (SPA) around Wales, JNCC

Atlantic grey seals in Wales

Atlantic grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) are a conservation feature of three of the five sites. The term conservation feature refers to a specific habitat or species, as listed under the EU Habitats Directive (originally Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora transposed in the UK as the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended)), for which the SAC has been selected. Grey seals are among the rarest seals in the world; the UK population represents about 40% of the world population and 95% of the EU population. The population occurring in Wales are the most southerly breeding population in Europe. The British Isles has a population of approximately 124,000 grey seals.

A key issue for the conservation of the grey seal is disturbance of pupping, haul-out and moulting sites by human activity. In areas that have a high incidence of human impact through boating and other recreational water craft, fishing, dog walking and other activities; existing populations are subject to growing pressure from disturbance. The increase in the use of personalised watercraft such as kayaks, canoes and stand up paddleboards (SUPS) has further provided access to locations where previously grey seals would have remained largely undisturbed. Along with disturbance, other issues can also affect seal abundance and distribution; interactions with fisheries such as entanglement and incidental capture in line and netting, pollution, disease, and a reduction in food availability due to changes in the distribution and abundance of their prey.

Disturbance of seals during the pupping season can result in the abandonment of seal pups. After birth, seal pups remain on the shore for just three weeks and they are fed by their mothers every couple of hours. The milk is rich enough that the pups feeding on two and a half litres of milk every day can grow by as much as 30kg. The females return to the sea between each feed, leaving the pups alone on the shore. This often results in the misconception from well-meaning members of the public that lone seal pups on a beach have been abandoned, leading to well intentioned, but harmful interventions such as removing the pup from the beach or chasing it into the water. Seal pups are poor swimmers, and need to spend their time resting and growing. Females give birth to their pups above the high water mark to avoid their pup being washed into the swell, attempts to chase the pup into the sea cause distress and use up a lot of the pup's energy, and interventions of human handling can result in the pup being abandoned. In other instances pups are caused significant distress and disturbance from loose dogs being exercised on the beach, or from members of the public approaching too close to take photographs.

Although currently the conservation status of Atlantic grey seals in Wales is favourable, it is vitally important that we make every effort to work to keep grey seals, as a conservation feature in Wales' SACs, in favourable condition; and improve it further if we can.

Methodology

In 2016, the Cardigan Bay SAC Officer, through their host organisation, Ceredigion County Council, successfully bid for and secured funding from Natural Resources Wales (NRW) to design and produce temporary interpretation panels that were placed seasonally along the coast of the Cardigan Bay Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The need for seasonal interpretation boards was identified after several consecutive years of issues of disturbance of seal pups on beaches by:

- ❖ recreational users of the beach / dog walkers / members of the public trying to get near to/ photograph the seal pups
- ❖ the unnecessary removal of healthy pups from beaches by members of the public and inexperienced British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) volunteers

These panels were placed at key pupping beaches and also beaches that are very popular with tourists.

The panels proved very popular with both locals and tourists, and generated a lot of interest. In 2016, and also in the consecutive years of 2017, 2018 and 2019, when the panels were in situ, the issue of disturbance was significantly reduced and there were no recorded incidents of healthy seal pups being removed unnecessarily from those beaches with signage in place.



The Cardigan Bay SAC Officer provided feedback on the project to the other Welsh marine SAC Officers through the Welsh Partnership of MPA's. Significant problems were also being experienced in the north of Wales; in the Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau SAC, and other areas along the north Wales coast, particularly at key pupping sites such as Porth Dyniewaid (Angel Bay) at Penrhyn between Llandudno and Colwyn Bay. The Wales SAC Officers consulted widely with partner organisations such as the Wildlife Trusts and the Wild Sea Wales group who similarly voiced concerns at the increase in seal pup disturbance, and expressed support for the Cardigan Bay project to be rolled out Wales-wide.

Figure 2: Cardigan Bay original board on site at Llangrannog

The Wales marine SAC Officers felt that rolling out the seal pup panels across Wales' marine SAC sites would be both beneficial to grey seal populations and demonstrate a consistent message. As a consequence, the Welsh Partnership of MPA's successfully secured funding from the Welsh

Government to adapt the signs and produce them in sufficient quantities to deliver the project across Wales. This work aids in the provision of actions from the MPA Network Management Action Plan for Wales, along with site level Management Schemes. The total cost of the project was £2, 970 (excluding VAT) including the design, printing and delivery of 50 bilingual panels.



Figure 3: Welsh Partnership of Local MPA's seal pup awareness board

Pen Llŷn a’r Sarnau SAC (PLAS) and the North Wales coast

The placing of signage along the coast of the Pen Llŷn a’r Sarnau SAC, the islands of Anglesey and Bardsey, and along the coast of the Menai Straight and Conwy Bay SAC (where no SAC Officer is currently in place) was co-ordinated by the PLAS SAC Officer. Due to the scale and geographical size of the area, signage was placed at different locations by a number of organisations and volunteers working together. Information was also posted on both the PLAS and many other partner organisations social media platforms. All the organisations listed below agreed to place the signs out and retrieve them on an annual basis. Signs are erected temporarily for the duration of the north Wales pupping season (November to January) by the following -

- ❖ The North Wales Wildlife Trust took responsibility for ten signs all along the north west Wales coast (Anglesey, Gwynedd and Conwy)
- ❖ The Pen Llŷn a’r Sarnau Liaison Group placed approximately thirty water-proof posters up around the coastline of the PLAS SAC
- ❖ Gwynedd Council, the National Trust and private landowners placed signage around the Llŷn peninsula including at the National trust sites of Porthor, Porth y Swnt/Aberdaron, Porthdinllaen, Porth Gwylan, Porth Ysgo
- ❖ The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) placed signage at their South Stack site (Anglesey)
- ❖ The Bardsey Island Trust took responsibility for signage on Bardsey Island

Feedback from all those involved in the project in the Pen Llŷn a’r Sarnau SAC has been very positive.

The Bardsey Island Trust reported that;

“The Bird Observatory took responsibility over the signs. They put up three signs, one by the storehouse (where everyone arrives on the island) one by the wall opposite Honllwyn (where the seals come onto the rocks to eat their food) and one in front of Solfach (the beach). They felt that the signs were very effective at reducing disturbance.”

Alison Palmer Hargrave, the Pen Llŷn a’r Sarnau SAC Officer attested that:

“There has been nothing but positive feedback about the signs. Lots of people were previously complaining about seal disturbance and they are now pleased that we were doing something about it.”



Figure 4: Examples of signage around Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau SAC and the north west Wales coast

Cardigan Bay SAC

The coast of the Cardigan Bay SAC falls mainly within the county of Ceredigion, with the southern end of the sight reaching into North Pembrokeshire. The signs are on site from mid-August until mid-December. Signage is placed at (south to north): Ceibwr Bay, Mwnt, Aberporth, Tresaith, Penbryn, Llangrannog, Cwm Tydu, New Quay Traeth y Dolau, New Quay Cei Bach, Aberaeron south beach, Aberarth, Llanon, Llanrhystud, and Borth by the Cardigan Bay SAC Officer. The information is also available on the Cardigan Bay SAC website, the Ceredigion County Council facebook page, and is also shared on the facebook pages of The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales and Natural Resources Wales. In previous years, the signage has proved very effective, and has generated a lot of interest and positive responses from both locals and tourists, with visible changes in behaviour from the public. In 2020 however, the number of incidents of seal pup disturbance increased. This was attributed to the unprecedented number of visitors to Ceredigion during the August – October period following the Covid 19 lockdown and subsequent lifting of restrictions.



Figure 5: Examples of signage on site along the Cardigan Bay SAC

Pembrokeshire Marine SAC

The placing of signage in Pembrokeshire was influenced by the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority (PCNPA) policy regarding signage installation within the National Park, as many of the key seal pupping beaches within Pembrokeshire are PCNPA managed beaches. Consequently, where the use of the A1 signs was considered inappropriate, use was made of A4 poster versions that could also easily be added to council beach notice boards. A1 panels were provided to some locations where car park attendants could display them temporarily. This however has been impacted in 2020 by some of those car parks converting to automatic machines and also staffing issues related to the covid pandemic.

The putting out and taking in of signage is managed jointly by PCNPA, National Trust, the RSPB and Skomer Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) staff. These organisations placed signage in the following locations:

Freshwater East, Stackpole Quay/ Barafundle, Castlemartin Range, Broadhaven South, Freshwater West x2, Martin's Haven – beach, Martin's Haven – carpark, West Dale, Marloes Sands, St Brides Haven, Mill Bay, Little Haven, Broadhaven North, Newgale, Solva, Porthclais, St Justinians, Ramsey, Whitesands, Aberiddy, Abebach and Pwllcrochan.

Feedback in Pembrokeshire, from the organisations placing out the signs, and Sue Burton, the Pembrokeshire Marine SAC Officer, was that generally the signs held a positive message. However it was felt that the signs had a lot of text to read and concern was also raised that the contact telephone number on the signage was that of the BDMLR, not the RSPCA. These two issues will be further discussed in the conclusion.

Skomer MCZ staff feedback was that:



YES would be useful at many popular beach locations but the information is a little simplified although understand that this is needed and that the sign is bilingual. Not sure why the RSPCA number is not on the poster as they are the lead organisation on seal rescue work. If we have a pup on the beach we have to put up a very obvious sign (left) – in the middle of the path/beach entrance so that everyone can see it. We have tried lots of different sign options . . . The only sign that works is a simple one with no logos on. We put this on a sandwich board– it blocks the bottom of the lane so that people cannot miss it. In 20 years of doing the seal surveys this is the only sign that has actually worked at keeping people off the beach and keep their distance from the pups. We have tried just about every sign option over the years...but basically we have come to the conclusion that down at Martins Haven most people do not read signs and just follow what others are doing.”

Figure 6: Signage used by the Skomer MCZ referred to above.

PCNPA rangers observed that;

“ the signs are really useful and we can supplement with whatever information we think is relevant to the local situation”.

Paul Renfro of the Pembrokeshire Coastal Forum commented that;
“Too many signs just merge and people don’t read them. It is useful to have a temporary sign in the middle of an access route if a seal pup is present so that the message doesn’t get lost. This however is dependent on having people available to put a sign up. Idea about having a flip down sign ‘if there is a seal on this beach, please flip me’ at which point it gives active practical action ‘a seal pup has been spotted here, please keep your distance and keep dogs on leads’. I also think it a good idea – where staff exist and it’s an option (such as National Trust and PCNPA rangers or other ‘beach champions’) to add a ‘there is a seal pup on this beach’ sign when the need is there.”

The National Trust in south Pembrokeshire have made use of their own seal signage in the past (see Figure 7). Alex Moss from the Stackpole Estate stated that;

“We have not used your poster as the clip frames we have on our boards and buildings are suitable for portrait A4 not landscape. I would be happy to use any redesigned portrait posters.”



Figure 7: Examples of signage on site along the Pembrokeshire Marine SAC

Carmarthen Bay and Estuaries European Marine Site

Along the coast of the Carmarthen Bay and Estuaries European Marine Site a total of three panels were placed on site. Following several reports of seal pups on the beach, one panel was installed by the EMS Officer alongside a main beach access point at Port Eynon Bay, Gower. The remaining two panels were given to the National Trust to place onshore at the Rhossili lookout and offshore on Worms Head, Rhossili; the main seal haul out within the EMS. The Port Eynon signage generated a lot of interest from beach visitors.



Figure 8: Signage placed at Port Eynon Bay, Gower; Carmarthen Bay and Estuaries European Marine Site

Discussion

In both the Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau SAC and the Cardigan Bay SAC signs have been received with positive feedback from both locals and visitors alike, no negative feedback has been received. This was a similar case in Carmarthen Bay and Estuaries EMS, with locals providing positive feedback.

In Pembrokeshire concern was raised over too much information being presented on the boards, and this being 'off-putting' to visitors.

Feedback from the Skomer MCZ staff included comments that their signs are deliberately simple and temporary signage had the greatest effect (please see figure 6). The need for flexibility over signage to reflect the needs of specific sites was raised (e.g. a portrait as well as a landscape panel).

In the design and content of both the original seal pup awareness panels produced in the Cardigan Bay SAC and in the Welsh Government funded adapted seal pup awareness panels rolled out Wales wide, the importance of contributing to the retention of the Welsh language and culture was a key factor in the production of the signage; along with the need to follow strict language policy guidelines.

A further issue raised in Pembrokeshire was the contact telephone number being that of the BDMLR not the RSPCA. The boards had already been in use in Ceredigion for three years when this project began, and the contact telephone number on the Ceredigion boards is the RSPCA number – 0300 1234 999, however this number is a general helpline number, not a specific marine mammal rescue hotline number, and in Ceredigion in some instances callers were waiting over 20 minutes to get through to someone and then giving up.

The RSPCA number was used on the original boards in Ceredigion, as one of the issues in Ceredigion was that inexperienced BDMLR volunteers were unnecessarily picking up pups and removing them from beaches, before waiting to see if the mum was going to return to the pup, and on occasion, the pup was removed from the beach when mum was clearly present in the water.

The board design was circulated for consultation prior to printing, and feedback was requested regarding which phone number was most appropriate to use. In Gwynedd the feedback was that it should be the BDMLR number, as the BDMLR were the first responders to most incidents in north Wales. No feedback was received from Pembrokeshire.

It was felt that if both telephone numbers were included on the signage, it would be confusing for the public; the Cardigan Bay SAC Officer who was responsible for the design of the roll out boards spoke to the BDMLR about the contact telephone number issue, and received very rapid responses from the hotline number, and was also assured that the BDMLR policy was also now to contact the RSPCA marine officer directly, and that the two organisations worked closely together; so that in effect by contacting the BDMLR, the RSPCA marine officer would be automatically notified of the incident and a joint decision would be made regarding whether an intervention would take place, resulting in the possible removal of the pup from the beach.

The Cardigan Bay SAC Officer also tried to discuss this issue with a representative from the RSPCA, but no-one was available or got back to the officer to respond to the request.

The decision was therefore made to include the BDMLR contact telephone number on the national boards.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, although the messaging on the boards has worked really well in Ceredigion, Gwynedd, Anglesey, Conwy and Carmarthen Bay and Estuaries, there have been mixed reviews in Pembrokeshire. It seems apparent that perhaps a more locally specific adaption of the sign would be more appropriate in Pembrokeshire. However, in general the signs were very well received and successfully reduced disturbance, most notably in the Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau SAC and the Cardigan Bay SAC.

Further Recommendations are:

- ❖ To continue to place temporary annual seal pup panels on site at identified locations
- ❖ To maintain a list of key disturbance locations, adding to the list when new sites are identified
- ❖ To develop joint messaging for websites and social media across Welsh MPAs to raise awareness of the issues caused by seal pup disturbance
- ❖ To develop all-Wales interpretation material to raise awareness of the issues caused by seal pup disturbance
- ❖ To develop an all-Wales protocol on seal rescue
- ❖ To develop adapted versions of the seal pup sign when necessary

As a result of the issues and ambiguities over which organisation should be taking the lead on seal rescue, the author feels that an all-Wales Protocol on seal rescue should be developed with urgency, ideally before the next pupping season. This should include a collaboration of all organisations involved in grey seal conservation including:

- The Welsh Partnership of MPAs
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Natural Resources Wales
- Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority
- Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- British Divers Marine Life Rescue
- Skomer Marine Conservation Zone
- Welsh Marine Life Rescue