

Teaching unit: the grey seal

(Under the topic "The North Sea" or "Protected creatures")

Differences between the grey seal and the harbour seal

Harbour seals are smaller and more elegant than grey seals. This means that they are more flexible and faster on land. The seal's body has a maximum length of 1.7 m and a body weight of 150 kg. The head has a round shape and the colour of the fur is dark grey with black spots. The pups look similar.

The grey seal has a maximum body length of 2.3 m and a body weight of 310 kg. The head is cone-shaped.

The fur of the female grey seal is silver grey with dark grey spots, the male is dark grey and has bright spots. The pups are white.

For grey seals generally

The grey seal belongs to the family of true seals, they are elegant and fast swimmers.

Seals of this family have no ear flaps, so the ears are only visible as small openings.

The grey seal is a mammal, which is up to 2.3 m long and 310 kg heavy and lives among others in the North and Baltic Sea having a life expectancy of up to 35 years. Their diet consists mainly of schooling fish, small crabs, squid and rarely seabirds. An adult grey seal eats around 6 kg of food per day.

The grey seal dives up to 300 m deep and for up to 30 minutes. They can achieve diving speeds of more than 30 km/h.

The grey seal gives birth 11 months after fertilization. However, the actual gestation period is only 9 months. The first 2 months after fertilization, the seed in the womb of the female grey seal is inactive. The female gives birth between November and December, the pups are nursed for 2 – 3 weeks.

The natural enemies of the grey seal are sharks and orcas.

Threats to the grey seal

Because of excessive fishing and the increasing pollution of the seas, the grey seal was listed as extinct in 1970.

They were seen as a threat by fishermen and were hunted or got caught in fishermen's nets and drowned.

An additional danger was the pollution of the seas; the prey of the grey seal were poisoned and thus the grey seals died.

Even today the sea is polluted but hunting is restricted. Since 2009 the grey seal is on the Red List and is listed as "critically endangered" in Germany. In the Scandinavian countries, a certain number of grey seals are still released to be shot yearly.

There are approximately 380,000 individuals left on the planet. Only a few hundred of them still live in the Wadden Sea of Schleswig – Holstein and on Helgoland.

To protect the grey seal

Known birthplaces are marked by posts or fences. Additionally, flexible quiet zones are established to protect the pups. They leave their place of birth at an age of 4 weeks; quiet zones can be created in those areas.

If you find a pup, it is important that you keep a distance of at least 100 m. It is also important not to touch the grey seal, because the mother's smell clings to her pup and the mother will no longer accept her young, if the smell has changed. You should contact either the police or the next seal sanctuary.

Ways to enhance the teaching unit

It is possible for school classes to visit the seal station Friedrichskoog. There you can join guided tours to learn many more interesting facts about harbour seals and grey seals.