



**SEA LIFE Trust Cornish Seal Sanctuary  
Press release**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

### **Mission Seal Pup: Tracking the Journey Home**

**First rescued pups of the season head home, with GPS tracking – a SWE first.**

The Cornish Seal Sanctuary are excited to announce that it has released the first two rehabilitated seal pups of the season. After months of care and rehabilitation, Mary and Maggot have both been returned to the wild, but this time with a special mission!

Marking a new milestone in the Sanctuary's history, the pups have been fitted with specialist GPS tracking equipment. This innovative step will provide valuable insights into the pups' movements and behaviours as they return to the sea.

The study, which is first of its kind in Southwest England, will see 15 Grey seal pups being issued with the tags to examine their at-sea behaviour.

The Cornish Seal Sanctuary is working alongside Dr Luis Huckstadt, senior lecturer at the University of Exeter as he leads this exciting pilot study.

Luis comments;

**“This project will provide the first data on at-sea habitat utilisation and diving behaviour of naive grey seal pups in a unique oceanographic region of SWE, where the population dynamics and ecology of grey seals have, until now, been understudied.**

**Working in partnership with the Cornish Seal Sanctuary, this project offers an unprecedented opportunity to carry out public education and outreach activities, including teaching the general public about grey seals' biology, their natural history, the local seas and highlighting the threats that seals face in their natural environment, particularly from human caused activities.**

**It is hoped that the tracking data will shed light on the changes that seal pups go through in terms of diving capacity, (foraging) behaviour and ecology, throughout their first year. It will also give insight in dispersion patterns and potential risks of interactions with areas with high risk of public disturbance.”**

Anne van Domburg, *Senior Animal Care Specialist & Research coordinator* at the Sanctuary  
**comments;**

**“We are very excited to be working with UOE on this pioneering study at the Cornish Seal Sanctuary.**

**After spending months caring for the pups throughout their rehabilitation here at the Sanctuary, quite often, we are left in the dark as to what happens to the pups once they are released back into the wild. At present, we rely solely on sightings of our seal flipper ID tags, which although gives us valuable information, only sheds light on individuals that get spotted by volunteers of the Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust around the coast of SWE.**

**This GPS tracking will provide us with an amazing insight into the lives of our pups as they adjust to life in the wild. For us it would be very interesting to see if they return to the area where they were rescued from, and if the release location has any influence on their dispersion pattern.”**

Anne continues; **“The GPS tags we are using are attached on the seal pup’s fur (only) between their shoulders with a thin layer of glue. This will fall off when they go through their annual moult, which happens between December-April each year.**

**The tags are hydrodynamically streamlined and aren’t heavy, the antenna is also super flexible, resulting in minimal impact on the seal.”**

### **Protecting our local seal population**

The Sanctuary have a good understanding around which sites in Cornwall are important haulouts/rookeries for the local seal population, but this data will help pinpoint which areas in particular need to be protected and if there is any conflict with other stakeholders that make use of the sea.

Interestingly, as a part of this project, the Sanctuary vets will also sample blood and fur from most of the pups going through rehab to study the diet and large-scale patterns of grey seal adults (their mother’s). Because these tissues have been grown in the uterus they will therefore reflect where the mother came from and what she was eating!

Through stable isotope and genetic analysis, the study will provide a better idea about population genetics and foraging behaviour of the adult seal population in Cornwall. Most of the samples are non-invasive or part of the routine veterinary screening when the seals are initially admitted to the Sanctuary.

### **Avoidable rescues**

Every season between September and April the Cornish Seal Sanctuary rescues around 70 seal pups from around the Cornish coastline.

So far this season the Sanctuary has some very young pups admitted to the hospital due to public disturbance and being separated from their mum, sadly this has led to them being underweight and malnourished.

Bethan Goodridge, *Animal Care Specialist* notes;

**“Our recent release, Maggot, was rescued from Porthtowan on 3<sup>rd</sup> August when she was found on a very busy beach in the summer holidays at just 48 hours old. Maggot was in good body condition for her age at 14.9kg, showing that her mum was doing a great job in providing her with early nourishment. She was sadly separated from her mum, due to**

**public disturbance and unfortunately, at such a young age wouldn't have survived without our intervention.**

**Our other released pup Mary was rescued at 4 weeks old on Mother Ivys Bay on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, also due to public disturbance, and was very small and malnourished at just 12.6kg.**

**We are saddened to learn that both pups needed our help due to disturbance, which is a completely avoidable situation.”**

### **How to help**

The Sanctuary encourages the public to follow the DEFRA guidelines of keeping you distance and to visit their [website](#) for information on how to behave around marine wildlife, especially during seal pup season.

If a pup is found alone on a public beach, then do not approach or handle it, and make sure to keep dogs under control on a lead.

The Cornish Seal Sanctuary and BDMLR can be contacted for advice and assistance on 01326 221361 or 01825 765546 respectively.

ENDS

### **NOTES TO EDITORS**

For interviews, images and more information, please contact [helene.weston@sealifetrust.com](mailto:helene.weston@sealifetrust.com) (Marketing Manager) or call 01326 221361.