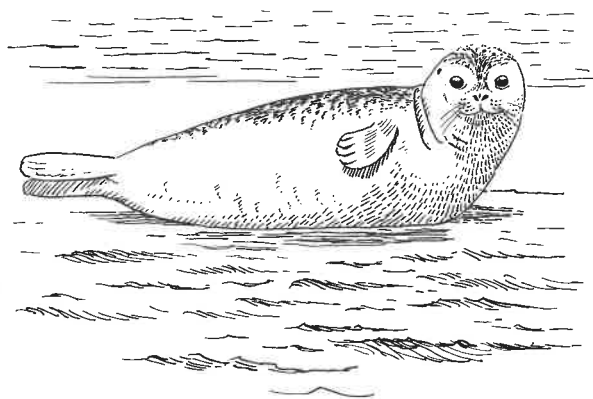


Phoca vitulina LINNAEUS, 1758



EO '97

E. Hazebroek

Common seal; Harbour seal

AL	-	LT	Paprastasis ruonis
BG	Обикновен тюлен	LU	Séihond
CZ	Tuleň obecný	LV	Plankumainais ronis
DE	Seehund	MK	Обична фока
DK	Spættet sæl	MT	-
EE	Randalhüljes	NL	Gewone zeehond
ES	Foca moteada	NO	Steinkobbe
FI	Kirjohylje	PL	Foka pospolita
FO	Steinkópur	PT	Foca-vitulina
FR	Phoque veau-marin	RO	Vițelul-de-mare
GR	-	RU	Обыкновенный тюлень
HR	Obični tuljan	SE	Knubbsäl
HU	Borjúfóka	SI	Navadni tjulenj
IR	Rón breachach; Rón beag	SK	Tuleň obyčajný
IS	Landselur	TR	Liman focu
IT	Foca comune	YU	-

Distribution

World: *P. vitulina* is one of the most widely distributed pinnipeds over both longitudinal and latitudinal range (30°N-80°N) and has a practically circumpolar distribution.

Europe: around the British Isles, in the Kattegat/Skagerrak, the south-western Baltic Sea, the Limfjorden, the Wadden Sea and farther south along the North Sea to Brittany. The most northerly distribution is along relatively warm Western Svalbard as a result of the Gulf Stream. They also occur in the waters of Iceland, along the coasts of Norway and on the Murmansk coast of Russia.

Geographic variation

Four sub-species are commonly recognized; the eastern Atlantic harbour seal, *P. v. vitulina* (Linnaeus, 1758), the western Atlantic harbour seal, *P. v. concolor* (DeKay, 1842), the western Pacific harbour seal, *P. v. stejnegeri* (Allen, 1902), and the eastern Pacific harbour seal, *P. v. richardsi* (Grey, 1864). The subspecific distinction of a fifth species, *P. v. mellonae* (Doutt, 1942), is currently under review. *P. v. vitulina* is the only subspecies that occurs in Europe.

Habitat

Harbour seals use a wide variety of coastal habitats including rocky coasts, intertidal rocks on offshore islets, reefs and pebble or sandy beaches. In areas with much human disturbance, seals haul out on tidal sand flats.

As pups swim almost immediately after birth, the seals can use tidal areas even for breeding, providing they are somewhat sheltered from rough seas. Another important criterion for haul-out sites, used for resting, breeding and moulting, is access to deep water. Both inshore and offshore waters are used for foraging. Like most seals, harbour seals seem to feed opportunistically, within relatively distinct feeding habitats.

Population status

An estimate of all *P. vitulina* populations dating from 1989 states 300000-400000 animals. In 1992, the total size of all eastern Atlantic populations of *P. v. vitulina* was estimated to be at least 70000. Since then no total estimates have been made. As over the whole range the population has grown after a dramatic virus epidemic in 1988, it may now well have reached 100000 animals.

International legal & conservation status

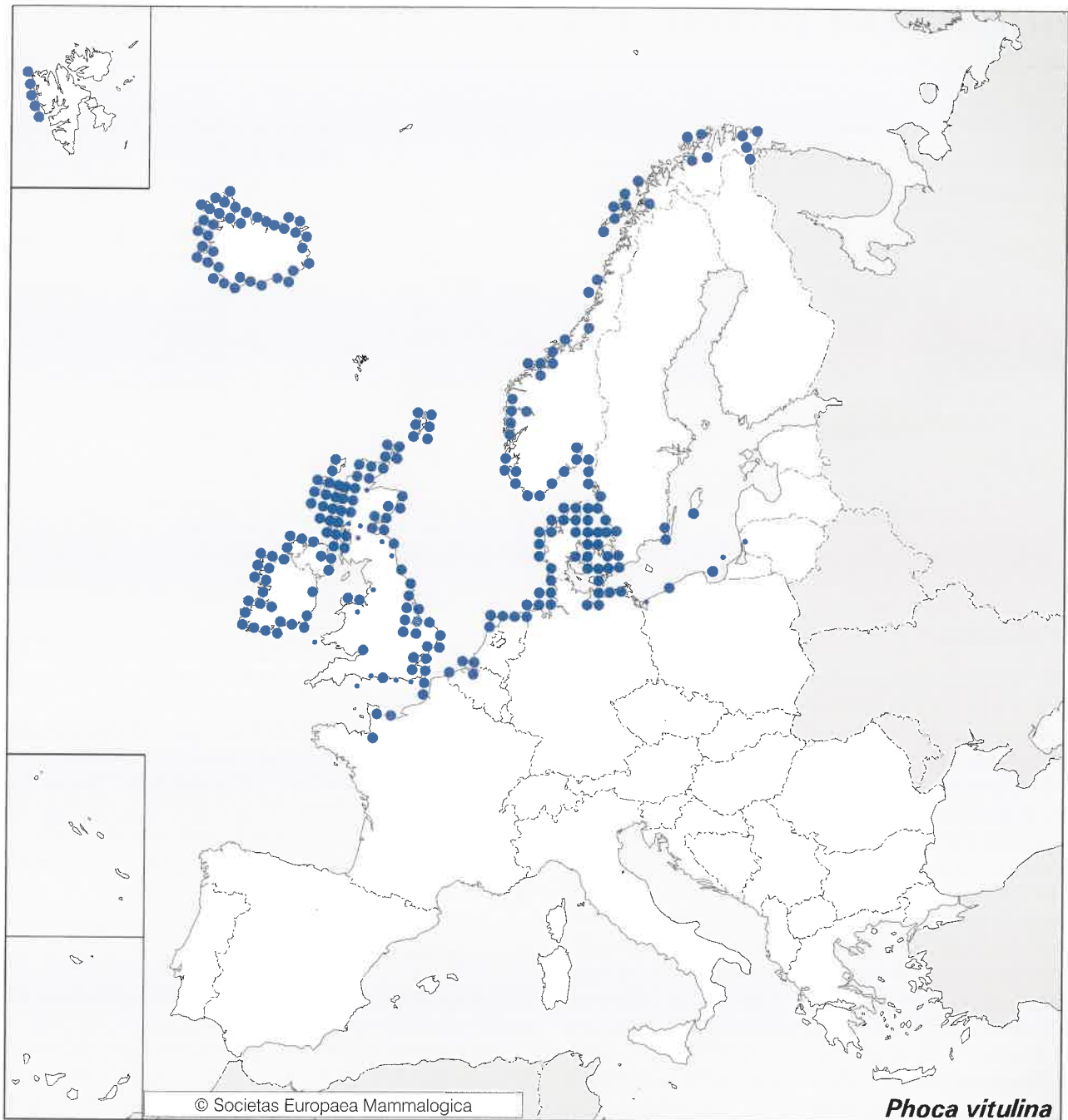
Bern Convention, Appendix III.

Bonn Convention, Appendix II (only the Baltic and Wadden Sea populations).

EU Habitats & Species Directive, Annex II, Annex V.

Other information

Overall, *P. vitulina* populations are growing and will be, if not yet, considered competitors of local fisheries. Lack of suitable databases currently hinders ecological research which might well resolve existing controversies.



Phoca vitulina

Certain hot spots for high burdens of environmental contaminants overlap with the seals' distribution range (Wadden Sea, Irish Sea, Baltic, and Oslofjord). Some local seal populations are already known to be affected by pollution, and negative effects on the seals' reproductive performance have been demonstrated. Recently, contamination burdens in seals were found to correlate with immune-suppressive characteristics. In this respect, the possibility of a new outbreak of an infectious epidemic still exists. Since harbour seals often live in the vicinity of human settlements, disturbance is one of the factors that could or already does regulate population size, especially in the light of growing populations.

Literature

- Reijnders (1992)
- Reijnders *et al.* (1993)
- Reijnders *et al.* (1997)

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