

Harp seal *Pagophilus groenlandicus*



 Grønlandskópur
  Aataaq
  Vöðuselur
  Grønlandssel
  Dealljá
  Grønlandssæl



Adult harp seal © Garry Stenson

Harp seal is a medium sized **true seal species** occurring in the waters of the North Atlantic and the Arctic. They are the most abundant **pinniped species** in these waters. Harp seals got their name for the distinguishable harp-shaped band adult males have on their side. The rest of their body is white or light grey. Adult females often do not have as pronounced harp on their back, instead they have a light coat with dark spots. When hunting for food, harp seals can dive up to 400 metres and stay under water for about 16 minutes.

Adult length 1.6 metres	Predators killer whales, sharks, polar bears
Adult weight 130 kg	IUCN status near threatened (2023)
Maximum age >30 years	NA abundance close to 9,000,000
Eats krill, amphipods, polar and arctic cod, capelin, other fish	Hunted in  36,255 seals/year
Group size several thousands for moulting and breeding	mean 2019-2023  5,020 seals/year

Main threats:



Climate change



By-catch



Pollution



Ship strike



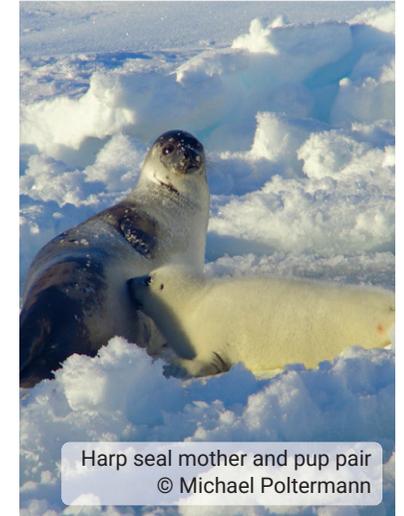
Habitat degradation

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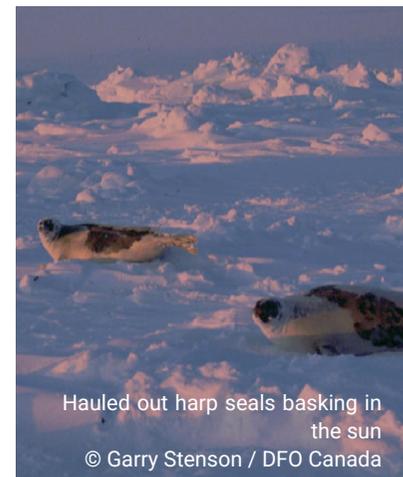


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Harp seals are an **ice breeding species**. They **haul out** in large numbers to give birth and nurse their **pups**. Giving birth is quite synchronised in harp seals, so majority of harp seal **pups** are born within few days from one another. **Pups** are born completely white, covered with **lanugo**. They **nurse** for only about 10-12 days and in that period, they gain over 20 kilograms. After the **nursing period**, they go through their first **moult**, gaining the silvery coat with a few dark spots, characteristic for "beaters". After that, they **moult** once a year, getting more and more spots in their coats until they get the recognisable harp shape on their backs.



Harp seal mother and pup pair © Michael Poltermann



Hauled out harp seals basking in the sun © Garry Stenson / DFO Canada

Harp seals feed very little during the **moulting and breeding seasons**. For females, producing energy-rich milk to **nurse** their **pups** is highly demanding, so they conserve energy by not hunting. This also prevents leaving their **pups** alone. **Moulting** is equally strenuous, and their fur offers little protection against the cold Arctic waters. To conserve energy and retain warmth, **moulting** seals stay hauled out, basking in the sun. By the time they reach **feeding grounds** in spring, they are lean and ready to feed on **lipid-rich prey** to rebuild their **blubber layer**.



Research: Why are harp seals usually counted during the **moulting** and **whelping** season?