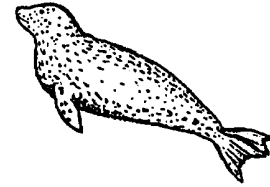


A Seal Pup Rescue

Lesson by Pat Rutowski, Monterey, CA

Key Concepts

1. Early in its life, a marine mammal pup is very dependent on its mother because she provides both food and protection.
2. Seal pups left on the beach by their mothers are sometimes mistakenly thought to be abandoned.
3. Seals come to shore for certain parts of their lives.



Background

Seals and sea lions belong to a group of marine mammals called the pinnipeds. Pinnipeds are marine mammals that live on the land as well as in the sea. They come to beaches, rocky outcroppings and marshes to haul out to rest, give birth, mate or, in some cases, molt their fur. They enter the water to feed and can spend large amounts of time in the ocean. People know very little about the activities of pinnipeds when they are in their ocean environment.

Pinnipeds usually give birth to their young on land. The pups spend their early lives with their mothers; the first 4-6 weeks, in the case of harbor seals and almost two years, in walrus. During the time that they are with their mothers, the pups are dependent on the moms for food and protection. The mother's milk is a very rich food. In harbor seals, it is ten times as rich as cow's milk. The pups grow rapidly. While it takes a human baby 180 days to double its birth weight, an Arctic Harp seal does so in five days!

Mortality rates are high; almost half of the pups of some types of seals die from exposure or predation. While they are most at risk when they go from the land into the ocean, pups may also get trampled in large seal groupings.

Although most pinnipeds are rarely seen by humans, harbor seals are sometimes found in close proximity to human habitation. Harbor seals haul out onto sandy beaches, rock outcroppings, or in an estuary to birth their pups, though sometimes they deliver in the water. One pup is born to each harbor seal mother. Shortly after the pup is born, it swims with its mother but young seals seem to prefer to stay on dry land. During their six weeks together, the mother teaches the pup to feed on fish and shellfish. On its diet of rich milk, augmented by fish and shellfish caught during its training sessions, the pup doubles its weight.

Even though harbor seal mothers spend a lot of time with their pups, they must return to the sea to feed themselves. As a result, they sometimes leave the pups on the beach for up to two days. Concerned people oftentimes assume that these pups have been abandoned and are starving. Often these pups are “rescued” and brought to marine mammal facilities and aquariums. In spite of the temptation to intervene, it is recommended that a “found” animal be left alone, and that the observer leave the area, so that the mother will return to the beach to retrieve the pup.

Materials

For the class:

- photos of harbor seals, including pups
- drawing materials (markers/or crayons)
- 11" x 17" pieces of paper

Teaching Hints

In “A Seal Pup Rescue”, students imagine life as a harbor seal pup through guided imagery, then create the ending to the seal’s story through a group storytelling activity. After the story is completed, they draw a storyboard which depicts each scene of the imagery and the group story.

1. Preparation: Draw lines on the large sheets of paper dividing the space into 12 squares (see below) for storyboarding. Number the squares from 1 to 12. These grids could also be photocopied if you have access to a copier that will accept ledger size paper.

1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12

Have space cleared on the board or post a large piece of paper on which to write an outline of the story created by the students. Drawing supplies (markers and/or crayons) should be ready.

2. Tell your class about harbor seal babies (called pups). Explain that they depend on their mothers, just as a human babies do. They drink their mother's milk for four to six weeks during which time they double their weight. Be sure students know that sometimes the mother must go out into the ocean and leave the pup on the beach while she hunts for food.
3. Set the scene. Explain that you are going to do an imagination activity. Students should be comfortable so that they can relax and imagine. You may want to move desks so they can sit in a circle on the floor, dim the lights and have a tape of wave sounds playing.
4. Slowly read the guided imagery adding sound effects when appropriate.

Guided Imagery

"You are a young harbor seal. You lay on the warm sandy beach. You squirm and feel your soft fur rub against the sand. When you were born three weeks ago, you were less than three feet long and weighed 24 pounds. Since then, you have been drinking your mother's rich milk. Your body grows so fast you can feel it growing!

You cry for your mother, 'krooh krooh', but she does not come. She has left you before, going into the ocean to feed. You know she will return. You remember the first time she left and how frightened you were. You thought she might not come back. You tried to follow her in the water but she swam off without waiting. The gulls flew around you making their loud calls and you felt alone and scared.

The birds are here, but they do not frighten you now. Instead, you feel hungry and you look around for the other seal mothers and pups who share the beach. You cannot go to one of the other mothers for food. They would scold you and send you away.

Looking down the beach, you see another animal. It is not a bird, or a seal. It is very tall. It has thin, long flippers and you wonder how it swims. It also has fur, but only on top of its head. You wonder how it stays warm. It walks on its back flippers and moves quickly toward you down the beach. It makes a bird-like sound as it comes closer. It stops in front of you and stares. You hear it make another sound. Then it bends its body almost in half, making it much shorter. It seems to be looking at you closely and you are glad that you are too big for it to eat. You make your call, 'krooh krooh', and it makes more noises back. You look out to sea for your mother and then back at the strange animal and wonder what will happen next....."

After the reading is finished, ask students to imagine how the story might continue. Allow several minutes for them to silently conclude the story.

5. Have each student add a sentence or a paragraph to the story to continue the guided imagery. Outline the story as the students tell it. If one of the students finishes the story, have the next student start another ending in which something else happens to the seal pup by asking, "How else could the story have ended?"

Two options for the story ending are most common. In the first, the human coming down the beach "rescues" the seal and takes it to a facility. In the second, the human leaves the seal on the beach and the mother returns. Whatever the children decide, you may want to discuss both of the above possible endings. Be sure to discuss whether people should ever take an animal from its home or otherwise intervene in such a situation, even if it seems as though the animal might die.

6. Have students return to their desks and supply them with drawing materials and the storyboard paper. Ask them to draw each scene from the story in the boxes. Have seal photos available for students to consult. Start with the guided imagery scene in which the young seal is lying on the beach.
7. Have students share and post their storyboards.

Key Words

dependent - relying on another for support or care

harbor seal - a kind of earless seal with silvery spotted fur that lives along many ocean coasts

Extensions

1. Have students act out the guided imagery in small groups and finish it with one of the student endings.
2. Write a caption on one or each of the storyboard scenes, or write up the whole story.
3. Sing this song to the tune of BINGO.

There is a seal who has a home
The ocean is the place.
OCEAN OCEAN OCEAN
The ocean is the place.

He swims with mom in and out
The ocean is the place.
OCEAN OCEAN OCEAN
The ocean is the place.

Mom leaves him on the beach to hunt.
The ocean is the place.
OCEAN OCEAN OCEAN
The ocean is the place.

If you see a pup, leave it be.
The ocean IS his place.
OCEAN OCEAN OCEAN
The ocean is his place.

- words adapted by Laurie Dumdrie

4. Read one of these books listed in the bibliography:

Surfer the Seal by Jane Burton

Pearson: A Harbor Seal Pup by Susan Meyers

Sterling: The Rescue of a Baby Harbor Seal by Sandra White and Michael Filisky.