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17 June 2015

From Rory Stewart MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment and Rural Affairs

18 JUN 2015

Dear Richard,

Thank you for your letter of 26 May to the Secretary of State on behalf of a number of your constituents about seal culls. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area. Seal conservation is a devolved issue so I can only respond with respect to England. Approximately 85% of the UK seal population is in Scotland and the Scottish government have their own legislation concerning the protection of seals.

Seals in England are primarily protected by the Conservation of Seals Act 1970. Under this Act, it is an offence to take or kill common and grey seals out of season (when they have pups), unless licensed to do so. The Act also allows government to provide year round protection in any specified area. Such a 'Conservation Order' covers the east coast of England, providing extra protection for almost all common seals and the majority of grey seals in England.

Before an individual is granted a licence for the lethal control of any animal, including seals, they must first demonstrate that less severe alternatives, such as deterrents and exclusion measures, have been exhausted or shown to be unworkable. The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) grant scheme, which is due to open in autumn 2015, may support grant funding for the purchase and trial of equipment that protects gear and catches from seals. Consequently, existing arrangements help to promote the use of non-lethal control measures. No licences have been issued for the culling of seals in England in the last five years.

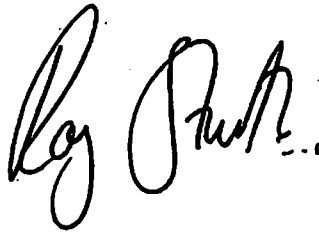
Whilst grey and common seals are protected by the Conservation of Seals Act 1970, fishermen have the legal right to take unlicensed emergency lethal measures to prevent damage to their fishing equipment or fish contained within it. However measures taken must be to prevent such damage occurring and the seal must be in the vicinity of the equipment. Legislation therefore only allows limited local action to be taken against individual problem seals and does not permit widespread control.

Common and grey seal populations in England have increased over the last ten years and there is no evidence to suggest that the limited local control of seals permitted in England is having any adverse effect on the conservation status of the UK seal population as a whole.



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The Conservation of Seals Act 1970 strikes a proportionate balance between the conservation and welfare of the seals and the needs of those impacted by individual problem seals.



RORY STEWART MP

