



NCPOC Newsletter



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## Caspian seals and icebreakers

by Olivier S.G. Pauwels & Aidyn Sakharbayev (NCPOC HSSE Biodiversity Team)



Another winter has finished, and ice has now melted. Baby seals, that were born on the ice plate covering the northern part of the Caspian Sea, have now learnt to swim and are beginning their aquatic life. For another year, NCPOC Biodiversity Team has coordinated seal conservation activities that involved biologists of the University of Leeds, the Institute of Hydrobiology and Ecology, the Institute of Microbiology and Virology, and AgipKCO and NCPOC Logistics to help preserve this amazing species that is unique to the Caspian Sea. Feeding on fish, it is the top predator of the Caspian and its ecological role is crucial. The species has gone through a strong decline over the last Century, suffering mostly from hunting, drowning in fish nets and severe virus outbreaks, and it has become very important to put efforts into preserving the remaining population.

Our Venture's icebreakers, which are travelling back and forth between Bautino and Kashagan, cross on their way part of the seals breeding grounds, and special measures had hence to be put in place to make sure the impact of this vessel traffic on the seals and their natural environment is minimal. The mitigation measures that were applied by our Venture include helicopter surveys of the icebreaker route, and deployment of seal observers teams onboard icebreakers. The aim of the helicopter surveys is to detect high seal concentrations within the icebreaker navigation corridor, so that these locations are communicated to the captains who mark them on their navigation map and avoid them. As it is not possible to find areas that are totally seal-free, seal observers are also working onboard the icebreakers to assist the captains in locating the seals, using binoculars, so the crew has enough time to slow down and maneuver the vessel to avoid them.



Authorities show a strong interest in our environmental activities, and in order to provide first hand information on what the Venture is doing in the field, Government officers have been invited, as each year, to participate to our surveys; this year we welcomed the Head of Ural-Caspian Interregional Basin Fisheries Inspectorate and the Assistant of the Environmental Prosecutor who took part to a helicopter survey, and a Senior Fisheries Inspector who joined the seal observers onboard an icebreaker.

In order to further increase the efficiency of our mitigation program, the Venture has purchased infrared cameras to equip the five icebreakers that did not have them yet. These cameras, installed on each side of the bridge and directed frontwards, detect seal's body heat and allow locating seals at more than 500 meters ahead the ship, in whatever weather conditions (night, blizzard, extreme cold temperatures, or all combined).

In April, we are organizing a new campaign of satellite tagging of Caspian seals that will increase our knowledge about the movements of the seals in the Caspian and our understanding of the conservation threats to the species. Besides the application of mitigation measures, the Venture has indeed also greatly contributed to the scientific study of the Caspian seal, to the environmental awareness of the vessel crews, and to the training of numerous Kazakhs as seal observers. Another recent positive outcome of our scientific activities is the successful defense at University of Leeds of a doctoral thesis on the Caspian seal ecology largely based on results obtained during our seal observations campaigns. The Venture will continue its conservation efforts to preserve this beautiful and iconic species of the fauna of Kazakhstan.

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