



NCPOC Newsletter



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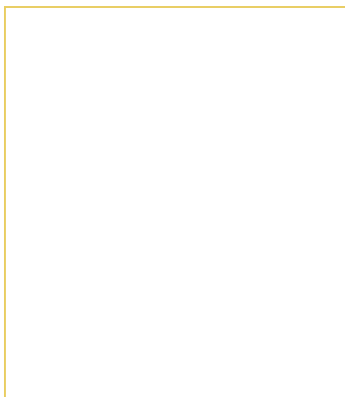
## Caspian Seals, Satellites and NCPOC

by Olivier S.G. Pauwels and Aidyn Sakharbayev

We have all heard about the gathering of seals on the ice covering the North Caspian Sea in the winter, when seal mothers give birth to their cute pups directly on the floe. Over the past six years, our Venture has developed very specific measures and trained seal observers to prevent direct encounters between our icebreakers and the seals.

The Caspian seal is endemic to the Caspian Sea, but very little is known about how the Caspian seals spend their time in this vast expanse of water. Where do they go in the summer months? Where do the males go in winter? What distance does an individual cover every year? At what speed do they travel? Do they have regular, specific migration routes? How much time do they spend resting each day? Where are their main feeding grounds?

To answer these questions and to help us put in place conservation measures, our Venture has developed since 2006 a scientific partnership with the University of Leeds, the Institute of Hydrobiology and Ecology, the Institute of Microbiology and Virology and the Institute of Fisheries Research and Production (Almaty).



Seals are highly mobile, fast, shy, and hence difficult to approach and study. So our ecologists have chosen to use a state-of-the-art solution: satellite tags, directly glued on the neck of the seal, communicating live information on each tagged seal's position. The tag is not painful for the seal, does not disturb it in its daily activities and is designed to fall off the seal in March-April when the seal loses its winter coat.



In October this year, the NCPOC Biodiversity team supervised the satellite tagging of 15 seals in Kenderly Bay (about 200 kilometers north of Aktau). This location was selected because it is a place and a time where seals are known to gather, and where NCPOC staff and contractors could most safely perform the works, avoiding the need for helicopter or hovercraft access and avoiding the need to set up a remote camp site.

The results of seal tagging completed in previous years had already taught us that most seals travel at the end of the year to the northern part of the Caspian Sea. Some of them have travelled west to Russia, or south to the shorelines of

Turkmenistan. According to Samat Sarsengaliyev, Ecologist in the NCPOC Biodiversity Team and member of several seal tagging expeditions:

*“satellite tagging showed that some seals have travelled as much as 46 km a day; the satellite tags also allow us to learn how deep Caspian seals dive, and the present record is 500 meters below the surface (!), probably while chasing near the sea bottom the fish on which they feed; dives can last up to 20 minutes”.*

We have also learned that the seals make extensive use of a migration corridor along the Kazakh coastline between the Turkmen border and the Ural Delta. The shallow areas from Komsomoletz Bay and the Ural Delta seem to be an important zone for transit, foraging and resting. There remains much vital scientific knowledge to be discovered - information that will be used by NCPOC to help ensure that we take all reasonable measures to protect this species which is an endemic icon of the Caspian Sea.

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