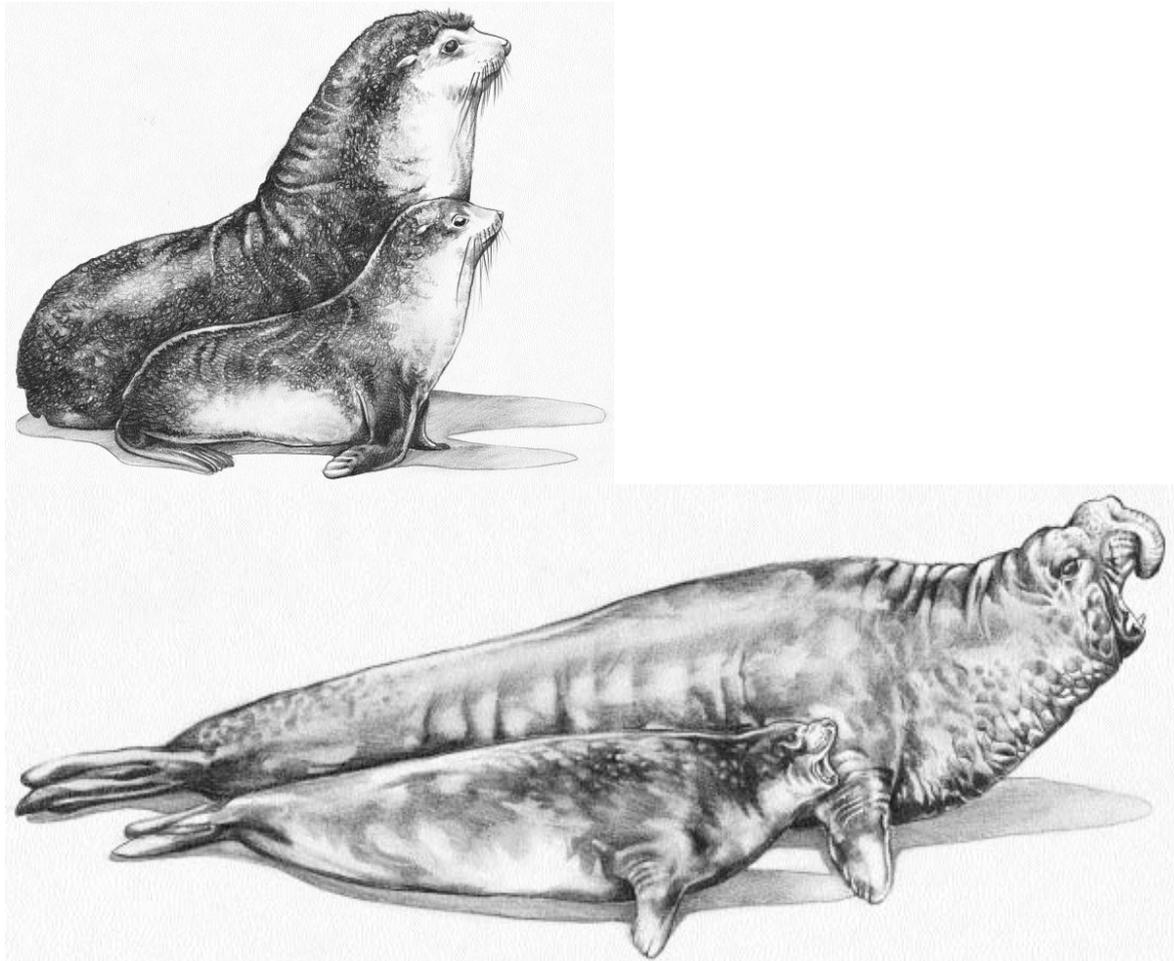


SUB-ANTARCTIC FUR SEAL AND SOUTHERN ELEPHANT SEAL RECOVERY PLAN

2004-2009



Illustrations by Peter Child from: ©Stewardson, C.L. (1997). *Mammals of the Ice*. An introductory guide of the seals, whales and dolphins in the Australian Sub-antarctic and Antarctica, based on records from ANARE voyages, 1977-90. Braddon A.C.T: Sedona Publishing. pp. 183



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Background

The Sub-antarctic Fur seal *Arctocephalus tropicalis* and Southern Elephant seal *Mirounga leonine* are carnivorous marine mammals of the cold southern ocean. In Australian waters, both species breed and haul out mainly on Macquarie and Heard Islands, but individuals range widely and occasionally reach the beaches of Tasmania and the Australian mainland. Both species are listed as Vulnerable under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act), triggering the preparation of this recovery plan, which is set out in accordance with Part 13, Division 5 of the EPBC Act.

Objective (270(2)(a))

To maintain existing levels of protection for the Sub-antarctic Fur and Southern Elephant seals to enable population growth so that these species may be removed from the threatened species list under the EPBC Act, and to ensure that any future anthropogenic impacts are not limiting.

Threats (270(2)(ca))

Historically, the main threat to the Sub-antarctic Fur seal and the Southern Elephant seal has been hunting and over-harvest. Neither activity currently occurs.

Among the many potential threats to both seal populations are competition and interaction with legal and illegal fisheries, marine pollution of various kinds including oil and non-biodegradable debris, climatic and oceanographic change, increased predation, disease outbreaks, and direct disturbance from tourism, research or ignorant interference. At present, none of these, with the possible exception of climatic and oceanographic change, appear to present a significant threat to populations of either Sub-antarctic or Southern Elephant seals, but they may pose real risks to some individuals.

This plan only addresses anthropogenic threats that can be effectively and realistically managed.

Populations under Particular Pressure of Survival and Protective Measures (270(2)(e))

Population trends can only be detected in the long-term, but there is some evidence that Southern Elephant seal populations are no longer decreasing.

The Sub-antarctic Fur seal presents unique problems because of ‘natural’ population processes, which include hybridization and introgression, and the suspicion that immigration may be maintaining the population. Hooker’s sea lions (*Phocarctos hookeri*) prey on Sub-antarctic Fur seal pups on Macquarie Island. It is not the intention of this plan to address any of these processes that are natural rather than anthropogenic through active intervention.

Actions to Achieve the Objective/s (270(2)(c))

Given the absence of significant current anthropogenic threats, the only action to be identified in this plan is to monitor the Australian populations of the Sub-antarctic Fur seal and the Southern Elephant seal by:

- undertaking scientifically robust, regular and repeatable population surveys to determine the rate of population change and population size; and
- in order to identify any emerging threats that will have an immediate impact on the species and thus on its recovery and develop an appropriate response.

Management Practices (EPBC Reg. 7.11(2)(b))

Management practices and measures other than those contained in this plan have been developed and are being implemented through, *inter alia*, various Heard Island and Macquarie Island Management Plans, Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) procedures and protocols, the Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) Code of Conduct.

In addition, the EPBC Act provides protection for the Sub-antarctic Fur seal, and the Southern Elephant seal through making it an offence to kill, injure, take, trade, keep, or move any member of a listed threatened and/or marine species in a Commonwealth area without a permit.

Criteria to Measure Performance of the Plan against the Objective/s (270(2)(b))

The objective of this plan will be attained in respect to the:

- Sub-antarctic Fur seal when the breeding population of the Sub-antarctic Fur seal exhibits a sustained increase in size, and if future major threats to the population emerge, that measures to minimise or mitigate them are identified and implemented as a priority; and
- Southern Elephant seal when the population is stable or has demonstrably increased for three generations (24 years), and if future major threats to the population emerge, that measures to minimise or mitigate them are identified and implemented as a priority.

Habitats Critical to the Survival of the Species and its Protection (270(2)(d))

Important habitat for the Sub-antarctic Fur seal and the Southern Elephant seal within the Australian jurisdiction includes:

- terrestrial breeding colonies and resting and moulting grounds on Sub-antarctic islands;
- waters adjacent to breeding colonies; and
- important feeding waters.

In the Australian region, important breeding sites are Macquarie Island for the Sub-antarctic Fur seal and Macquarie, Heard and possibly Maatsuyker Islands for the Southern Elephant seal.

Macquarie and Heard Islands, and their surrounding waters, are afforded high levels of protection through, *inter alia*, their listing as World Heritage sites, their status as Marine Protected Areas under the EPBC Act, and in the case of Macquarie Island, additional protection afforded by Tasmanian legislation. While such protection arrangements remain in place, this habitat is

protected for use by both seal species. Protection for Maatsuyker Island is the jurisdictional responsibility of the Tasmanian government.

Major Benefits to Other Native Species or Ecological Communities (270(2)(h))

Minimising threats to the Sub-antarctic Fur seal or Southern Elephant seal may benefit other marine species that share the same breeding and/or foraging habitat.

Two other *Arctocephalus* breed on Macquarie Island. Several albatross and giant petrel and penguin species also breed on Macquarie. In the surrounding water several species of whale have been recorded including southern right whale *Eubelaena australis*, sperm whale *Physeter macrocephalus* and killer whale *Orcinus orca*.

Heard Island is an important breeding ground for several penguin species and the globally endangered black-browed albatross *Thalassarche melanophrys*, light-mantled albatross *Phoebetria palpebrata*, southern giant-petrel *Macronectes giganteus*, the Heard Island cormorant *Phalacrocorax atriceps nivalis* and the lesser sheathbill *Chionis minor nasicornis*. The island is also an important breeding location for the Antarctic fur seal, and wintering area for the leopard seal *Hydrurga leptonyx*.

Implementation of this plan is unlikely to have any negative impacts on any other native species or ecological communities. Research activities associated with monitoring will need to be undertaken in a manner that will ensure that disturbance to threatened species on the islands is minimised.

Duration and Cost of the Recovery Process (270(2)(f))

This plan should be reviewed in 5 years time and remain in place until such time that the populations of both species have improved to the point that they can be removed from the EPBC Act threatened species list.

The cost of this plan should be covered under the core business expenditure of the affected organisations, though should emerging threats be identified, additional costs are likely to occur.

Affected Interests (270(2)(g)(i))

Organisations likely to be affected by the actions proposed in this plan include the following: AFMA; Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry; Department of the Environment and Heritage, including the AAD; the Tasmanian Government Departments of Tourism, Parks, Heritage and the Arts and Primary Industries, Water and Environment; researchers; commercial fishers; conservation groups; wildlife interest groups; and tourism operators.

Organisations/Persons Involved in Evaluating the Performance of the Plan (270(g)(ii))

The National Seal Recovery Group should evaluate the performance of this plan and report the results of their review to the Minister of the Environment and Heritage, through the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC).

Where to Get the Plan

This recovery plan is obtainable from:

<http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/recovery/public-comment/index.html>

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