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Handsome Harbor Seals

The Harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina*) inhabits several regions of the earth. They are seen along the Pacific Coast of the United States up and in the Arctic; along the North Atlantic Coast up into Canada, around Greenland and in Northern Europe. There is a scientific division for subspecies that is dependant on where they live.

Like with all seals, Harbor seals “haul out” to give birth and to bask in the sun. They are seen inhabiting sand and mud banks, river estuaries, rocky shores, protected sandy coves and in the case of the far northern colonies, pack ice.

Harbor seals have fur coats that are variable in shades of color, ranging from a sandy brown to dark brown. Generally, they are described as having dark spots on a light back ground. Pups are lighter shades of their parents when born, but change quickly to blend with their colony.

Length and weight varies by sex in Harbor seals. At birth they are approximately 45 cm in length and weigh 9.5 kg, gaining over half a kilogram a day. Females are 140 cm in length and weigh 50 kg when full grown; about 5 years old. Males are 155 cm in length and weight 75 kg when full grown; at about 9 years old.

Pups are born from the beginning of February to early July, depending on the region they live in. For example, a colony in California would have pups in late February where those living in the North Sea would be born in late June to early July. A pup is dependant on its mother for food for up to six weeks. They feed every three to four hours and eat for up to 45 minutes at a time. The pups are able to swim and dive efficiently from birth, but are closely monitored by their mother. Harbor seals show more maternal care for their pups than any other seal. Because of this relationship, it leads to a better survival of their young.

A diet for a Harbor seal consists of fish (bottom dwelling and free swimming) and invertebrates. Their diet depends on the region of the world they live in. Harbor Seals have been seen eating herring, cod, flounder, salmon, octopus, shrimp and amphipods. They have an average dive time of five minutes but have been recorded diving for up to 28 minutes. Dive depth can be around 300 meters. It is thought that they typically dive longer when foraging for food.

Harbor seals have no detected migratory movement. They have local movement which consist of following the food resources and searching for safe breeding and pupping sites.

Some threats to a Harbor seals include algae blooms that lead to death caused by pneumonia and contracting morbillivirus. They are prone to man made threats including entanglement, pollution and loss of habitat.