

Each year the Scarborough Public Safety Dispatch center fields dozens of calls for seals on the beaches or rocks surrounding our coast line. Often people think the seals are ill or stranded and in need of help. Sometimes the seal is deceased and beyond help but most often the seal is in its natural environment.

Recently the Scarborough Police Department teamed up with Marine Mammals of Maine (MMOME) for training on how to respond to these calls for service and how we can help educate the public. MMOME is a non-profit organization dedicated to marine mammal and sea turtle response, rescue, care, research and education. Their small full time staff and dedicated volunteer team provides expert stranding response across roughly 2,500 miles of Maine's coastline (including islands), covering the geographic area of Kittery to Rockland. They operate a 24/7 marine mammal and sea turtle reporting hotline.

With late spring and early summer upon us this is the time of year that we see a spike in calls for stranded or sick seals along with seal pups being abandoned. This time of year is also seal pup season. Like other wildlife, the moms will leave their pups on the beach or rocks while they are out foraging for food. It is important to know that seals and seal pups rest on shore, this is normal behavior - Do NOT disturb them. Seals will go into the water to find food but return to shore to rest. There is no doubt that seal pups are adorable and it can be very tempting to save them or pet them. The pups will also let off a sound that seems like a distress or whining sound. You must resist the urge to "help" them as human contact or intervention can be detrimental to their health and will cause undue stress that may result in their death. Human contact is also against the law.

In 1972 the the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) was enacted. It protects all marine mammals within the waters of the United States. The Act makes it illegal to "take" marine mammals without a permit. People may not harass, feed, hunt, capture, collect (touch), or kill any marine mammal or part of a marine mammal.

MMOME provided us with information on their guidelines and restrictions when dealing with seals and seal pups. Do minimize the animals stress: keep the area quit, stay 150 feet away, keep out of sight of the animal, keep people and dogs a safe distance away. Don't pour water on the animal. Seals are adapted to living out of the water and don't require it. Do not offer food, cover with blankets, handle it, return it to the water or remove it from the water. This will cause undue stress!

Most importantly and the steps that we will take is to call the 24/7 MMOME hotline at 1-800-532-9551. They advocate for people calling them direct whenever possible. The sooner they are notified of a stranded animal the sooner a staff member or volunteer can respond and complete a health assessment on the animal and take appropriate action if necessary.

Educational material on seals can be found at <https://www.mmome.org/>.