



# IAATO OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES FOR VIEWING SEALS

## GENERAL CODE OF CONDUCT FOR VIEWING SEALS ON LAND AND ICE

- Do not use vessels, small boats<sup>1</sup> or other means of transport in ways that disturb wildlife. Never surround a seal with people or small boats.
- Approach and depart from landing sites, colonies and individual animals slowly and carefully. Coordinate with others in the area.
- Monitor animal behaviour for signs of disturbance.
- Keep noise to a minimum and do not make sudden movements.
- Always give animals the right of way.
- Never encourage interactions, touch wildlife or let it touch you.
- Never feed wildlife.
- Always follow appropriate biosecurity procedures for clothing, footwear and equipment.



## UNDERSTANDING SEAL BEHAVIOUR TO HELP AVOID DISTURBANCE

Seals hauled out on land, rock or ice, are sensitive to boats and human presence. Noises, smells and sights may elicit a reaction.

Be aware of seal behaviour that indicates a seal has been disturbed, such as:

- An increase in alertness or vigilance, head turning or neck lengthening
- Raising its head more than once. If this happens, move away as the seal may be stressed by your presence
- Change in posture from lying to erect
- Swiveling of body to face a perceived threat from people, vessels or vehicles
- Individuals or herds hurriedly moving away from approaching vessels, vehicles or people
- Open mouth/yawning displays (e.g., in leopard seals on ice, or elephant seals on land)
- Aggressive displays or bluff charges in your direction.

When in doubt, carefully increase your distance.

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IAATO's Operational Procedures for Viewing Seals provide an overview of best practice for viewing seals in a safe, environmentally responsible manner. They supplement but do not replace IAATO's species specific procedures.

For more in-depth information, please view the full IAATO Operational Procedures for Viewing Seals document.

<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this document, 'small boats' are defined as Zodiac-style inflatable boats, such as rigid or semi-rigid hull inflatable boats or any similar small landing craft used for shore interaction.

<sup>2</sup>General Guidelines for Visitors to the Antarctic, Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting Resolution 4 (2021), Annex 1

## RECOMMENDED APPROACH DISTANCES

Minimum distance from seals on land or ice is at least 5 metres/15 feet<sup>2</sup>

Prescribed distances of approach/observation must be followed, assuming animals are showing no signs of disturbance from your presence. Be aware that your permit/authorization may require a greater distance to be kept. Closer interactions should only be dictated by the animals.

Species and/or life stage	Minimum Distance (m/ft)
Jousting bull elephant seal on land	25m / 75ft
Fur seals and sea lions on land	15m / 45ft
Leopard seals on land/ice/water	5 - 15m / 15 - 45ft
Juveniles, including pups and elephant seal 'weaners'	5m / 15ft

## VIEWING AND APPROACHING

### SEALS ON SHORE



- During the height of the breeding season, it may not be possible to land due to the sheer number of seals and their forceful defence of territories.
  - Small boat cruising is an alternative activity that will protect both seals and visitors.
  - Avoid blocking areas where wildlife is entering or exiting waters.
  - Slow down and/or alter course to avoid collisions.
- When viewing seals do not surround or separate them, especially harems, and mothers and pups.
  - Pups are often left alone when the mother is feeding. They are not abandoned and should be left alone.
  - Stay on the side where they can see you.
- Try not to tower over hauled out seals or break their horizon.
- On beaches, avoid getting between seals and the sea, walk 'above' them.
- When on breeding beaches, walk with a buddy to minimise the risk of surprise encounters. Take photographs in turn so one is always on lookout.
- Be aware of animals in tussock grass areas.
- Keep equipment as far away from wildlife as possible on shore. If seals approach, be prepared to move equipment carefully when safe to do so. Don't use 'selfie sticks' or other equipment to get closer.
- Never disturb wildlife or plants to get 'better' pictures. Flash photography must not be used in any circumstances.

