

# IAATO Seal Watching Guidelines



## General code of conduct for viewing seals on land and ice:

- When viewing seals do not surround or separate them, especially mothers and pups. Stay on the side where they can see you.
- On beaches, avoid getting between seals and the sea, walk 'above' them.
- Suggested minimum distance from seals ashore is at least 5 meters/15 feet;
- Some species, or behaviors, require a further distance to be kept:
- Keep at least 25 meters/75 feet from jousting bull elephant seals.
- Fur seals and sea lions are highly mobile on land and may charge (and potentially bite) if approached too closely. Keep at least 15 meters/45 feet from them.
- On beaches where there are concentrations of breeding seals, it is recommended to remain on your feet for wildlife observations.

## Understanding seal behavior

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 behavior that indicates a seal has been disturbed. Such behaviors include, but are not limited to:

- An increase in alert or vigilance, head turning,
- Change in posture from lying to erect,
- Hurriedly moving away from approaching vessels, vehicles or people;
- Open mouth threat displays (e.g., in leopard seals on ice, or elephant seals on land), and/or
- Aggressive displays or bluff charges in your direction.

## Viewing seals on land and ice

- Try not to break their horizon or tower over hauled-out seals – stay low. Pups are often left alone when the mother is feeding. They are not abandoned and should be left alone and not touched.
- Any seal response other than a raised head should be avoided.
- If an individual or a herd moves towards the water or there is a hurried entry into the water by many individuals, you should retreat slowly and carefully.
- Be aware of animals in tussock grass areas. Ideally, a field guide should lead, carrying walking stick or equivalent.
- Elephant seals, especially the pups (weaners) are often very inquisitive and may approach. It is important to be cautious and alert when near them and to avoid contact:
  - Make every effort to keep a minimum distance of at least 5 meters/15 feet;
  - Be aware that seals can be interested in equipment. Minimize interactions where possible;
  - If an individual or group moves towards you retreat slowly;
  - Do not initiate interactions;
  - Do not touch weaners.

