

Working procedures of the Scientific Advisory Committee for Seal Rehabilitation

17 October, 2017

Introduction

There are currently five centres for the rehabilitation of seals in the Netherlands. In the day-to-day practice of seal rehabilitation different opinions exist about if, when and how to rehabilitate seals, which ones and how many. The policy principles in the trilateral 'Seal Management Plan' and the 'Guidelines on the rehabilitation of harbour seals and grey seals (2003)' (Leidraad opvang gewone en grijze zeehonden) should give clear guidance on this issue. However, these existing guidelines are currently interpreted in different ways, depending on the motive for the rehabilitation. One possible motive focuses on the importance of rehabilitation for the population of seals and the ecosystem as a whole. Another motive focuses on animal welfare and the duty of care for individual animals. Since the initial guidelines were drafted the populations of both grey and harbour seals have increased dramatically and new scientific information has become available on the survival rates and maternal pup relationships in both species. These developments have led to increased debate about the necessity, desirability and usefulness of seal capturing and rehabilitation.

On March 16 2016 the State Secretary sent a letter to the House of Representatives to announce the decision to request scientific recommendations on all aspects of the seal rehabilitation policy. This was followed by the decision by the Minister of Economic Affairs to install the Scientific Advisory Committee for Seal Rehabilitation (Stcrt 2017, 44874) . This committee has been requested by the Minister to answer the following questions:

1. In which situations is rehabilitation permissible and in which situations is it advised against? The recommendations should address both the approach that there should be minimal rehabilitation of wild animals ('in which cases is it justified') and the approach that rehabilitation is to be accommodated from the point of view of the welfare of individual animals ('in which cases are there objections to it').
2. How to act in situations in which rehabilitation is advised against?
3. What standards should rehabilitation meet, which treatment and care form part of it and what are its limits when it does take place?
4. Which conditions should be set with regard to releasing animals back into the wild?

The following persons are appointed as member of the advisory committee for the period between September 1 2017 and March 1 2018:

- a. Prof. Em. A.N. van der Zande, resident in Gouda, also chair;
- b. Prof. Em. J.J.M. van Alphen, resident in Leiden;
- c. Dr S.J. Goodman, resident in Leeds (UK);
- d. Dr F.L.B. Meijboom, resident in Ede;
- e. Prof. A.J. Stegeman, resident in Amersfoort;
- f. Dr D. Thompson, resident in St Andrews (UK).

Working procedures

The Committee has decided on its own working procedures (or Modus Operandi) during the first meeting in September 2017.¹ The main principles of its working procedures are:

- ✓ The Committee will base its advice on scientific publications and ongoing scientific studies.
- ✓ Key scientific experts (both national and international) on seals and seal rehabilitation will be invited to inform the committee on the latest scientific insights.
- ✓ The Committee will organise a number of working visits to Dutch seal rehabilitation centres to explore the current practices of seal rehabilitation and the current insights into what they consider to be the optimal operating procedures.
- ✓ Relevant policy documents and recent letters by stakeholders on seal rehabilitation addressed to the Ministry of Economic Affairs, will be used by the Committee as an additional source of information and evidence.
- ✓ The Committee is open for suggestions on scientific publications or other reliable sources of evidence (for example unpublished manuscripts or expert judgements) to include in its advice. Suggestions and comments can be sent to the secretariat of the Committee (j.latour@altwym.nl).
- ✓ The committee has opened a website: <http://waddenzee.nl/themas/natuur/zeehonden/onderzoekscommissie-zeehonden>. This website will be used to inform the general public on the proceedings and working procedures of the committee. The preliminary advice will be also published on this website (mid-January).
- ✓ Stakeholders will have the opportunity to respond to the preliminary advice of the Committee (mid-January) in the beginning of 2018. A selection of these stakeholders will be invited by the Committee to respond to this preliminary advice in person. The invitation will be to comment on the evidence base of the committee's advice and on the logic of its recommendations.
- ✓ The final scientific advice will be sent to the State Secretary/Minister of Economic Affairs on March 1 2018.

¹ Decree establishing the Scientific Advisory Committee for Seal Rehabilitation (Minister of Economic Affairs, August 9 2017, section 4 sub 1).