



An overview of current issues in seal rescue and rehabilitation in the U.K.

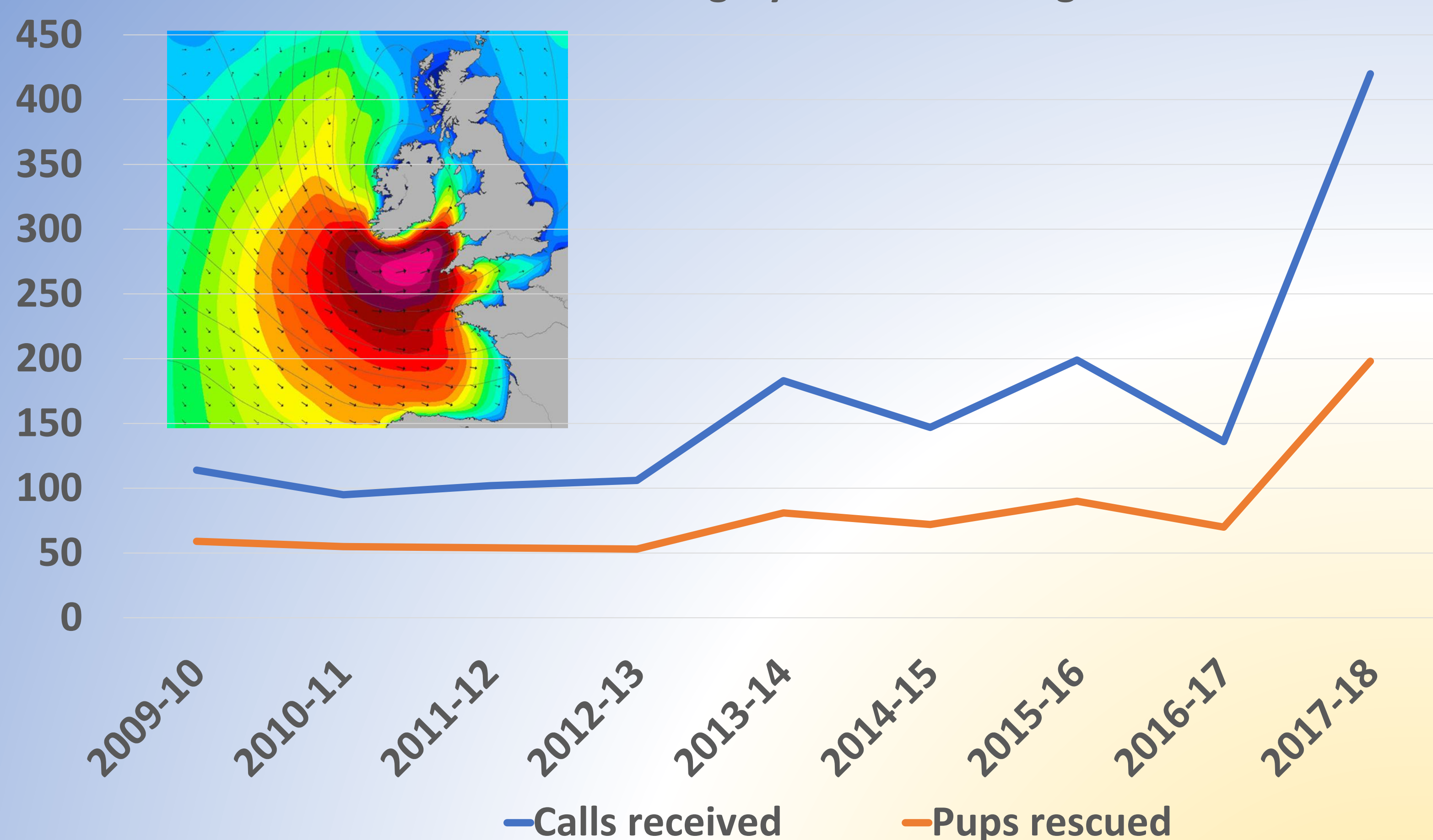
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BACKGROUND.

In recent years it has become evident that there has been a steady increase in the number of seals being reported to rescue organisations in the U.K., with 990 calls being received by British Divers Marine Life Rescue in 2017 alone, an increase of 30% over 2016. This is putting greater pressure on the rescue and rehabilitation resources available to deal with them, and in particular the total rehabilitation capacity in the country is often reaching its limits at peak times each year. There appear to be number of factors that are contributing to this rise, which are highlighted here.

Callouts and rescues of grey seals in SW England



Winter storms.

Since 2013, the U.K. has been struck repeatedly by severe Atlantic storms during Autumn and Winter, coinciding with the peak pupping season for grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*). Losses of over 70% of pups in one night have been recorded during these events at some sites. As a result, large numbers of pups have been separated prematurely from their mothers or have struggled to feed effectively in the post-weaning learning phase, which has left many of them severely underweight and exhausted. This trend appears to be worsening, with Winter 2017-18 being notably poor.

Health.

The general health of the common seal (*Phoca vitulina*) population on the East coast appears to be in decline. Some rehabilitation centres have recently reported survival rates of 25-45%, compared with 50-60% in previous seasons. There has been little pathological investigation to date, so causes for this increased mortality are unknown.



Natalie Stahl (RSPCA)

Human interactions.

Parts of the U.K. are increasingly popular as year-round tourist destinations, so naive pups have been at increased risk of disturbance, dog attacks, the 'selfie' culture, inappropriate drone use and other attempts to interact with them. There are ongoing issues with seals being hand fed from tourist trip boats within harbours that result in them becoming habituated to this environment and therefore at much greater risk of injury, infection and anti-social behaviour. Industries such as seabed mining, marine renewable energy, fisheries and fish farming have varied potential for causing disturbance, loss of habitat and prey, or mortality, particularly where these coastal activities as well as recreational ones overlap with sensitive seal sites and remain unmanaged.

Incidents of entanglement in marine litter appear to be increasing around the country too, perhaps as more severe storms cause greater loss of fishing gear.

CONCLUSIONS.

With increasing coastal human abundance and distribution and greater frequency and intensity of Winter storms, the number of calls to seals is increasing annually, a trend that seems unlikely to reverse. The rescue and rehabilitation infrastructure must therefore respond effectively. Greater communication, cooperation and management is required to maintain a coordinated approach. Proactive planning of resources must account for dynamic changes in society, climate and ocean health rather than maintain the status quo, as many arising issues have an anthropogenic nature. Creating awareness of these issues to the general public through social media, direct interaction, beach signage and in local and national media should be taken at every opportunity to help inform them of the problems and how they can be a part of the solution. Positive wider community involvement and stakeholder engagement with conservation organisations can help on a local scale with promoting better practices at seal sites.



Linda Pearce