



Cristina McAvoy



2023 annual report

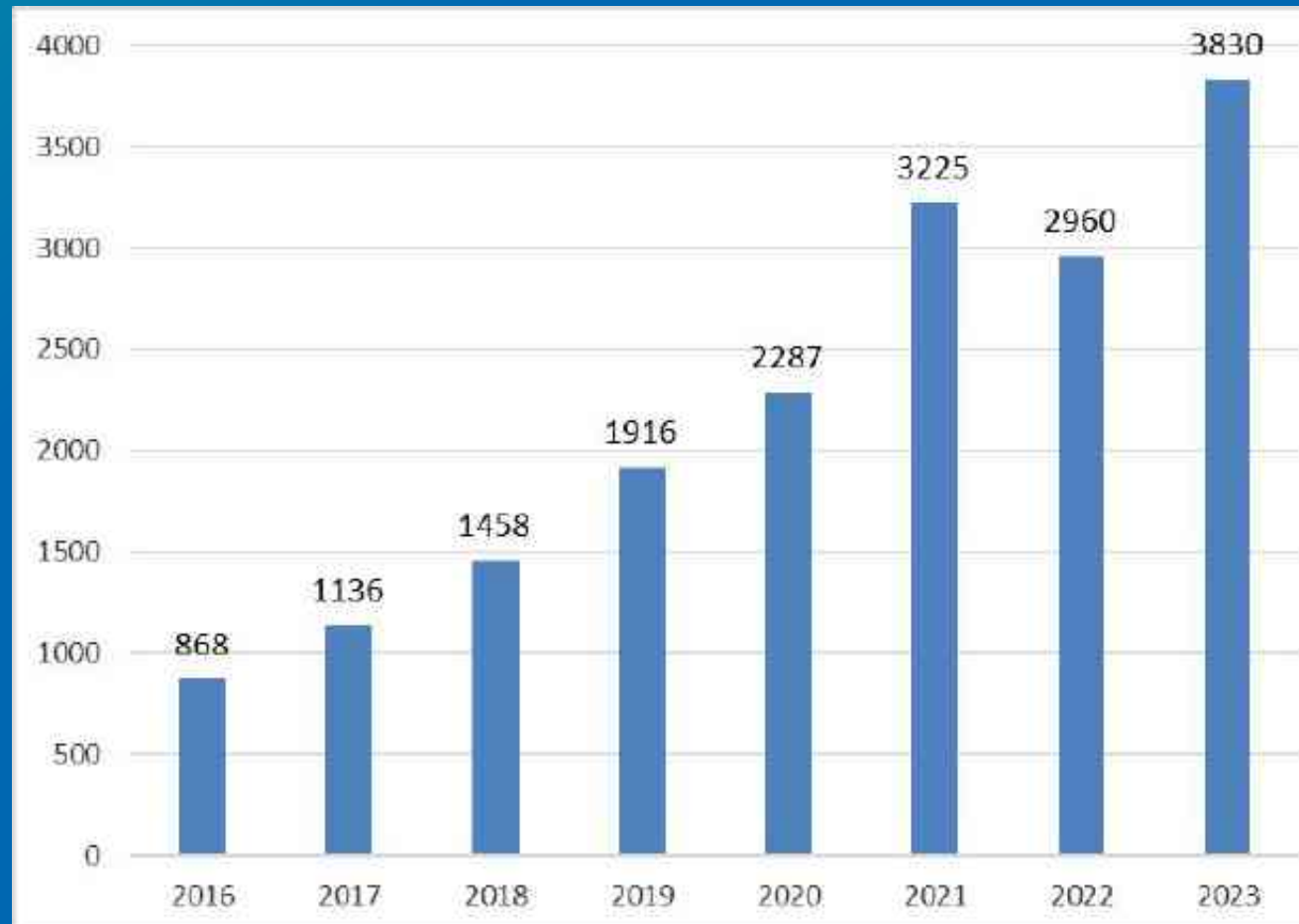


Calls: annual

Note: these data represent the raw number of calls received to the hotline.

2023 was marked as being consistently well above average for the volume of calls per month throughout. Storms and prolonged periods of rough weather once again featured as a major contributing factor for grey seals, however the summer was significantly busy for common seals for unknown reasons.

- 2016 = 868 calls
- 2017 = 31% higher
- 2018 = 28% higher
- 2019 = 31% higher
- 2020 = 19% higher
- 2021 = 41% higher
- 2022 = 8% lower
- 2023 = 29% higher

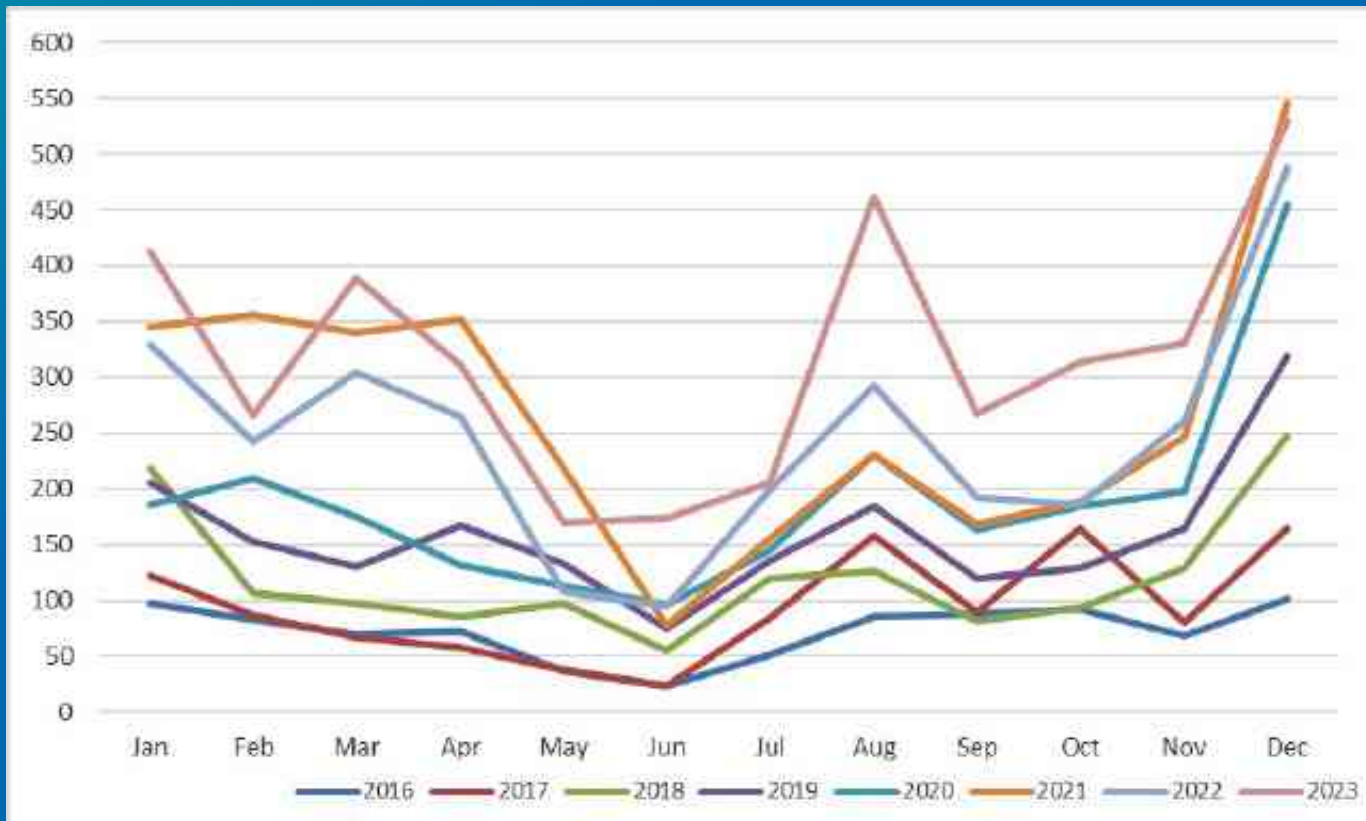




Calls: monthly

This chart is largely influenced by the seal pup rescue seasons (common seals primarily July to September, grey seals primarily September to May). January, March, June, July, August, September, October and November all set new total call records for their respective months.

June for the first time has surpassed 100 calls. Meanwhile, August was a very bad month for common seals though the reason why is unclear, as there is no obvious cause like a storm or correlation in health conditions and region for example.





Calls: ongoing trends

Generally, the rise in calls can largely be attributed to:

- **Increasing awareness of BDMLR**

- Greater online visibility and access
- Increasing media interest, especially with climate change and pollution
- Local awareness-raising efforts of BDMLR volunteers and colleagues

- **Changing human population and activity**

- Increasing human population
- Increasing year-round tourism
- Greater uptake of outdoor activities e.g.: SUPs, kayaks, coasteering, walking
- All of the above resulting in more wildlife disturbance incidents and causing casualties, and more potential casualties being found and reported

- **Climate change**

- More frequent severe storms/extreme weather events in Autumn and Winter
- Growing evidence for increased grey seal pup mortality, lower reproductive success and shift in timing of the pupping season
- Redistribution/expansion of wildlife populations

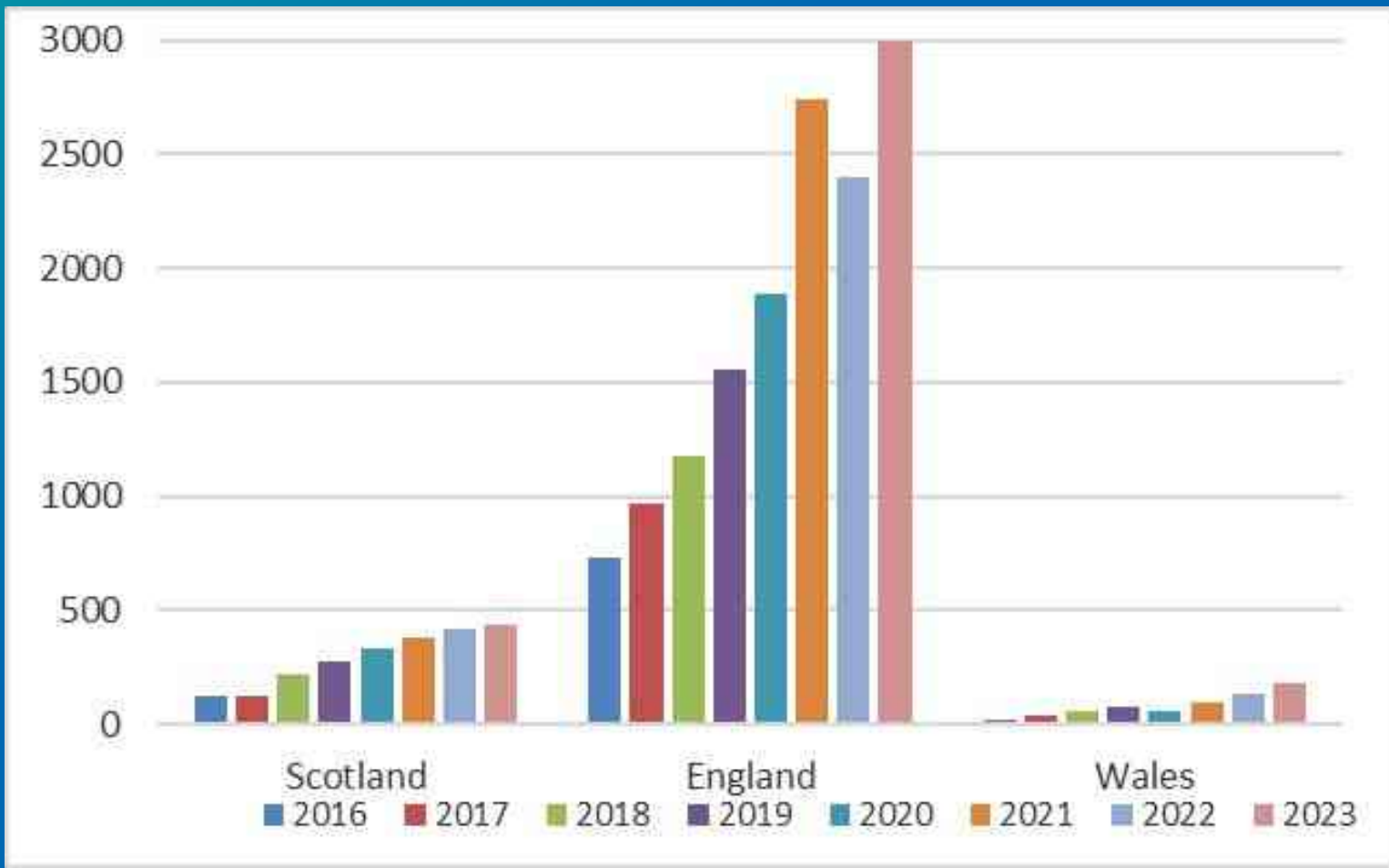
- **Health in the East coast common seal population**

- Severe 'mouth rot' infection in weaned pups over the last several years causing higher mortality



Calls: countries

England is disproportionately the busiest of the UK countries and there are likely a variety of reasons for this, including human population abundance and distribution alongside public awareness in more remote areas that are harder to engage with directly for generating reports. However, across all countries there is an upward overall trend in calls received to the hotline.





Calls: countries

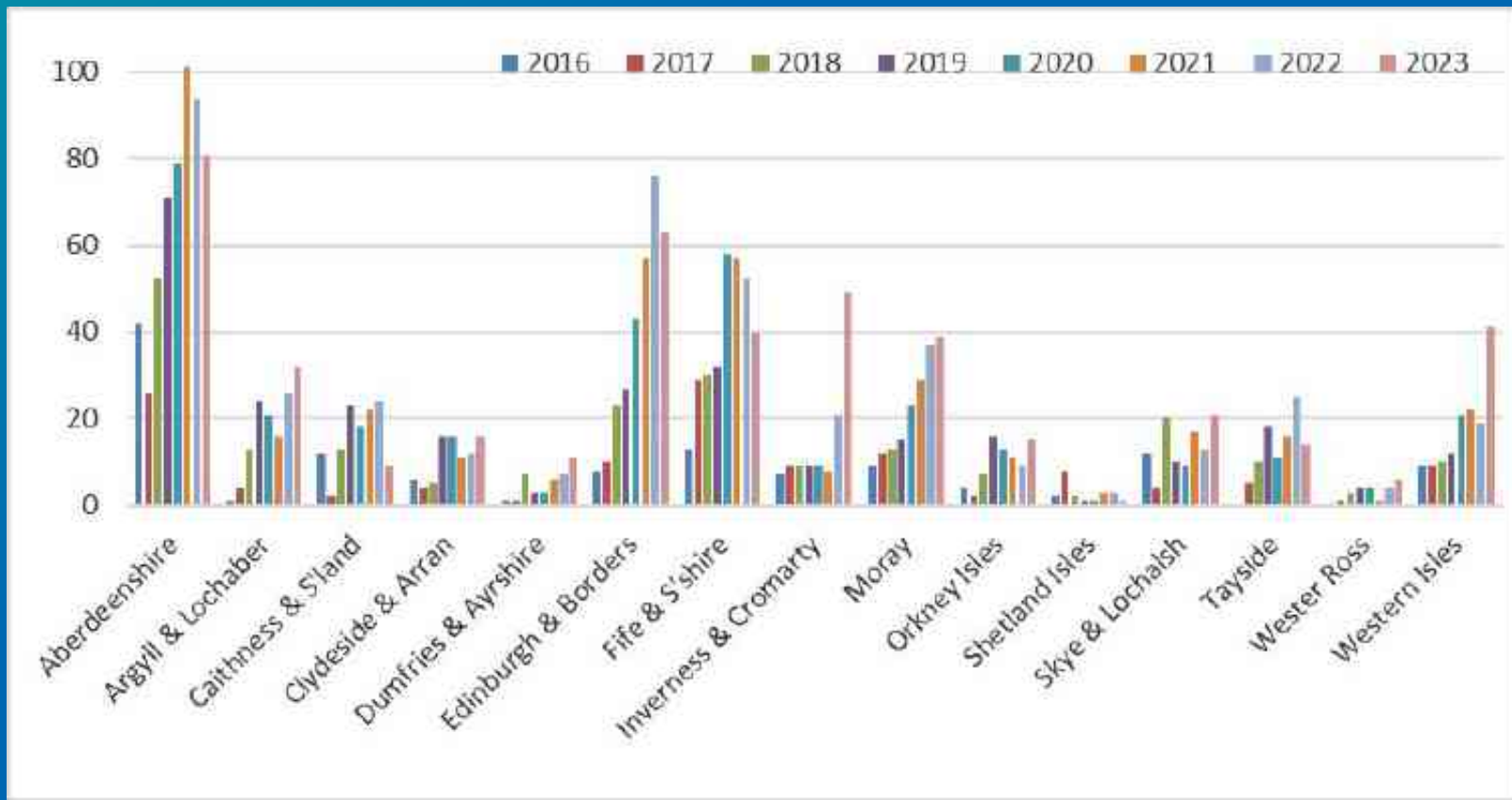
Broken down by country and species groups, England of course has a very high proportion of the seal calls. However, it should be noted that although England also has more cetacean calls, Scotland proportionally has a higher amount. The proportions between the species groups in Wales remains similar to 2022, with approximately one cetacean call per 10-12 seal calls.





Calls: Scotland

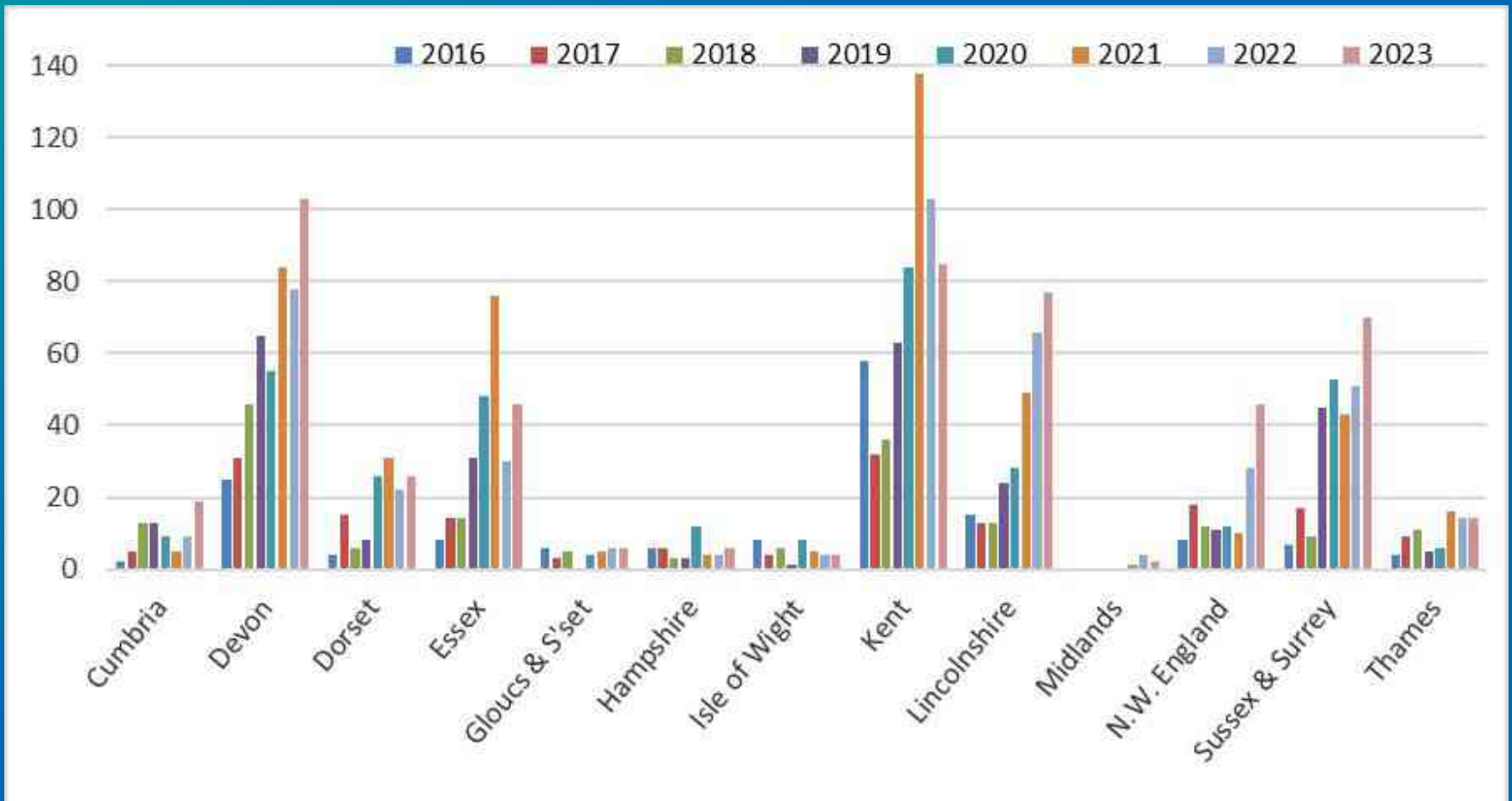
Aberdeenshire saw a decrease in calls for the second year running, although it remains the busiest of all Scottish regions. The regions bordering the Firth of Forth, again traditionally busy regions, also saw decreases. Interestingly all west coast regions received an increase in the number of calls to them, while the regions bordering the Moray Firth increased too. The significant increase in the Western Isles may be linked to awareness following the pilot whale mass stranding incident.





Calls: England

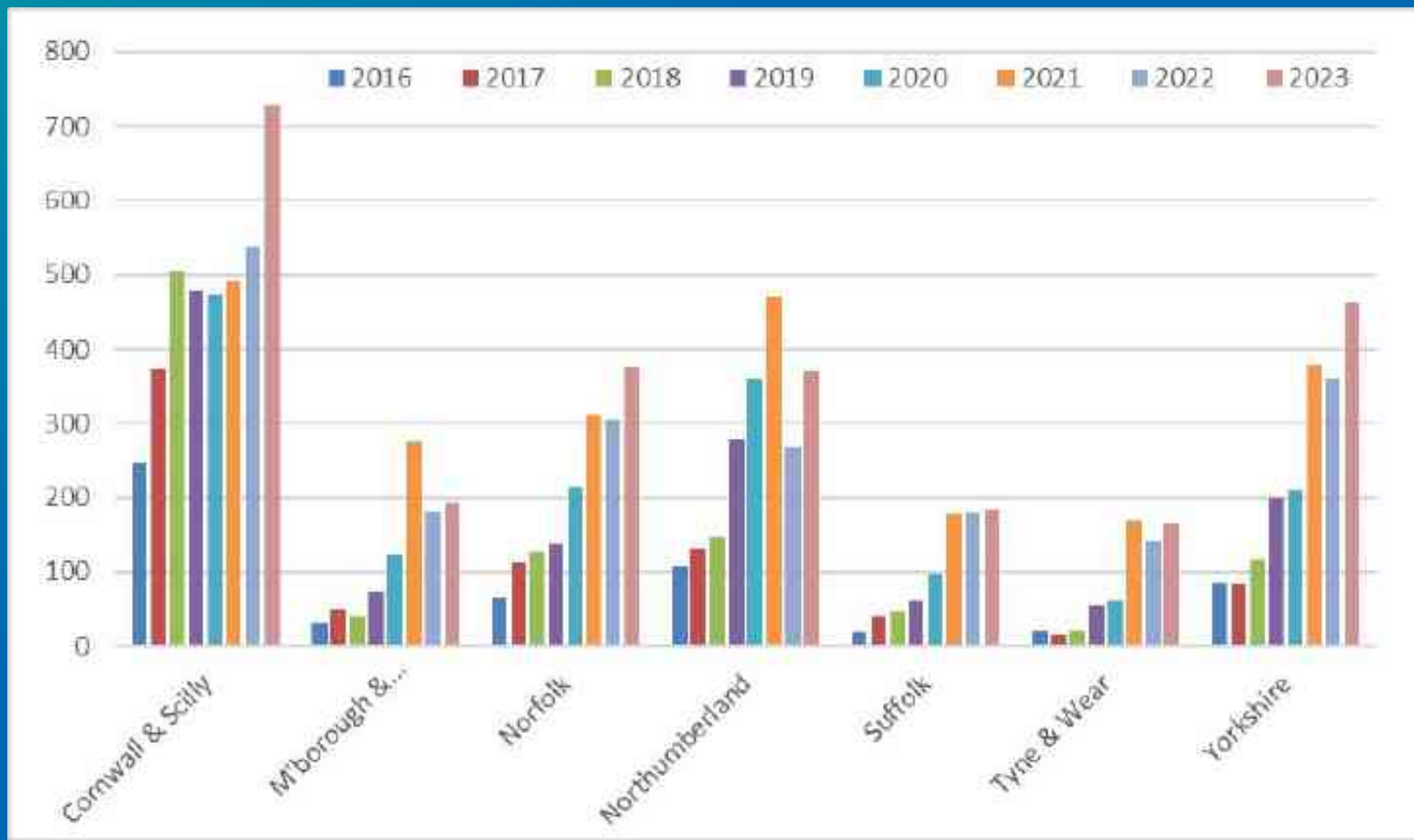
Most regions in England saw an uptick in calls in 2023, particularly Devon, North West England and Sussex and Surrey. Meanwhile, Kent continues to see a decrease following the notable peak in 2021, but it remains one of the busier English regions still. The remaining regions continue to be stable.





Calls: England

Cornwall and Scilly for the second year in a row set a new record for most overall calls of all UK regions in a year by a significant margin, which is a concern. The period from September to December was especially difficult with seals, but it was also a busy year for cetacean strandings too. All the other busy regions in England also saw increases in calls, albeit less pronounced. In order, Yorkshire, Norfolk and Northumberland are the next busiest regions in the UK.

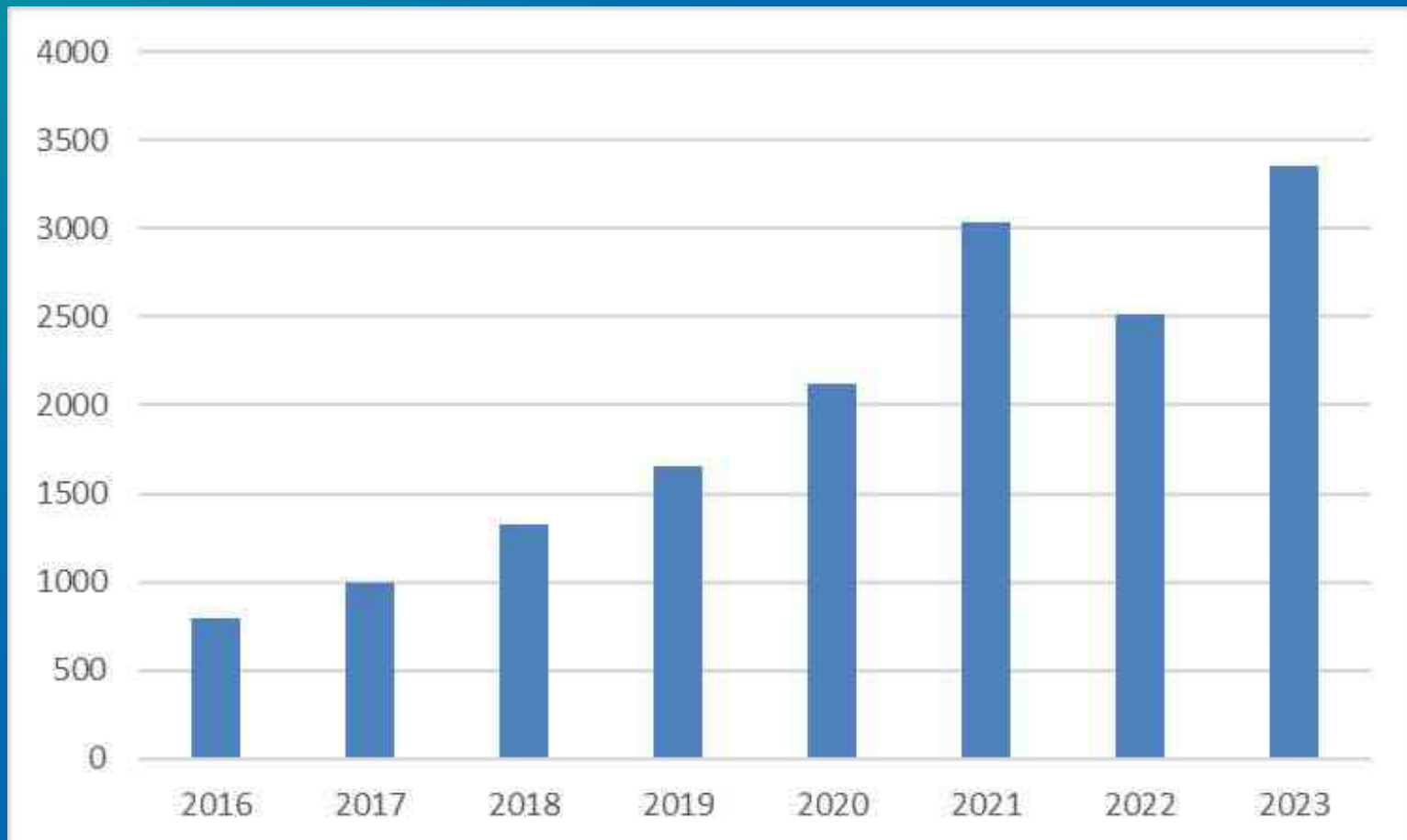


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Calls: pinnipeds by year

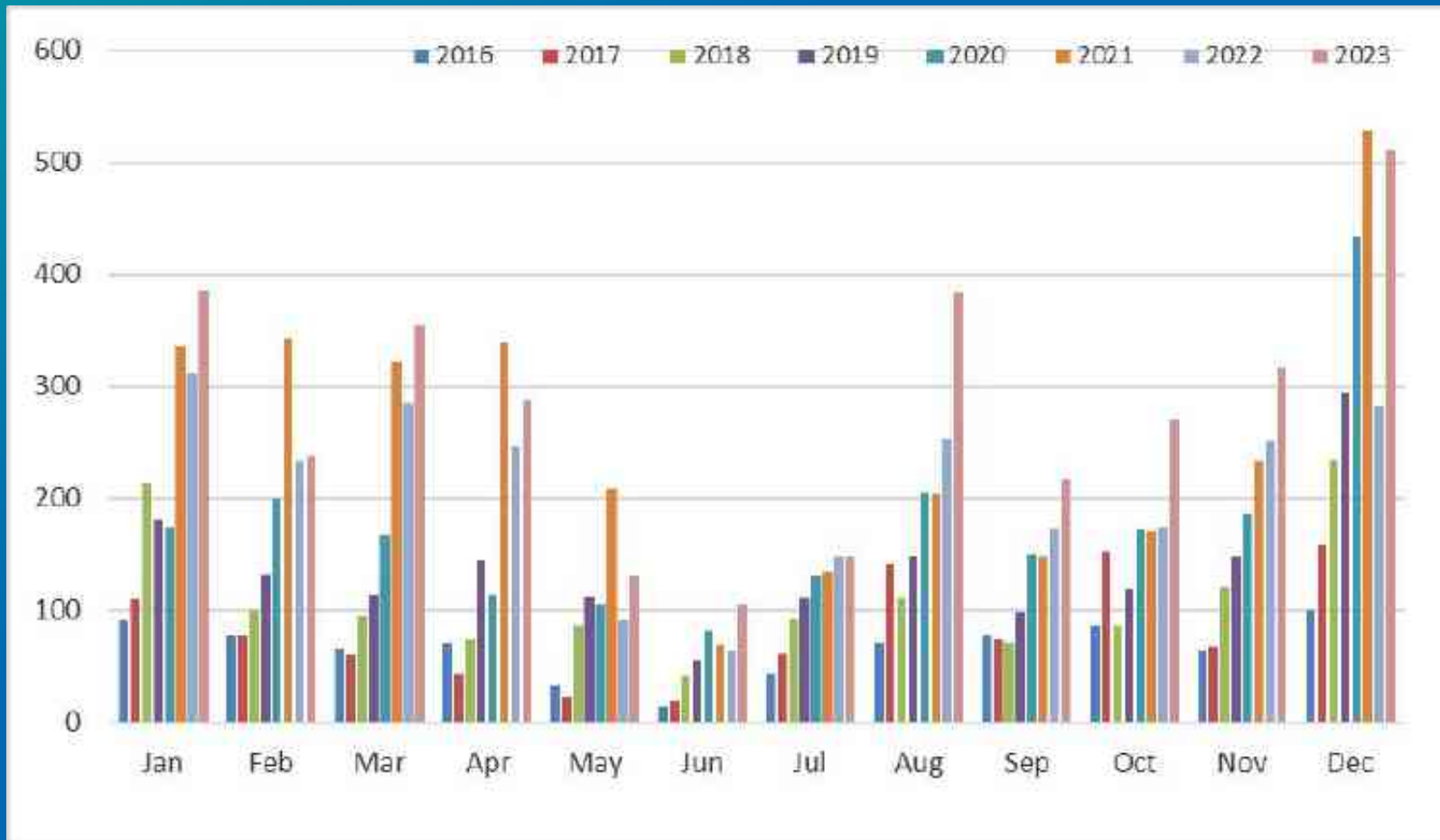
Overall the number of seal calls reached a record high in 2023. As previously mentioned there are a variety of contributing factors including storms in autumn in south west England and other regions, the huge peak in common seals in August on the east coast and others.





Calls: pinnipeds by month

As already mentioned, the majority of months in 2023 reached new record call totals and this was down to seals. The large August peak is especially prominent in the chart here but so is December for grey seals, reaching similar highs as the 2021 peak produced largely by Storm Arwen. Once again storms feature as a major impact on seals.





Calls: pinnipeds by species

As is typical for this chart, the switch between the long grey seal season and short common seal season is clear. Aside from the high total volume of calls and reasons why that have already been discussed, there is nothing that particularly stands out for 2023 as being unusual.

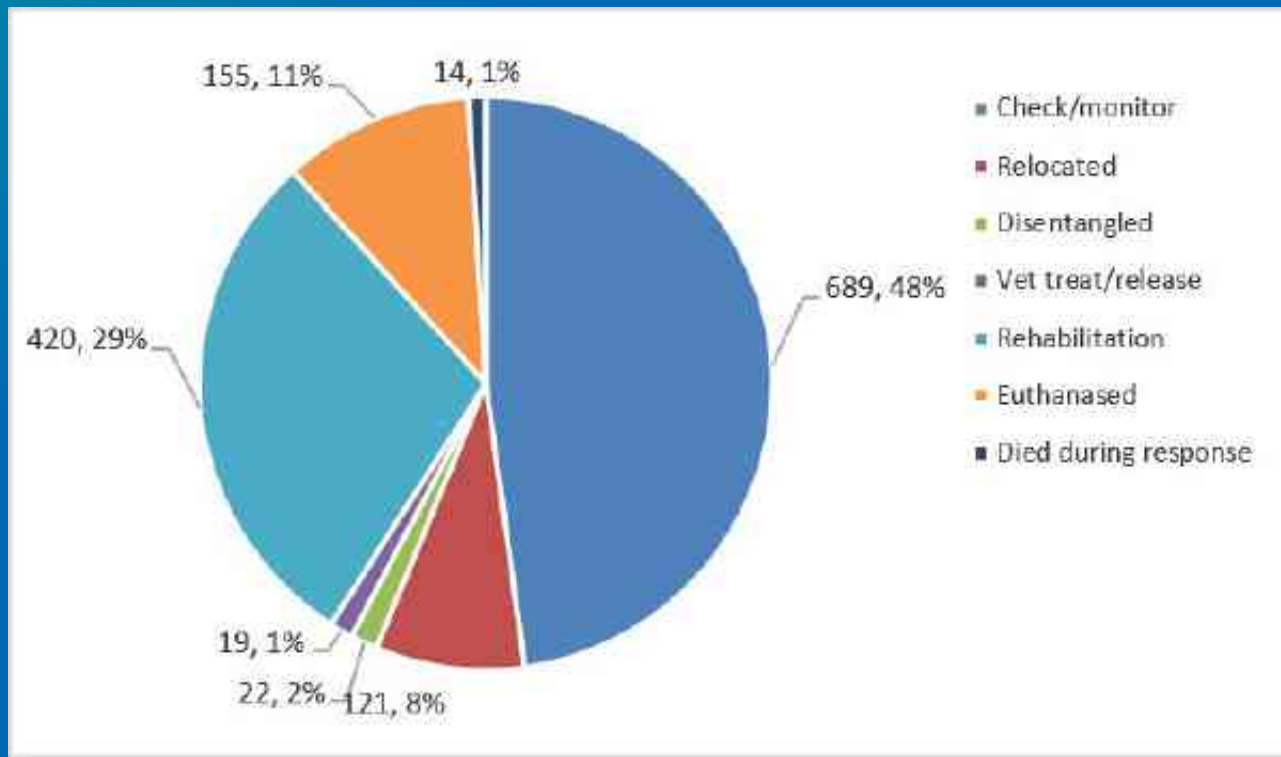




Calls: overall pinnipeds by outcome

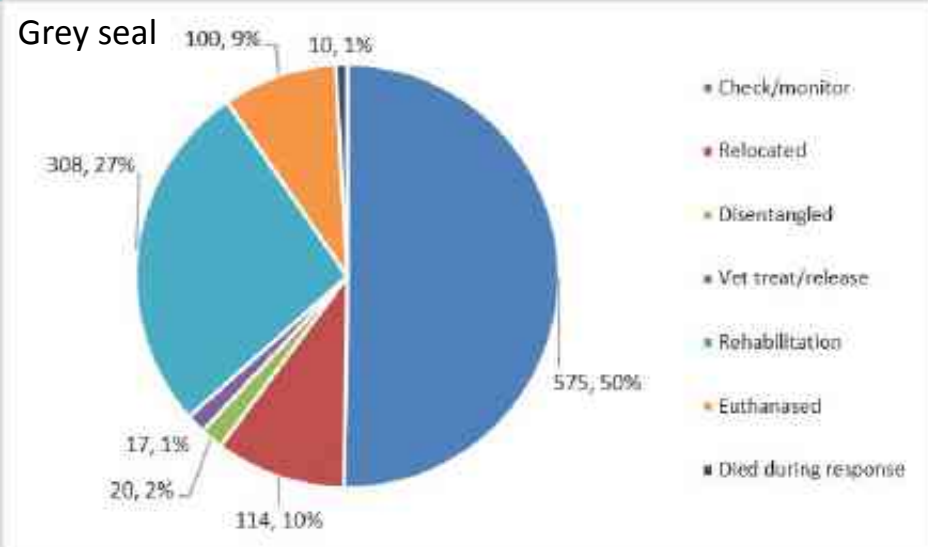
Overall almost half of seals reported were checked on by Medics but required no further action. This is up on 2022 by 13% but numerically represents an increase of 230 animals.

Similar numbers of seals were relocated or disentangled, while the number checked by a vet and released again dropped significantly, possibly as beach triage is improving. Proportionally the number of seals admitted for rehabilitation is down 3%, and numerically this is an increase of just four, so admission numbers are very consistent with 2022. The number of seals euthanased was down by 4% compared with the previous year.

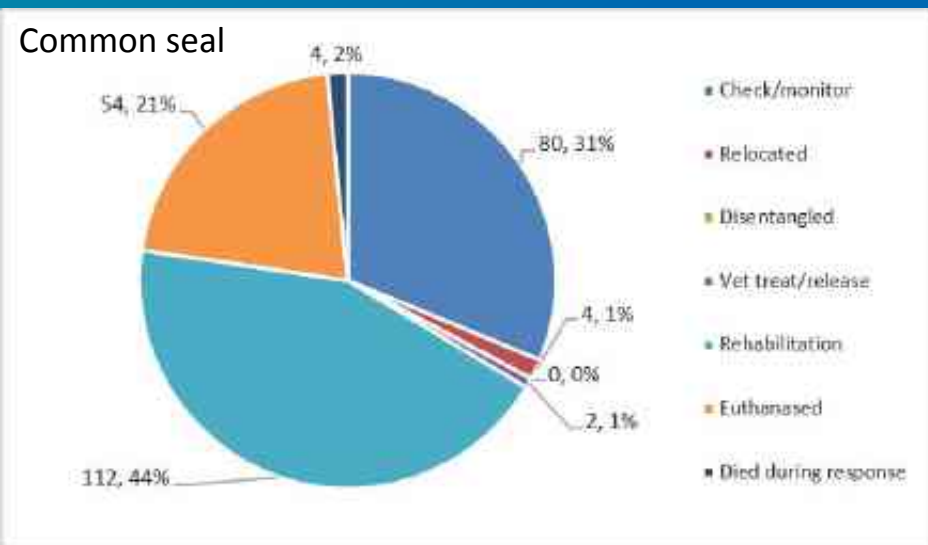




Calls: pinniped species by outcome



For grey seals, the number of animals checked on were the cause for the greatest increase (+12%). Relocations and disentanglements were almost exactly the same as 2022. Whereas Veterinary checks followed by release were down considerably (-3%), while the volume admitted to rehabilitation or euthanased were down slightly.



For commons, the number checked on was down slightly, along with relocations, disentanglements, veterinary checks and euthanasia which all too showed a decline. Meanwhile, the volume taken for rehabilitation was slightly up (+7%).



Calls: pinnipeds summary

Capacity in rehabilitation centres for seals nationally is a major issue as demand is outstripping supply. Four centres have closed in the last ten years and only two have opened. This has forced us to place more onus on in situ monitoring and short-term holding as a result, but this isn't the final or best solution. More full rehabilitation facilities are, especially as increasing callouts are largely due to human factors.

Work is ongoing to address this situation in the background, with proposals for other seal holding units (internal and external to BDMLR) and full rehabilitation centres being reviewed by staff, and where appropriate progressed and supported with advice on construction, protocols and photos of existing facilities. These are longer term solutions to a chronic problem that has developed in recent years. While it is likely that not all proposals will reach fruition, the ones that do will make a significant difference especially in the busiest or more remote areas.

In 2023 the avian influenza outbreak of the previous year subsided and as the risk level decreased the centres that had restricted or closed to admissions gradually reopened. Finding space for pups during that time was very difficult and so it was very welcome when the capacity situation was able to be improved once again.



Cornwall Seal Hospital

In the calendar year of 2023 the Cornwall Seal Hospital admitted 127 pups (126 grey seals and 1 common seal) for care. As mentioned elsewhere, the rescue season in South West England was particularly severe from September to December due to frequent or prolonged periods of rough conditions and storms, which contributed to the high number of admissions.

Dan and Natalie were joined by a seasonal relief cover vet Sam Sanger for the winter of 2022/23, and Zoe Satsias for 2023/24, which hugely helped to alleviate the workload on the veterinary operations side. There are over 65 volunteers from around Cornwall and Devon who form the core team operating in the hospital with a further 20 placements organised for other Medics and veterinary professionals from around the UK to come in and learn more skills and gain confidence in their abilities.

Two more pairs of veterinary student externships were run in 2023. The opportunity is open for fourth or fifth year students who will be given a lot of hands on time with the animals, learning veterinary procedures and assessments, but also rounding out the experience with opportunities to assist with a post mortem examination with Cornwall Marine Pathology Team, attend a seal survey with the Seal Research Trust and a cetacean survey with Cornwall Wildlife Trust to help them gain an understanding of wild population dynamics, behaviours, habitats, threats and conservation measures.



Mobile Seal Rescue Unit

44 seal pups (21 common, 23 grey) were admitted to the MSRU in the calendar year of 2023, which is a record by some margin and demonstrates again the need for such a facility in this region. The unit is generously funded by Andy Ottaway from the Seal Protection Action Group. Seals can be held here temporarily for a few nights until they can be moved on to rehabilitation or released again if deemed fit enough.

The unit has been working extremely well as a stop gap for seals in a busy area where pups can be looked after locally by the experienced volunteer team before being moved on for rehabilitation at one of the next nearest centres. More volunteers are gradually being recruited to help the team leads care for the pups while they are in and providing a good opportunity for training new and improving existing skills.





Temporary holding units

Yorkshire unit: 59 seals (7 common, 52 grey).

Northumberland (three sites combined): 38 seals (14 common, 24 grey).

Moray unit: 7 seals (6 common, 1 grey).

Inverness unit: 13 seals (11 common, 2 grey)

Kent unit: 32 seals (23 common, 9 grey).

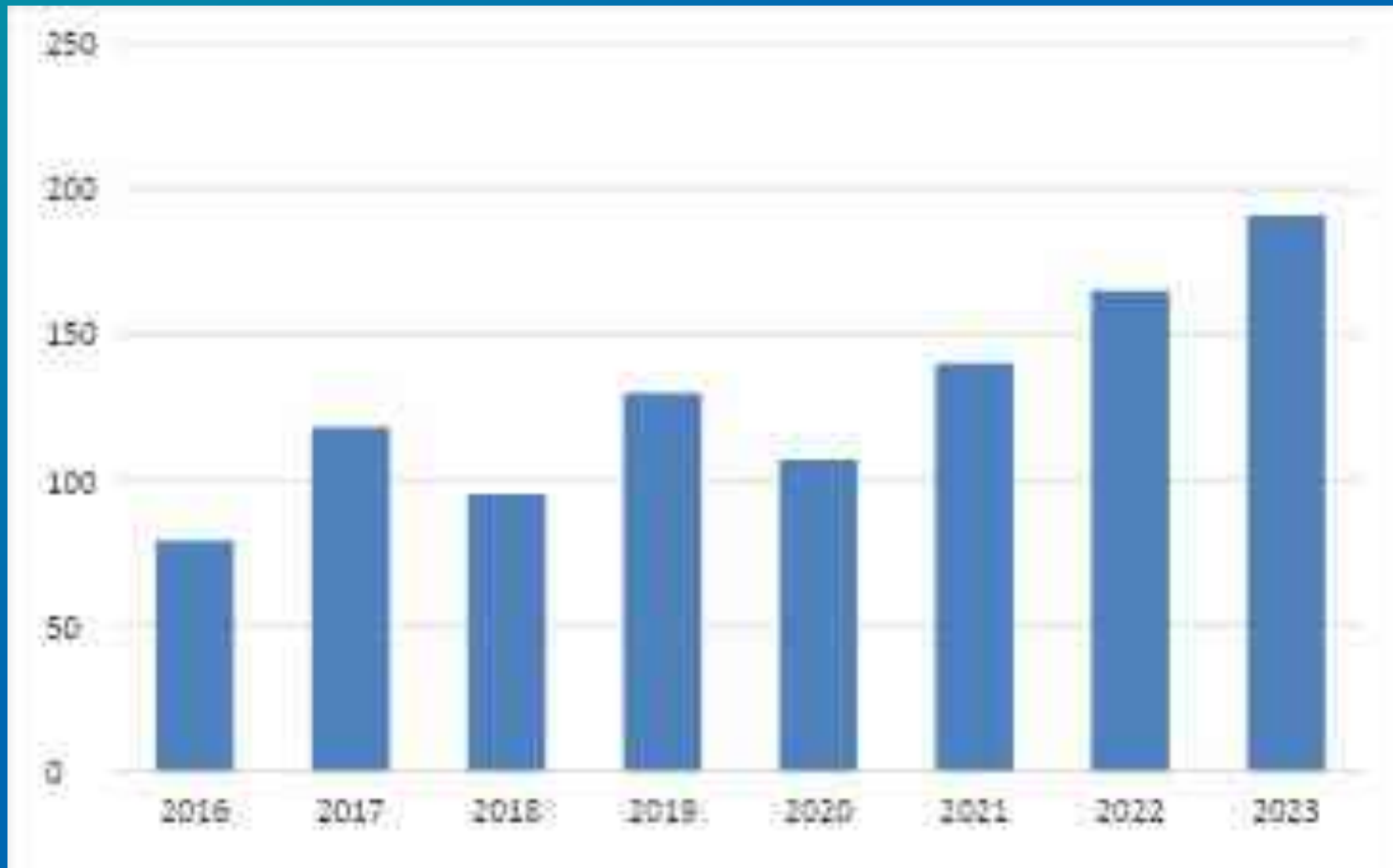
These are the only temporary holding units operated by BDMLR volunteers with specialist training and facilities to do so, who are all evidently doing an incredible job. Otherwise we generally make use of key experienced veterinary surgeries and a handful of other external centres (e.g.: Kendal College) to hold pups until we can move them to full rehabilitation centres, so the overall numbers of seals held temporarily is higher than illustrated here.

The number of animals passing through our temporary holding units alone is strong evidence for the need for more full rehabilitation facilities in parts of the country due to volume of casualties and/or distance from the nearest available centre.



Calls: cetaceans by year

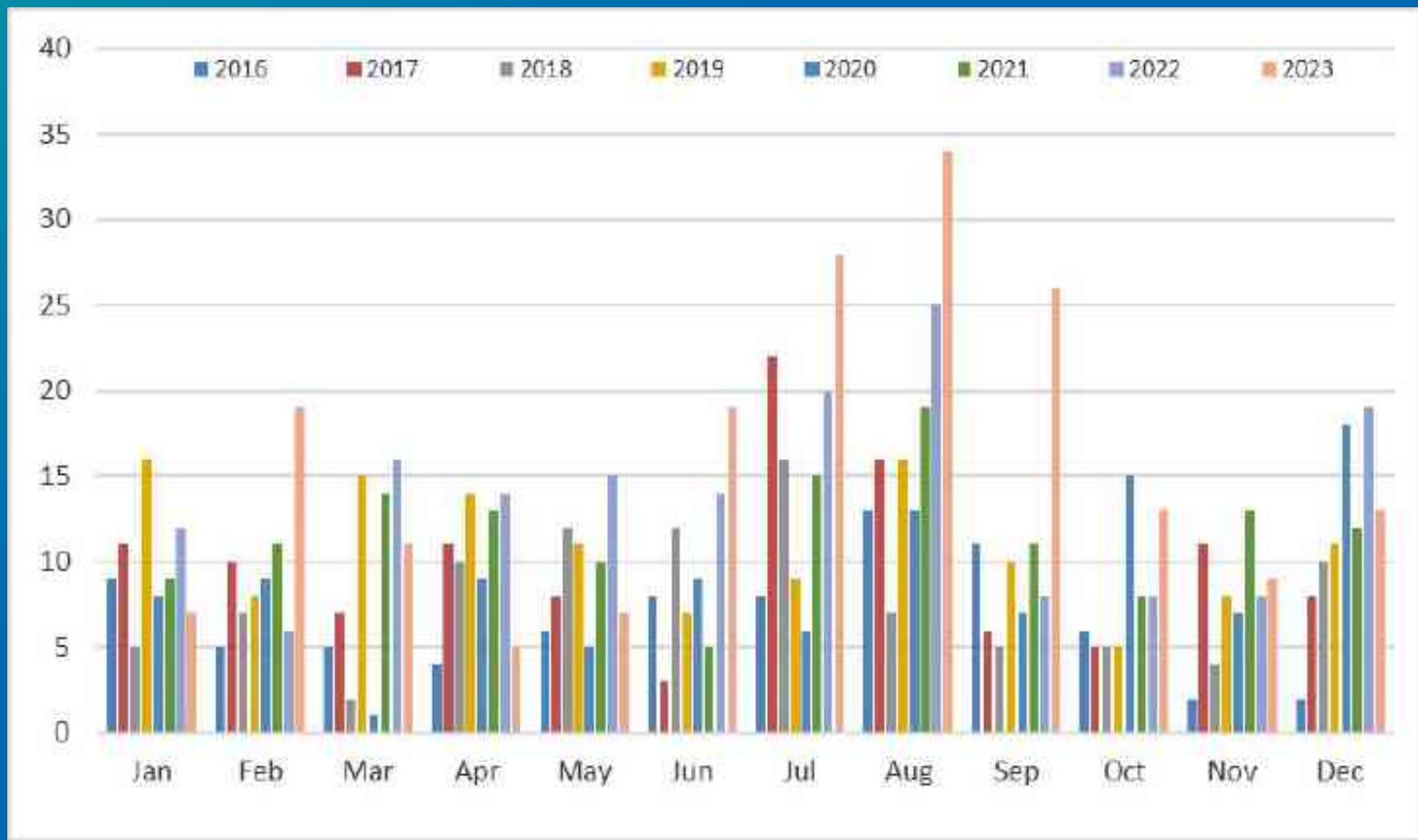
Annual calls for cetaceans continue to express a gradual incline overall, also reflecting similar trends observed in 2021 and 2022. Though expressing similarities with other organisations including CSIP, such outcomes could be associated with a number of different influences including greater awareness amongst the general public and communities, further collaborations with stakeholders, or changes within environmental conditions.





Calls: cetaceans by month

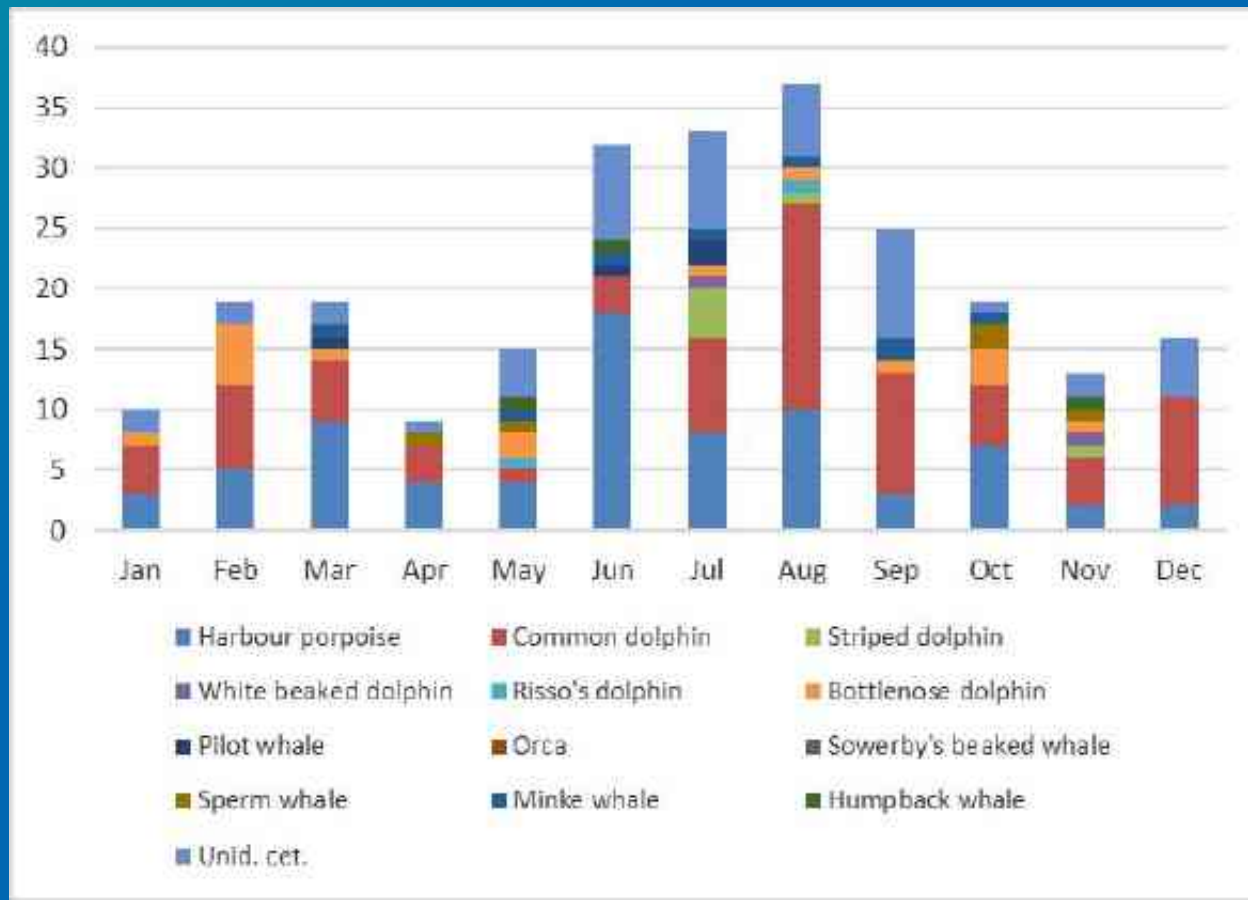
Monthly reports show little in the way of trends for reports of cetaceans usually, however it can be noted now that June, July and August are now all showing at least three consecutive years of annual growth. It is unclear whether this is due to more incidents occurring or increased public reporting effort thus far, however in either case it is a noteworthy finding that can relate back to our operational readiness both for Hotline Coordinators and area team preparedness.





Calls: cetaceans by species

Interestingly, the top two months for reports was the same in 2023 as it was in 2022 and 2021, however there is no clear reason for any trends to be appearing in the data as none have been noted previously. Therefore, the overall impression is that summer of 2023 was an especially busy time for cetacean-related incidents. Activity was lower in spring and early autumn, contrary to 2022, as were the winter months too.

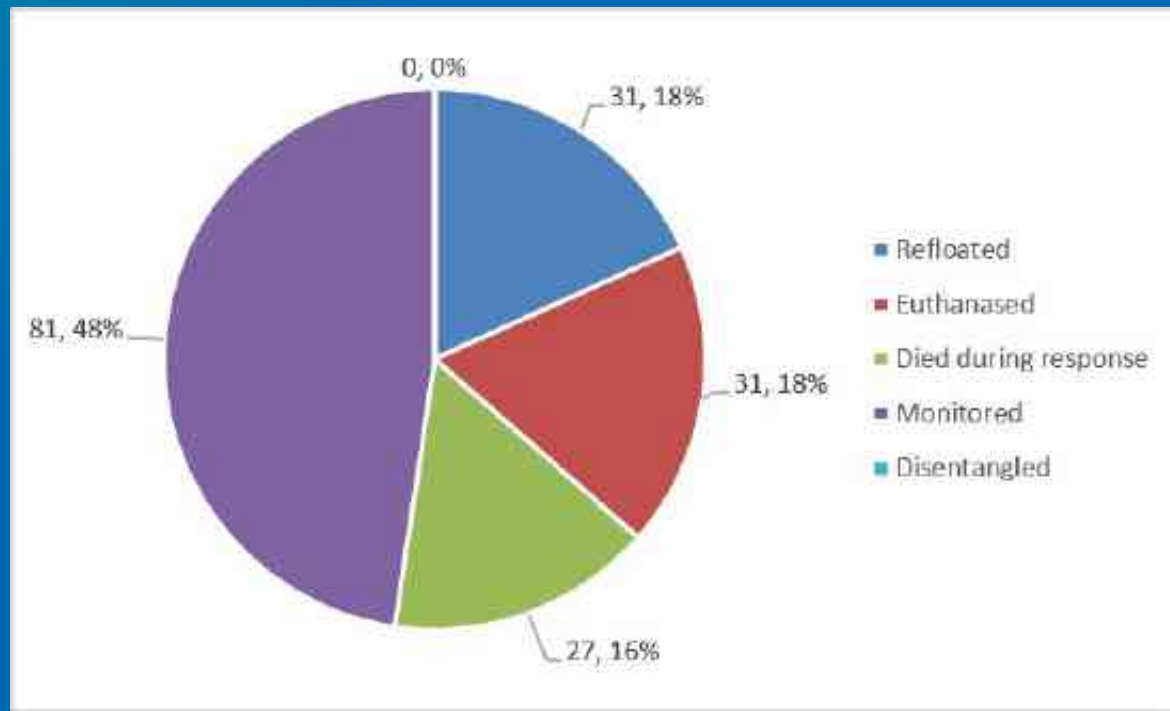




Calls: overall cetaceans by outcome

This chart depicts the outcomes of all individual animals recorded across all incidents. Around half of incidents involved monitoring, comparable with 2022. There was a jump in the number of animals that died during response (+10) compared to 2022, but this was skewed by the pilot whale mass stranding on the Isle of Lewis.

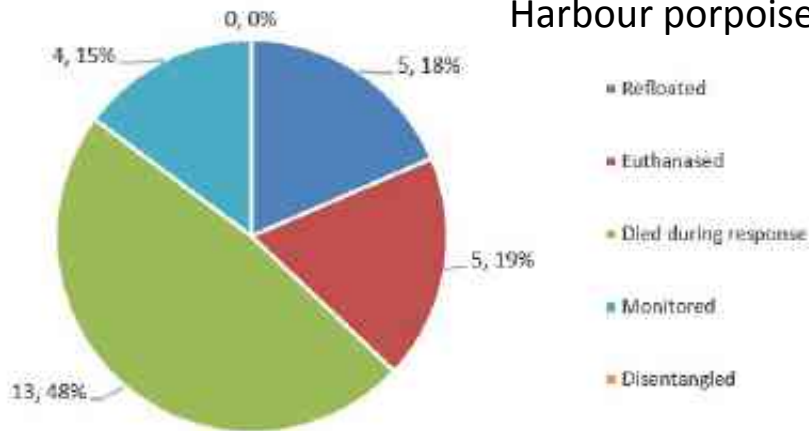
Of the animals that were live stranded when BDMLR attended, the proportion refloated appears down significantly, but again this is skewing of data from the mass stranding and numerically a very comparable number of animals were refloated. The number euthanased of that died during response was affected in a similar way, with higher figures resulting.





Calls: overall cetaceans by outcome

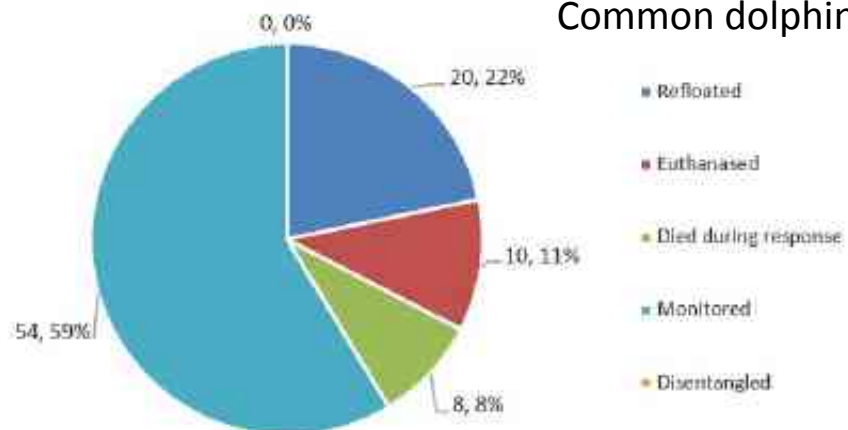
Harbour porpoise



Species outcome data is only prevalent enough for harbour porpoises and common dolphins to be looked at individually.

Harbour porpoise refloats were equal to 2022, while euthanasia increased slightly. The number of animals that died during response was up, reflecting a busier year for porpoise strandings.

Common dolphin



Meanwhile, common dolphin refloats proportionally were lower, though in number were almost equal. Unusually in 2022 none were euthanased, while in 2023, 10 animals were. The number of animals that died during response was slightly lower, so this likely reflects improved triage and response time.



Calls: cetaceans summary

Common dolphins were the most frequently stranded species in 2023, potentially a result of population changes that are ongoing in line with data from survey work. Harbour porpoises are indicated to be moving towards the southern North Sea area and less abundant elsewhere, while common dolphins are extending their range north, both of which are thought to be linked with climate change. Reports of both species in 2023 peaked during the summer months, though there appears to be no strong seasonal trend for these two species in terms of stranding.





Notable incidents

A fin whale live stranded and died on rocks during stormy conditions in Cornwall, during January. Unfortunately the body washed out so no post mortem examination was possible.





Notable incidents

There were a spate of live loggerhead turtles reported mainly in south west England during the early part of the year, most in poor health and one of whom had ingested a quantity of plastic tape. Those that survived were eventually released off the Azores by the Navy in 2024.





Notable incidents

In May a fin whale live stranded at Bridlington, Yorkshire. It was not very healthy and died soon after coming ashore.





Notable incidents

During June a pair of white beaked dolphins were found live stranded in Aberdeenshire. A team of Medics were able to stabilise them and assessed to be in good condition. They were successfully refloated later in the day. A third dolphin was then found further along the beach that had not long stranded, and it too was able to be returned to sea.





Notable incidents

A pair of common dolphin stranded in the Firth of Forth during July were successfully refloated together following good care and assessment by the team of Medics involved.





Notable incidents

The major mass stranding of 55 pilot whales took place in July at a remote beach on the Isle of Lewis. As they had stranded overnight most animals were already deceased when found, and the remainder were deteriorating as the tide in the day was not due back for many hours. One whale was able to be refloated, but the rest were later euthanased to relieve their suffering.





Notable incidents



In August a harbour porpoise live stranded and was successfully refloated by Medics in the Lanarkshire area.



Notable incidents



In early July an adult female grey seal habituated to human contact by public feeding in St Ives, Cornwall, became entangled in a frisbee ring. She was lured with fish into a tunnel where she was trapped and directed into a cage where the ring was cut off and she was let go again.



Notable incidents



A mass stranding of eight common dolphins occurred in the River Fal, Cornwall, later in August. They had been monitored during the day but did not leave as the tide went out and became stuck on mud flats. Seven animals were successfully refloated, while one calf passed away.





Notable incidents

A mother and calf pair of common dolphins stranded in Strangford Lough in Northern Ireland were able to be refloated after hours of care from a team of Marine Mammal Medics.





Notable incidents



A sei whale live stranded near the Forth Bridge by Edinburgh in October. It had extensive superficial damage, but was also in poor health and died soon after.



Notable incidents

The team on the Isle of Skye spent ten days monitoring a maternally separated sperm whale calf from the end of October into November. It was free swimming during this time but unsafe to intervene until it sadly passed away.

Records of female sperm whales and calves in the UK are very rare, but appear to be on the rise potentially due to climate change altering their distribution.





Operations update

We aim to run around 30 – 40 Marine Mammal Medic courses annually (37 in 2019; 21 in 2020; 43 in 2021; 39 in 2022) to maintain a relatively consistent and reliable funding stream for the charity. In 2023 we ran 48 MMM courses as there was high demand in several regions around the country along with the opportunity to be able to run at that capacity.





Operations update

In spring we also delivered a marine mammal response workshop over two days for a team from Sea Shepherd France and Apex Diving. Hosted at the BDMLR Cornwall Seal Hospital, they spent a day each on cetaceans and seals, as well as covering topics such as out of habitat and social solitary individuals. It ended with a series of questions to discuss and find solutions to a variety of scenarios. The course was received very well and may be a template to run similar in future.

We were also invited back to Gibraltar for the second time by the Government Department of Environment, Heritage and Climate Change to run two more cetacean response courses and a stranding exercise for their existing team and a new NGO, The Nautilus Project.





Operations update

In 2023 we finally managed to get back to running Mass Stranding Exercises for the first time since 2019 and the pandemic. The first one was run in Kent, followed by another in Suffolk and then one near Glasgow. A smaller exercise was also run in the Channel Islands. The size of the events were slightly scaled down from previous ones, and invitations directed to the nearest regional teams to get them working together more rather than being open to anyone.

It is hoped that at least two MSEs can be run each year now, instead of alternate years. There is a growing onus to increase the amount of refresher training opportunities to Medics nationally and this is one of the ways in which we will be able to deliver it on a more regular basis alongside encouraging Area Coordinators to run stranding exercises or training sessions.





Operations update

The Large Whale Disentanglement Team continue to improve their skill sets and experience of members with regular training sessions throughout the year. The new recruits are coming along well and beginning to advance through the levels, and new equipment has been added to the inventory to improve training opportunities and response. A new van was purchased using funds granted by the Scottish Government Nature Restoration

Fund to replace the one damaged in a storm the previous winter, which has been modified and upgraded to suit its use and looks fantastic!





Operations update

Our Tim Bain Memorial Award winner for 2023 was Gem Simmons!

Gem was nominated by two people for her steadfast abilities as an Area Coordinator and long-time volunteer to do her very best for animal welfare and more recently building the team in North Wales into an effective response group. She has consistently demonstrated the values of BDMLR and spirit of this award in the way she works. Despite a number of personal challenges, she has come through everything thrown her way more determined than ever!





Projects

- **Common seal mouth rot investigation:** the team have had another busy data collection period, with 97 suspected cases recorded between June and September. Of those, 48% were euthanased and 43% went into rehabilitation. 32 of the cases which were euthanased contributed samples. Further funding secured from Defra this year means that we now have sufficient funds to process all of these in full, and the group is aiming to publish their first paper with their initial findings in 2024. At present a viral cause for the condition is still suspected, and further work is ongoing in the lab to confirm this- including the development of a lateral flow test which will be used to quickly determine if a live seal has any of the viruses of concern. BDMLR has contributed £1000 towards the development of the test.
- **Seal Alliance:** The coalition continued to work hard on the seal disturbance legislation and were able to secure a debate in the House of Commons, which was received well. This was led by Sue Sayer and Mary Tester with support from Sarah Olney MP who presented the debate to Parliament. An EFRA Committee report also recommended that this legislation be taken forward along with several other suggested improvements for wildlife legislation. This will hopefully strengthen the case for it to be made into law and speed up the timescale. Elsewhere the group has been pushing a campaign against the use of flying rings due to the number of seal entanglements and deaths occurring around the country, especially Norfolk.



Projects

- **Pinniped Entanglement Group:** we are represented on this international forum for rescue organisations to share new rescue techniques, raise awareness of the issue and find new collaborations. The network continues to grow via the developing website, newsletter and with partner organisations reaching out further to bring in new members.
- **Seal Rescue Conference:** the annual conference was hosted by Ecomare in The Netherlands and was attended by Julia, Natalie and Dan. Natalie gave two presentations: a case study of a chronic seal entanglement, and a common seal mouth rot update; whilst Dan presented on the Operation Seabird initiative.
- **European Cetacean Society:** this year's conference was held in O Grove, Spain, and was attended by Alan, Julia, Molly, Dan and Natalie. Two poster presentations were co-authored on walrus management (<https://bdmlr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ECS-poster-2023.pdf> and the Scottish Entanglement Alliance work (https://bdmlr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/EM_ECS-poster-2023_V2.pdf).



Projects

- **Dolphinaria-Free Europe:** Molly and Dan continue to be active members of the management committee, campaigning for the end of cetacean captivity. DFE draws awareness to how captivity impacts the welfare and wellbeing of cetaceans on a detrimental scale and participates in various events, petitions and proposals to prevent further breeding, transfer and capture worldwide and particularly Europe. Molly attended an event at the European Parliament in Brussels with several other members, where a policy brief and proposal was presented on the phasing out of dolphinaria in the EU to MEPs. This was live streamed and available to watch on Vimeo. A members meeting was also held to discuss future events and outreach to the newly-elected MEPs in September 2023 as the current contact is due to step down. 2023 saw the deaths of two captive orcas (Moana at Marineland Antibes and Lolita at Miami Seaquarium), which drew worldwide attention. The proposal of moving the remaining orcas from Marineland Antibes is a concern, and DFE supports campaigners to move them to an authentic seaside sanctuary as opposed to another marine park. In more positive news, a judge concluded that the owner of Attica Park in Greece was guilty of breaking the law for using animals for performances, which was prohibited in 2012. The owner was sentenced to eight months in prison, suspended. In March DFE celebrated the 30th anniversary of the UK's last dolphinaria closing down and continue to campaign for complete legal ban on captivity here.



Projects

- **Scottish Entanglement Alliance:** Since the project completed and published in 2021, activity has wound down aside from opportunities to promote the report and associated materials and maintain some contact between project partners. A spin off second scientific publication on humpback whale entanglements in Scottish creel fisheries was produced (<https://bdmlr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Leaper-R.-et-al-2022-minke-and-humpback-whale-entanglements-in-Scotland-compressed.pdf>). Plans are being made for a phase two of the SEA project in the background to continue the collaboration and advance the good progress made so far. Ellie (SEA), Bally (Scottish Creel Fisheries Federation) and Mariel (SMASS) in particular have been working hard to promote the project and have been attending conferences and collaborating with other organisations outside of the UK.
- **Media projects:**
 - BDMLR filmed a full day with Steve Backshall undergoing a Marine Mammal Medic course for his documentary series 'Whale' that aired late in the year. The charity was feature in two episodes, one covering strandings and the other a case study of 'Spirtle'.
 - As usual BDMLR was represented in news media around significant incidents on a local level, but occasionally also national and beyond. The large mass stranding on the Isle of Lewis resulted in several days' worth of global media coverage in the aftermath.





Research

We have supervised several research projects in 2023, as follows:

- **Michal Zatrak (PhD, University of Manchester)**: investigating stress and disease in seals (ongoing)
- **Ellie Barlow (MSc, University of Exeter)**: assessing the impacts of seal entanglement caused by plastic pollution in the UK (complete)
- **Freya Pellie (PhD, University of Teesside)**: post-industrial recovery of the harbour seal in the Tees estuary: population dynamics, connectivity and diet (ongoing)
- **George Jones (BSc, University of Exeter)**: an investigation into the location and reasons for grey seal rescues in Cornwall (completed)
- **Megan Harvey (MSc, University of Plymouth)**: investigating spatial and temporal trends in marine mammal callouts across the UK (completed)
- **Rachel Oldham (FdSc, Cornwall College)**: what proportion of seal rescues require hospitalisation and has there been an increase over the years?

Plus various smaller projects such as surveys, photography projects and interviews on a variety of subjects.



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