

E-MAIL FROM: John F. Robins, Company Secretary and Campaigns Consultant, Animal Concern, Post Office Box 5178, Dumbarton G82 5YJ. Tel. 01389-841-639, Mobile: 07721-605521.

E-MAIL: animals@jfrobin.force9.co.uk website: <http://www.animalconcern.org/>

Animal Concern is a pressure group registered as a non-profit making Limited Company (Co. No. SC109126) incorporated in 1988 as Animal Concern (Scotland) Ltd.

Animal Concern incorporates the Scottish Anti-Vivisection Society which was founded in 1876.

Ms Susan Davies,
Acting CEO,
Scottish Natural Heritage

Dear Ms Davies,

Please find below an e-mail I sent earlier today to HM Coastguard regarding low flying over seal colonies at the mouth of the River Ythan. I understand that the foreshore at the Ythan estuary is owned by SNH and/or managed by SNH as a wildlife reserve.

From reports I have received from local environmentalists the seal colony at the mouth of the Ythan is being subjected to frequent disturbance from people who do not realise the danger they pose to the seals and the risks they expose themselves to by walking up to the seals to take photographs. Several people have been seen flying camera drones right into the colony to take pictures. Others are walking their dogs through the seals.

As well as disturbing the seals, causing pups to be separated from their mothers earlier in the breeding season and by driving seals into the dunes where they can become trapped, these people are putting their own health at risk as they could be injured or receive potentially life threatening infections should they be bitten by a seal. Dog owners are not only putting their pets at risk but are also exposing the seals to diseases which can cross from dog to seal and vice versa.

I understand that information signage had been erected on the approaches to the beach but, either by storms or vandals, much of that has been displaced.

Save Our Seals Fund does not advocate totally closing areas like the Ythan estuary to the general public but it is vitally important that visitors are properly managed to avoid damage to the habitat and the animals which live there as well as stopping people putting themselves and their pet dogs at risk of injury.

I ask SNH to consider the situation at the Ythan and to implement some new strategies to improve the situation for both the animals which live there and the people who visit the area to see the wildlife. The most obvious improvement would be to re-instate signage and employ wardens to advise and control visitors to the area. There is surely potential for an

education centre and wildlife watching hide to allow people to see the seals and other wildlife without disturbing them. Perhaps a local by-law could be introduced to ban the flying of drones in the area?

Unless SNH take positive action quickly the situation is bound to deteriorate as visitor numbers increase during spring and summer.

Save Our Seals Fund would be willing to participate with SNH in any publicity aimed at explaining to the public the need for controlling access to the seal colony to ensure that both seals and seal watchers are protected.

Yours sincerely,

John F. Robins,
Secretary to Save Our Seals Fund

You can find more details about the situation at the Ythan (including photographs and videos) on this link: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/stoptheythansealcull/> If you have any problems accessing the site please let me know.

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HM Coastguard Operations
Bay 2/06
Spring Place
105 Commercial Road
Southampton
Hampshire SO15 1EG

Dear Sir or Madam,

We have had a report that at around 16.15hrs on Sunday 28th February a Coastguard search and rescue helicopter flew low over the sands at the mouth of the River Ythan. The aircraft approached from Hackley Head and was flying down the coast towards Aberdeen. I am told that it flew over the Ythan Estuary at around twenty to thirty feet above sea level.

The winchman was in the open door of the machine but eye-witnesses said no rescue or exercise took place in the area around the mouth of the Ythan.

Our concern is that there were as many as 1,000 seals hauled out on the sands at the time and the low flying helicopter caused a bit of a panic in the colony. Attached is a photo taken two days earlier showing how many seals were basking on the sands at that time.

These seals have been subjected to quite a bit of disturbance lately through visitors to the area trying to get very close to them to take selfies with them. On several occasions people have used camera drones to photograph the animals. Indeed earlier on Sunday afternoon a chap had been flying a drone in the same airspace used by your helicopter. I have attached a pic of the man with the drone which looks as though it could easily be a hazard to low-flying helicopters as well as to hauled-out seals.

There are many seal pups on the sands around the Ythan estuary and when disturbed some have been driven up into the sand dunes where they can become trapped.

About twenty years ago a helicopter carrying HRH Prince Charles disturbed a seal colony on Islay. I wrote to the Prince and he brought the issue of low flying aircraft over seal breeding colonies to the attention of the MOD. A few months ago, the day before he flew to the same area of Islay, Prince Charles had his pilot telephone me and between us we arranged a flight plan which avoided the seal colony.

Would it be possible for Coastguard helicopters to avoid low flying over sensitive areas such as seal breeding colonies when not engaged in search and rescue operations in the immediate area? There are two periods of the year where seal colonies are at special risk from disturbance. These are during and for a few weeks after the breeding and moulting seasons which cover the periods of mid-September to late April for Grey Seals and late June to mid-September for Common seals.

Your assistance in this matter would be much appreciated.

Yours faithfully,

John F. Robins,
Secretary to Save Our Seals Fund