

# AUSTRALIAN SEALION



notes

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There are five species of sealion worldwide and although they appear very similar to seals there are a few characteristics which separate the two families.

Sealions are able to walk on land by using their flippers like legs, unlike seals who are unable to do this, instead moving like caterpillars. Sealions also have visible external ears, seals have barely visible slits for ears.

The Adelaide Zoo displays the Australian Sealion. These sleek, marine animals are found only in Australian waters from Western Australia through to Kangaroo Island in South Australia. The greatest numbers are recorded at Seal Bay, Kangaroo

Island and Dangerous Reef off Port Lincoln, South Australia.

Adult females weigh up to 80kg and are 1.7-1.8 metres long. They have a grey to fawn upper body and a creamy underbelly, giving them a much more streamlined appearance than the males and making distinctions between the sexes easier. Young males resemble females until they are about 2 years of age when they begin to darken in colour and become bulkier.

Adult male sealions are called bulls and can weigh up to 300 kg. They measure 2-2.5 metres in length. Rich chocolate coloured fur covers their bulky but buoyant body. Hair forms a mane

around the neck and they have greyish markings on top of their head. The mane serves the important function of protection during the breeding season when males fight to protect their harem of females. They have strong, sharp canine teeth, which are capable of doing serious damage.

Pregnant females haul themselves up onto the beach 3 days prior to birth, and then spend 14 days after the birth feeding and protecting their new pup. At this time the mother sealion will leave the pup in a safe place on the beach while she enters the ocean to feed. She may be gone for a few hours or even a few days at a time. This will continue until around 8-10 months of age when the pup will accompany its mother on fishing trips and begin to eat solid food. Weaning takes place after one year or when the next pup is born.

The Australian Sealion gestation can be up to 18 months, which includes some periods of delayed implantation, that is the embryo lies within the uterus in 'suspended development' for a number of months before it begins normal growth. The exact length of time this suspended development lasts for is unknown.

The Adelaide Zoo is participating in ongoing research, collecting accurate records of captive sealion reproduction and their biology to learn more about these animals.

In the wild, sealions feed on fish, squid, crustaceans and bird life. Food is usually swallowed whole (only larger fish are chewed) enabling sealions to swim through schools of fish swallowing as many as possible without stopping. Researches examining dead sealions have found stones and pebbles in their stomach. Many theories have been put forward as to their purpose such as pups playing and accidentally swallowing them, to the sealions using the stones and kill

parasites in the gut. Others suggest that the stones are used as stabilisers to steady the sealion when swimming. However, the most popular and likely theory is that they assist in digestion by grinding up bones, squid beaks and hard shells in the stomach.

To assist them to feed in the ocean, sealions have some less obvious adaptations other than flippers and streamlined bodies. For example they have a layer of fat, called blubber, to protect them from the cold, especially in deep water. They can hold their breath for up to five minutes, more if they have to, while diving to depths of up to 100 metres. They have whiskers to feel the vibrations produced by their prey which assists in finding their food in the darkness.

Surprisingly, sealions are well camouflaged while at sea. From below they are difficult to see against a bright sky because of their light underbelly. When diving, their dark coloured back hides them in the dim light of deep water.

Humans pose a considerable threat to sealions. Earlier this century sealions were hunted for their meat and pelts. Many were slaughtered, as it was believed they interfered with fish catches. Although numbers became dangerously low they are now a protected species and over 12,000 are believed to exist. Other threats include oil spills, chemical dumping and floating debris such as old nets, fishing lines and even plastic bags. We need to be responsible for our litter and encourage others to do the same, thus doing our small part to keep our oceans and waterways clean and safe for its inhabitants.

The Adelaide Zoo houses sealions that have been rescued as orphans by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. A number of pups have been bred, many of which have been sent to other zoos. The sealions continue to be an active and exciting educational exhibit and are a popular favourite at the Zoo.

