H5 Bird Flu and Australian sea lions in South Australia

Government of South Australia
Department for Environment and Water

The Australian sea lion (*Neophoca cinerea*) is one of Australia's rarest marine mammals and are only found in Australia. South Australia supports approximately 85% of the global population, with important breeding colonies at Seal Bay, Dangerous Reef and The Pages.

Australian sea lions have an exceptionally slow reproductive rate. Females begin breeding at around six years of age and typically give birth to a single pup every 17–18 months, with pups dependent on their mothers for at least 18 months. Adults can live up to 25 years, with adult males typically weighing 200–300 kg and females 70–100 kg.

The species is an iconic part of South Australia's nature-based tourism, particularly on Kangaroo Island. Also, it holds significant cultural value, forming part of the Sea Country of Aboriginal Traditional Owners, as well being of scientific and educational value.

Conservation significance

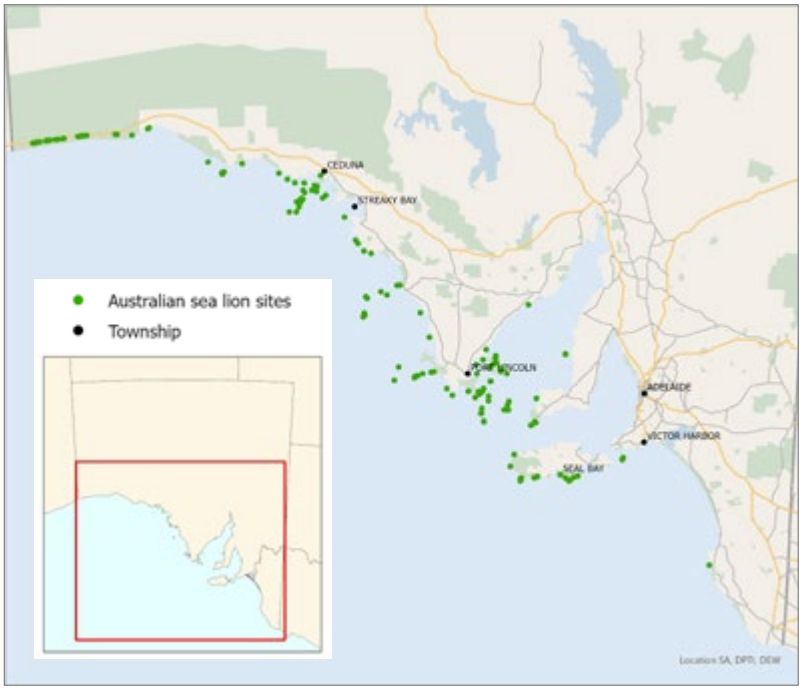
Australian sea lions are an important part of South Australia's marine environment and play a role as predators within coastal marine ecosystems. The Australian sea lion is listed as 'endangered' under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and 'vulnerable' under South Australia's *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*.

The species has an estimated population of only 10,000–12,000 individuals, distributed across approximately 80 breeding colonies and haul-out sites. Australian sea lions have experienced historical declines associated with sealing, fisheries interactions, parasites, habitat disturbance and other pressures. Reducing ongoing threats is important for building population resilience and supporting recovery should a significant disease event occur.





Australian Sea Lion sites



Susceptibility to H5 bird flu

H5 bird flu is a viral disease that primarily affects birds, but can also infect mammals, including seals and sea lions. Overseas, H5 bird flu has been detected in several seal species and has caused significant wildlife mortality events.

The Australian sea lion has a fragmented population, making it vulnerable to localised mortality events. Its colonial breeding behaviour and shared habitats with seabirds may increase its susceptibility to H5 bird flu outbreaks. Significant losses at individual colonies could have long-term consequences for the species. These colonies are often small, geographically isolated and situated on remote islands or coastlines, which can limit opportunities for surveillance and intervention. During the breeding season, the concentration of females and pups at colony sites may also increase the potential for disease transmission. Their distribution and biological characteristics present important challenges for disease preparedness and response. Consequently, the Australian sea lion is an important species for consideration in H5 bird flu preparedness, surveillance and response planning.

Management and resilience-building actions

Government agencies, researchers and conservation partners are working to improve preparedness and strengthen the resilience of Australian sea lion populations. Current activities include:

- long-term population monitoring
- satellite tracking, and ecological and behavioural research
- health monitoring and biological sampling
- treatment for parasites, increasing the survival rates of pups
- improving habitat such as trialling pup shelters
- marine debris removal and disentanglement programs
- supporting responsible tourism and fisheries management programs
- community reporting, biosecurity and compliance activities

Additional conservation, preparedness and recovery actions that may further strengthen the species' resilience to H5 bird flu include:

- enhanced remote surveillance and non-invasive monitoring technologies
- strengthened biosecurity within colonies
- restricting non-essential visitation during high-risk periods
- increased seabird surveillance near colonies
- colony prioritisation frameworks for response planning
- improved capability for carcass collection
- assessment of vaccination and insurance population feasibility
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Effective preparedness, response and recovery actions can help maintain healthy and resilient Australian sea lion populations, protect key breeding colonies and habitats, support ecosystem function and sustainable wildlife tourism, in the event of an H5 bird flu outbreak.

Sources are referenced in the H5 bird flu preparedness, response and recovery plan - Australian sea lion (Neophoca cinerea).

Access the latest information at www.birdflu.gov.au

or for South Australian specific information at www.birdflu.sa.gov.au

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