



# Our Seal Heritage

New Zealanders live in a country lacking native land mammals as they mainly evolved after the life raft that was to become New Zealand broke away from Gondwanaland. A number of marine mammals frequent our coastal waters but only fur seals are commonly seen. The trusting nature of seals, their playful antics and congregation in colonies often with easy access or near population centres arouse great public interest. They are a source of wonderment for children and overseas visitors alike.

Records show that enormous numbers of seals were killed in early European times.

The first commercial sealing gang was dropped off at Dusky Sound in 1792 and took 4,500 skins. During one season prior to 1815, more than 100,000 seals were reported taken from Macquarie Island.

The Government officially halted fur sealing in 1894 but issued restricted licences for sealing on Campbell Island between 1913-1916 and 1922-24.

In 1946 the Government bowed to pressure from fishers complaining of seals threatening their livelihood and declared an open season from 1 June to 30 September around parts of the southern South Island, Stewart Island and surrounding islands.

Since that latest slaughter which claimed over 6,000 seals, desperate fishers have occasionally revived calls for a seal cull, but overfishing, not seal predation, is clearly behind dwindling fish catches.

This year's disastrous fur seal catch in the hoki grounds has prompted the Department of Conservation to carry out a census of the population this summer. Over the years the national population has been steadily increasing but estimates of the total number are largely guesswork. What is certain is that the West Coast population will be depleted for years to come as a result of this year's seal slaughter.

*From 1792 seals were the indiscriminate target of ruthless sealers. However, so rapacious was the industry that sealing had become uneconomic by the early 1800s. Engraving by Alfred de Neuville published in 1875 in F.E. Raynal's Wrecked on a Reef.*