

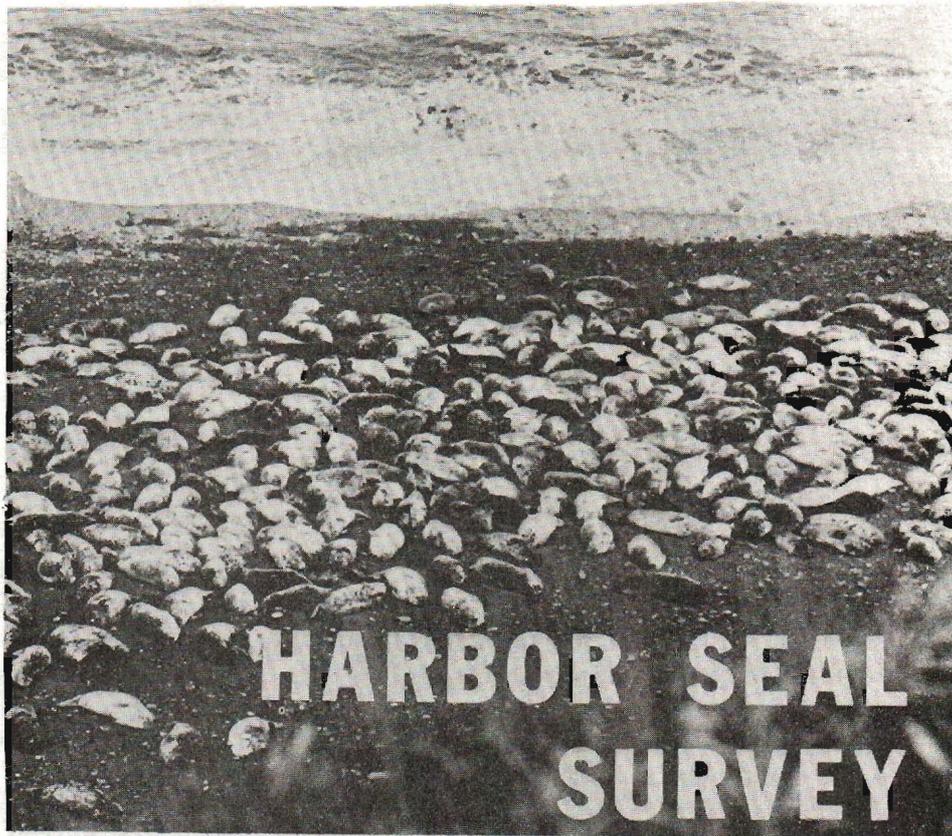
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DURING LATE MAY and early June, thousands of harbor seals gather at pupping rookeries along the coast of Alaska's Kenai Peninsula.

Information gathered from aerial surveys and interviews with commercial seal hunters since 1966 has pinpointed the locations of many of these rookeries, which are often located at the heads of bays. Although Fish and Game Department biologists have located the major concentrations of seals during the summer months, relatively little is known of the seals' winter population distributions.

In an effort to learn more about the distribution of the harbor seal in these areas adjacent to major population centers, the Fish and Game Department began aerial surveys along the southern tip of the Kenai Peninsula in June, 1970. The purpose of these surveys--which covered the area between Cape Junken and Seldovia Bay--was to learn more about harbor seal winter distributions and to determine the effects, if any, of both commercial and recreational seal hunting.

Surveys were flown in June and July to locate pupping areas along the peninsula. Additional surveys were flown in August, October, November, January and April. Major concentrations of seals were always located at the heads of Harris Bay, Aialik Bay and Nuka Bay. During June and July, two large herds were hauled out at Cape Fairfield and on the Chugach Islands. Several herds of 15 to 25 seals were also found throughout Whidbey Bay, Day Harbor and Port Dick during June and July. These herds contained pups as well.



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After July, the seals at Cape Fairfield and the Chugach Islands had dispersed. Very few seals were seen in the area between Cape Junken and Resurrection Bay after September. Small groups of five to ten seals were observed hauled out at Day Harbor in January. Seals were widely scattered from Aialik Bay to Rocky Bay and seldom were in herds of more than 10 animals. Lone individuals were more common in October, November and January. Seals were rarely seen from Chugach Bay to Seldovia Bay even during the pupping season.

More than half of the 7,000 seals observed during the surveys were located around pupping areas in June. The widespread dispersal of these animals during the nonpupping and nonbreeding seasons accounted for the low numbers seen during later surveys. Except in bays containing glaciers, few large concentrations of seals were seen along the entire survey route after August.

The pupping rookeries at Cape Fairfield and the Chugach Islands are relatively inaccessible to both the

commercial and recreational hunter because of rough seas and rocky cliffs in the immediate area. Recreational hunting in Aialik, Harris and Nuka bays is limited by the distances required to travel over open water in small boats from Seward or Homer.

Commercial hunting from larger boats in the aforementioned bays has produced harvests of up to 600 seal pups. However, continual shooting drives the seals from these areas and hunting is usually profitable for only a short period of time.

At present, neither the recreational nor the commercial seal hunter is a management problem on the Kenai Peninsula. Continued surveys, especially during the pupping season, will always be a requirement to insure the continued existence of the harbor seal along the Kenai coast. ■

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