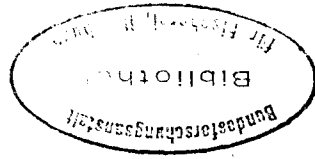


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International Council for
the Exploration of the sea

C.M. 1981/N: 11
Marine Mammals Committee

Observation, catch and release of a walrus (*Odobenus
rosmarus*) on the Isle of Ameland, Dutch Wadden Sea.

by

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Abstract

For the third time this century, in spring 1981, a walrus was sighted in the Dutch Wadden Sea. The animal was caught and housed temporarily at the Research Institute for Nature Management, at the isle of Texel. It was a male, 220 cm in nose - tail length, with tusks of 10 cm and apparently five years old. The animal was released at Helgoland (54° 13' 30'' N, 07° 56' E.L.) on the 9th of April and for the last time sighted at Skagen, North of Denmark, on the 28th of May. The animal was marked with yellow and green paint on its back.

Résumé

Au printemps 1981, c'était pour la troisième fois en ce siècle qu'un morse était observé sur la côte de la Mer des Wadden hollandaise. L'animal, un mâle a 220 cm de long, des défenses de 10 cm et était apparemment âgé de cinq ans. Il était capturé et hébergé temporairement à l'Institut Gouvernemental de la Ménagement de la Nature, à Texel, Pays Bas. L'animal était repatrié au 9^{ème} avril près d'Helgoland (54° 13' 30'' N, 07° 56' L.E.) et observé finalement le 28^{ème} mai sur la côte de Skagen, Danemarke du Nord. L'animal était marqué sur le dos avec de la peinture vert et jaune.

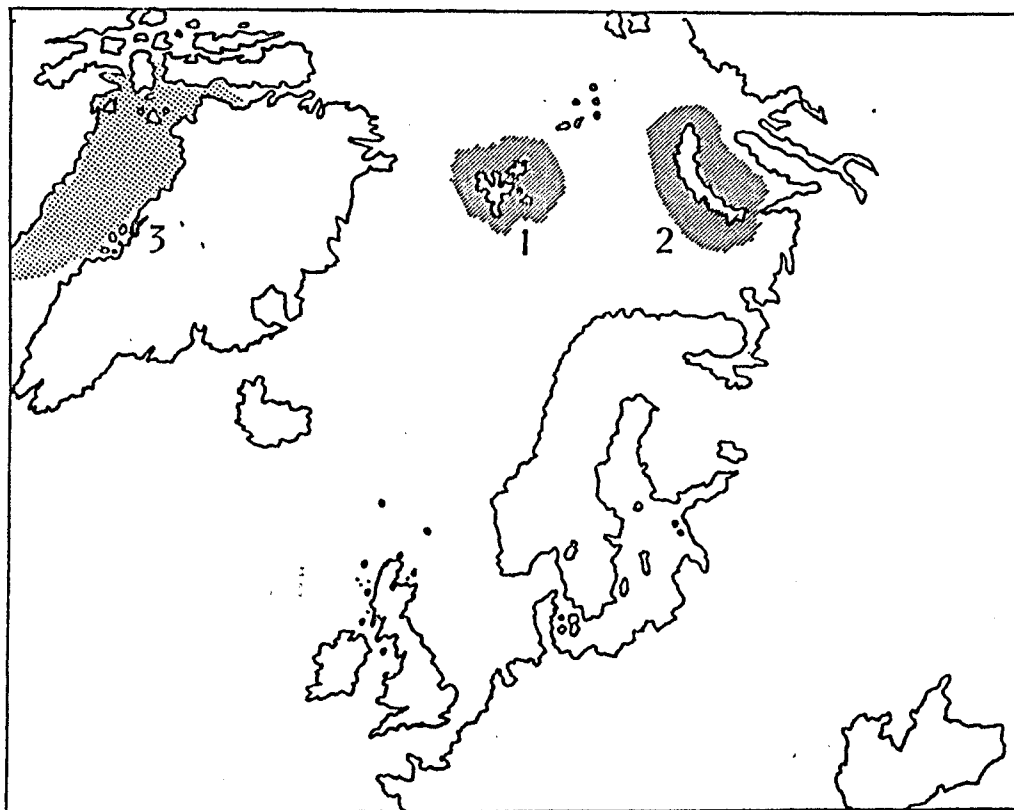


Fig. 1. Distribution of the Atlantic stock of Odobenus rosmarus. 1: Spitsbergen; 2: Novaya Zemlya; 3: Greenland.

The total world population of *Odobenus rosmarus* is estimated at about 250,000 specimens. Due to heavy hunting it became an endangered species but nowadays it enjoys a world wide protection. Only eskimo hunters are allowed to shoot them but some sell their license to sport hunters. In spite of this negative aspect it is assumed that the total numbers remained fairly stable during the last decennium. Roughly two stocks can be distinguished: the Atlantic stock: (Greenland area, Spitsbergen and Novaya Zemlya) and the Pacific: (Bering Sea area), the former consisting of around 30,000 and the latter 220,000 animals (Fig.1).

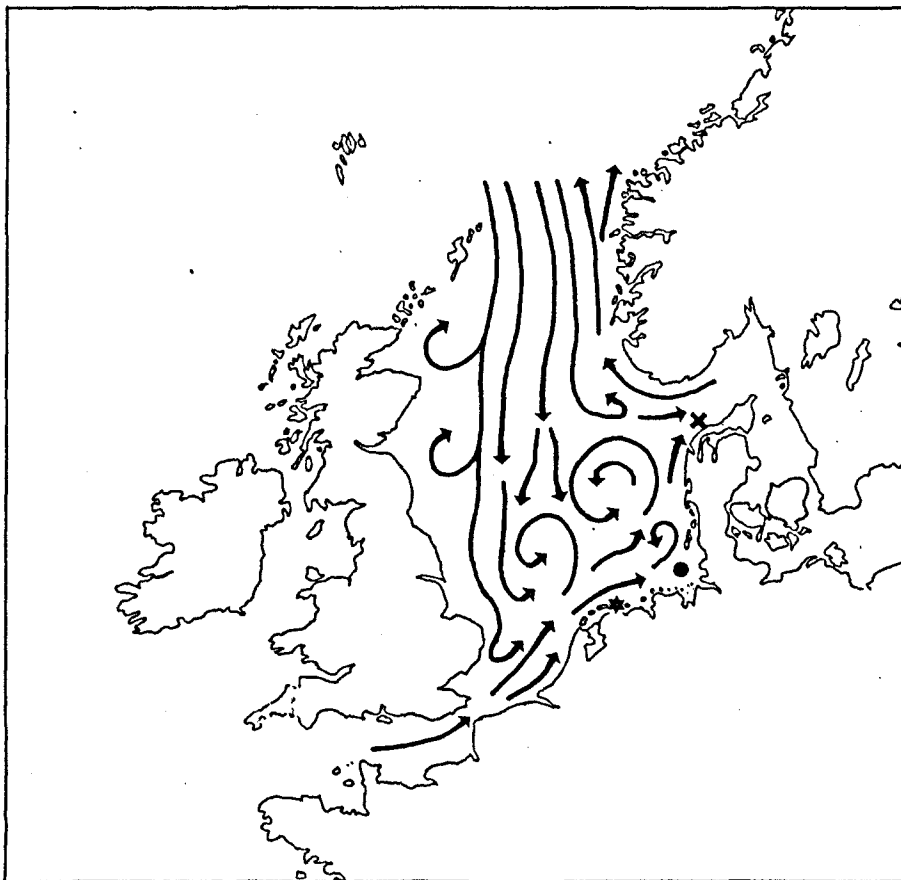


Fig. 2. Map of the northern North Sea showing the places where the walrus was observed and residual current pattern. place of capture ★ - Ameland; place of release ● - Helgoland × - last sighting.

The walrus is a shelf-bound species and therefore it is believed that the animals which sometimes occur in the North Sea probably originated from the Novaya Zemlya region. The fact that they could have drifted away from Spitsbergen cannot be excluded. Anyway they are always observed during the winter periods when the pack ice is at its Southern-most point. It is still unknown why these animals become separated from their main herd but it is not uncommon as can be deduced from the fact that each year a few sightings off the Norwegian coast are reported (Tørger Øritsland, Bergen, pers. comm.).

The observation of a walrus on the Dutch Wadden Sea coast in 1981 was only the third one ever reported. The first observation was in 1926 and the second one in 1978.

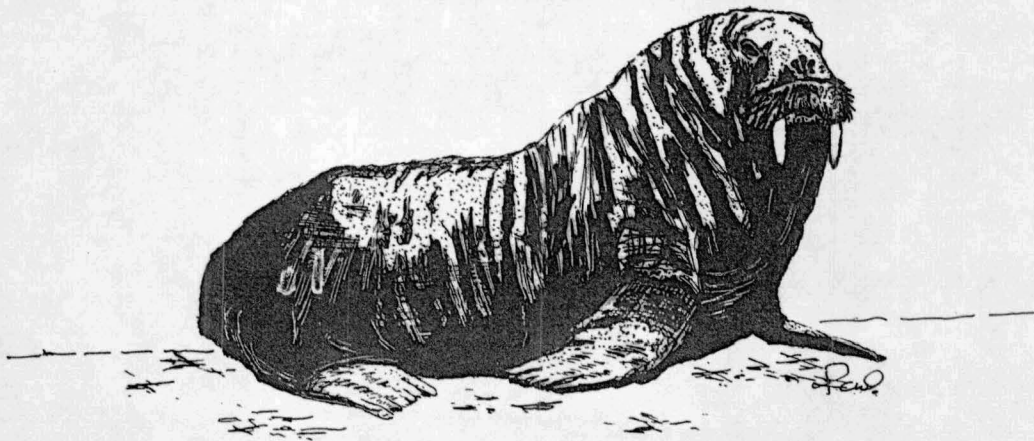
The animal was sighted for the first time on the North Sea side of the islands Ameland and Terschelling (see fig. 2). After a couple of weeks, it finally entered the Wadden Sea, and unfortunately was caught with a net on the Ameland mud flats on the 27th of March. First it was transported by a truck, via the ferry to the Seal Nursery Station at Pieterburen. As the animal began to recover from the stress caused by capture and transport, it became painfully obvious that the basins were too small for an animal of that size, to be kept at the station. It was therefore decided to transport the animal to the Research Institute for Nature Management on the island of Texel, where apart from the facilities where 32 seals are being temporarily held, also three major open water storage tanks each 40 x 40 x 4 meter were available. The animal was placed into one of these tanks, where running seawater was available, but it soon became obvious that the animal was not partial to swimming, and preferred to lie down. Therefore for the duration of his stay, the tank was kept virtually empty.

The animal, a male, about 220 cm in nose to tail length and both tusks about 10 cm, was apparently five years old. It weighed about 400 kg and, although having a lean appearance seemed not to be in a bad condition. Because of its rather good state of health it was decided to repatriate it as soon as possible. Meanwhile, feeding was attempted but all efforts failed until we discovered that with about 30 centimeters of water in the tank the animal could rest and was also willing to eat for the first time on the 3rd of April. The animal consumed from then on about 40 kilograms of mussels and a single mackerel per day. Also during its journey from the far North and in the North Sea it must have found some nourishment because it defecated on its arrival on Texel. The faeces was solid and did not resemble that from starved marine mammals which have started to break down their fat depot. The plans for its repatriation were first focused on the possibilities to release it as near as possible to those areas where a residential stock occurs. No permission could be obtained to release the animal on Greenland or Spitsbergen because of a faint suspicion for rabies. Then it was decided to release it in the North Sea and because of its weakness, it would probably travel more or less passively with the existing residual currents (Fig. 2) along the coast of Denmark and Norway and further north.

After the necessary land and sea transportation the animal was released on the 9th of April at Helgoland (54° 13' 30'' N, 56' E.L.) after being marked with green and yellow paint upon its back.

The walrus was observed regularly around Helgoland until the 20 th of May and on the 25 th of May the first observation came from an area 100 km north of Esbjerg, Denmark where it was observed resting on the beach. Finally it was sighted three days later near Skagen, the northern point of Denmark.

It is a start but a very long way back to the polar region.



The Walrus (impression by Rick Nichols).