

Reports of sea lion shootings on rise in Calif.

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(AP) -- The weak and woozy California sea lion found on a San Francisco Bay-area beach in December with buckshot embedded in its skull has become an all-too-common sight for wildlife officials.

Wildlife officials have seen a slight rise in the shooting of ocean mammals in recent years, and investigators often struggle to find a culprit. There are few witnesses to such shootings, making it nearly impossible to bring a case.

"We always try to do an investigation, but unless there's an eyewitness to the shooting it's hard to make a case for our enforcement folks," said Joe Cordaro, a wildlife biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who tracks reports of the shootings.

The NOAA said there were 43 reported [marine mammal](#) shootings in 2009 in the waters off the California coast - nine more than in 2008 and 14 more than five years earlier. Of the reported shootings in 2009, all were sea lions. And officials say many more cases likely go unreported.

Wildlife officials say [sea lion](#) and human populations continue to increase, making interaction more common, especially among fishermen who compete for the same food and often view the creatures as a nuisance.

Though NOAA and the California Department of Fish and Game are responsible for investigating these cases, few cases result in prosecution. Recent public outcry over highly publicized cases like that of the

wounded sea lion near San Francisco have brought more attention to these shootings.

Veterinarians at the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito, Calif., are treating the wounded critter in the hope an aquarium or zoo will take it. The 7-foot-long male, dubbed Silent Knight by its rescuers, is now blind and cannot return to the wild.

When there is a witness, there usually is a case. A witness came forward after the 2009 shooting of a 650-pound sea lion nicknamed Sgt. Nevis was covered by local press and television.

Larry Legans of Sacramento was ordered to pay more than \$51,000 in restitution for the cost of treating the critter, who recently underwent plastic surgery at Six Flags Discovery Kingdom to close bullet holes in its muzzle. Legas also spent a month in jail and got five years probation.

Lt. Rob Roberts, a warden with state Fish and Game Department, said the agency takes marine mammal shootings very seriously, and noted that reports have increased in kind with the growth of the sea lion population along the Northern [California](#) coast.

Roberts hopes successful prosecutions and intense media coverage of cases like Legans' will help.

"If the general public sees that there's recourse and accountability, that's a deterrent," Roberts said.

The Marine Mammal Center, where Silent Knight is being treated along with hundreds of ocean animals suffering a variety of ailments, has treated nine gunshot victims in 2010. The center treated 18 in 2009, down from a high of 72 sea lions in 1992, when the center started keeping statistics.

While the number of mammals treated for gunfire wounds has trended downward at the center over the decades, in recent years it has begun to creep back the other way, statistics show.

On Monday, more than 400 people came to see Silent Knight during the center's visiting hours, fascinated by the plight of the wounded pinniped, said Jeff Boehm, the center's executive director.

The center tries to help wardens in the investigations by determining the kind of weapon that were used and how long an animal has been wounded. For now, the center will work to try and get Silent Knight healthy, and ready to live in captivity.

"We've seen over 1,000 patients in 2010, and of that number only nine were shooting victims, a small fraction," said Boehm, whose center studies and treats animals that have been injured by fishing nets, disease or environmental hazards like pollution.

"But it's dramatic, because (shootings) are entirely unnecessary situations."

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