

Sub-Antarctic fur seal found in unexpected waters

July 27 2015, by Sarah Rakowski



The discovery of a sub-Antarctic fur seal on the northern coast of Kenya – 210 km outside the species' normal range – has caused great excitement among conservationists and community members alike.

A fisherman working in Kiunga Marine National Reserve on Kenya's northern coast got a surprise on a recent trip when he pulled in his net to find a large mammal entangled within it.

The perplexed crew had never seen anything like it, and dubbed the creature a 'sea dog'. But what to do about it? Should they cut it from the

net and throw it back to sea in an unknown state of health? Should they save their net and just kill it?

After a short deliberation, the crew decided that the best course of action would be to seek help from a team of conservationists and rangers they knew to be working in their community.

Once ashore, the animal was identified as an adult male sub-Antarctic fur seal. Part of the family Otariidae (or 'eared seals'), this species is actually more closely related to sea lions than to true seals.

As its name implies, the sub-Antarctic fur seal is more commonly found in the southern parts of the Indian, Pacific, and Atlantic Oceans, and this is the first time it has ever been recorded in Kenya.

In fact, [according to the Nature Conservancy](#), this individual was found an astounding 210 km further north than any other record for this species.

Experts believe the fur seal's record-breaking swim may in part be due to burgeoning numbers; however climate change could also be playing a role, with warming seas in the species' usual range possibly causing individuals to explore new areas in search of food and cooler waters.



Sub-Antarctic fur seal. Credit: Kiplimo

Committed to conservation

Although finding oneself entangled in a net is not the best day in anyone's book, the vagrant fur seal was lucky to be caught in this area.

Fauna & Flora International (FFI) has been working with the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), NRT-Coast and other partners including The Nature Conservancy, the Kenyan County and State Department of Fisheries, Kenya Wildlife Service and other government and local organisations to help communities on the northern coast of Kenya sustainably manage their marine and coastal resources.

The goal of this work is to ensure that communities can continue to earn a living while also protecting the rich marine environment upon which they depend.

The challenge is to empower those responsible for managing their coastal waters with the ecological knowledge they need to protect vulnerable areas, and the necessary legal authority to enforce rules.

To achieve this, NRT-Coast (a satellite NRT centre based in Lamu) is currently supporting six coastal community conservancies at Kiunga, Pate, Awer, Ishaqbini, Ndera, Lower Tana Delta and Hanshak-Nyongoro.

In Kiunga and Pate Community Conservancies, FFI and partners are helping to develop Beach Management Units (BMU) – community-based organisations that bring together fishers to work with the government and other stakeholders to manage fisheries and improve local livelihoods.



Communities were both fascinated and enthralled with their unusual visitor.
Credit: Ali Bwana

Each conservancy has several BMUs that have jurisdiction over a particular area, with approved by-laws that complement national fisheries legislation and guide the development of the conservancy's constitution.

BMU members have been trained in fisheries and coastal resource management, conflict resolution and financial management. Meanwhile, the communities are in the process of developing co-management plans for their wider conservancy.

FFI has been a strong supporter of NRT over the last 10 years, offering not only financial resources but also targeted technical support towards

the development of the organisation and the conservancies it supports.

Local celebrity



The fur seal swims away, unharmed. Credit: Kiplimo

The discovery of a seal in this area highlights the importance of the Kiunga Marine National Reserve, while its subsequent rescue shows how well the conservancy model can work in imparting knowledge and skills to communities.

Not only did the fishing crew opt to seek help from the [conservationists](#) and rangers within the community (rather than choosing a simpler, more brutal, solution), but the animal also found itself something of a celebrity

when it was brought ashore.

Perhaps nothing says more about the enthusiasm Kiunga's people have for their conservancy and its wildlife than the fact that they held an impromptu blessing ceremony for their visitor before sending it on its way, unharmed by its experience.

Provided by Fauna & Flora International

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