Understanding Fur Seal Behaviour and Advice for Interactions

The Antarctic Fur Seal (*Arctocephalus gazella*), once hunted to near extinction, has seen a dramatic rebound in its numbers, now exceeding 5 million individuals worldwide, with over 95% using South Georgia as a breeding site. Fur seals are highly mobile on land and in water, and can be extremely aggressive during the breeding season (November – January). In the, late summer (February - April), females and pups move away from the beaches up into the tussock, often a surprising way inland. When surprised by human visitors, they can be easily startled and are likely to show an aggressive response.

It is important to note the special nature of fur seals: Both behaviour and numbers of fur seals on a landing beach should be considered when planning an excursion.

Every individual is different, and each interaction with fur seals needs to be judged as such. The below descriptions have been compiled from Field Staff and Fur Seal Biologists to help assist field staff and passengers make the best possible choice when interacting with fur seals.

When at all possible, Operator's should have no more than a minor or transitory impact when landing on a beach where fur seals are present.

Understanding general fur seal behaviour:

- Fur seals can travel much more quickly than humans over loose or slippery terrain.
- Fur seals can move extremely quickly on land, but are not able to stop quickly: be sure to give a galloping fur seal plenty of room.

- Be aware of behaviour that indicates a seal has been alerted to another presence – animal or human. Such behaviours include, but are not limited to:
  - An increase in alertness or vigilance,
  - Head turning,
  - Change in posture from lying to erect,
  - Hurried movement in any direction, including moving into another fur seal's "territory" or towards visitors,
  - Open mouth threat displays, snorting or whimpering,
  - Aggressive displays or bluff charges.
- When any of the above behaviours are observed, be especially alert.
- Often males give more warning when on the defense, whereas females and pups may bite first and then run away.
- Pups are often left alone while the mother is out at sea feeding. Single pups are not abandoned.

Understanding fur seal behaviour during the breeding season:

- During the breeding season (November – January) fur seals are especially sensitive to human presence, sight and smell. Human presence near harems may illicit an extremely aggressive response from either females or males.
- During the breeding season, males will arrive on the beaches first and set up territories, generally five square meter areas which they will defend forcefully, especially when females begin coming ashore and start to pup.
- Fur seals know the boundaries of their own territory, but these boundaries are not easily distinguishable to the visitor. There is always a risk of disrupting these territorial boundaries when landing. Care should be taken to stick to the periphery of seal congregations as much as possible.

- Fur seals which are disturbed will move into other territories, disturbing harems, causing fights between seals, and risk harm to self and/or other seals - especially pups. This movement can create a domino effect where seals then move and disturb molting penguins or other wildlife.
- When walking onshore during breeding season, harems require larger buffer zones – single seals may require less distance, but circumstances are variable and should be assessed for each scenario.

- When at all possible, do not disturb or surround harems – groups of females (with or without accompanying pups) and one dominant male.
- At congested breeding beaches during the height of the season, it may not be possible to land due to the sheer number of seals and forceful defense of territories. Zodiac cruising is often a preferably option to protect the seals and visitors alike.

Viewing fur seals when on land:

- **Follow the instructions of your leaders. They want you to have the safest and best possible experience.**
- Avoid sudden movements and or eye contact on land or in boats that might frighten the fur seals.
- On beaches, avoid getting between fur seals and the sea: walk 'above' them.
- Be aware fur seals are highly mobile on land and might charge (and potentially bite) if approached too closely: Keep an "escape" path open in case a hasty retreat from a charging seal is needed.
- When moving near large numbers of fur seals, travel as a group as quickly and quietly as possible.
- Do not lie down in the vicinity of adult fur seals, especially bulls.
- If any individual(s) move toward or have a hurried entry into the water, you should retreat slowly and carefully.
- Fur seal pups are often very inquisitive and may approach close to passengers. Do not touch or entice fur seal pups. Although small, pups can cause injuries.
- Stay away from jousting bull fur seals.
- Be aware of animals in tussock grass, a field guide should lead carrying walking stick or equivalent to keep the seal at a distance.

- When in tussock covered areas, where seals cannot see visitors and visitors cannot see seals, it is advisable to maintain a regular noise level so the animals are altered to human presence and not startled inadvertently, which could lead to an aggressive response.
- Fur seals have noxious bacteria in their mouths, which can quickly cause infections. Any fur seal bites should be examined by a medical professional, and thoroughly cleaned and monitored – the smallest scratch can become infected.