

# Marine and Coastal Wildlife Disturbance in Cornwall

Summary report compiled by Cornwall Wildlife Trust on behalf of the Cornwall Marine and Coastal Code Group (CMCCG).

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2021



**Cornwall  
Wildlife Trust**



**Cornwall Marine  
& Coastal Code  
Group**



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## PHOTO CREDITS:

Many thanks to Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust, RSPB, Looe Island Wardens, British Divers Marine Life Rescue.



# Executive summary



Records of marine and coastal wildlife disturbance events have been collated in Cornwall by the Cornwall Marine and Coastal Code Group's (CMCCG) disturbance register since 2014.

Reports are submitted to the database from the public by a 24 hour hotline 0345 2012626.

The number of reported disturbance events in Cornwall has nearly tripled in the last 6 years between 2014 and 2020.

There is a clear seasonal peak in August, which coincides with the peak visitor season in Cornwall.

Coastal users/walkers were the top cause of marine disturbance during 2014-2020, followed by tripper boats and paddle sports.



Privately owned leisure boats are the biggest threat to cetaceans in Cornish waters. Coastal users/walkers are a key sector to engage with in relation to disturbance of seals and sea birds.

A series of recommendations are presented at the end of this report, suggesting actions and measures which would better tackle marine wildlife disturbance in Cornwall.



# Introduction

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Records of marine and coastal wildlife disturbance events have been collated in Cornwall by the Cornwall Marine and Coastal Code Group's (CMCCG) disturbance register since 2014.

The aim of this report is to review the marine and coastal wildlife disturbance events between 2014-2020, to describe any trends in spatial and temporal distributions of disturbance incidents. The report will also investigate the key causes of disturbance to the three main animal groups most affected — cetaceans, seals and seabirds.

The results of this summary report will allow for recommendations to be made for targeted intervention to mitigate against marine and coastal wildlife disturbance in Cornwall.

It should be noted that due to the high number of contributions from the Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust's dedicated seal disturbance surveys, the data are heavily skewed towards this animal group and their known haul-out locations. Nevertheless, the information is still highly valuable to help determine which coastal user groups any targeted intervention should be aimed at.

For detailed information on marine and coastal wildlife disturbance and its impact on the environment and species, please see CMCCG website where an extensive collection of resources is available - [www.cornwallmarinelifecode.org.uk](http://www.cornwallmarinelifecode.org.uk)



# The Issue of Disturbance



Cornwall's coastal and marine wildlife, so essential to our economy, is under pressure from climate change, habitat loss, less available food, pollution and human activity... **it needs our help and respect.**

**Disturbance causes a change in animal behaviour.** Disturbance affects the animal's well-being and chance of survival. When disturbed, stress levels are raised, fight and flight (or freeze) response is triggered, heart rate increases, breathing rate increases, rest and digest is disrupted, energy is wasted, injury or death can occur when fleeing, abandoning young and separation from group can occur leading to starvation or predation of those left alone.



The **Cornwall Marine and Coastal Code** aims to minimise the negative effect on marine and coastal wildlife from encounters with people, by raising awareness of potential impacts, and promoting best practice through engaging with the public and industry.



# Cornwall Marine and Coastal Code Group

Cornwall's Marine and Coastal Code Group (CMCCG) aims to reduce the pressures on marine and coastal wildlife resulting from increasing recreational use of our coast and seas, and raise awareness of the issue of disturbance to wildlife across all sectors and audiences.

Membership of the group includes the following:



CMCCG recognised the need to record disturbance incidents to understand the issue better and focus limited resources and time to where it is needed. In response to this, a disturbance register was created to capture and quantify information reported from the public, to be able to analyse and map the extent and complexity of disturbance events across Cornwall.

This helps to identify where targeted work with specific user groups is required to resolve issues and promote responsible use of the marine environment. This report has been created using the data from this register.



# CMCCG Disturbance Register

Disturbance events are reported to the CMCCG via a 24 hour hotline: 0345 2012626. This hotline is linked to the CMCCG disturbance register, which is held on behalf of the Group by Cornwall Wildlife Trust and consists of information from the general public detailing disturbance incidents in Cornwall. Data is also made available from members of the CMCCG partnership through specific survey work and volunteer activity, and is uploaded to the register periodically. The register includes information on the date and location of the disturbance incident, details of who was involved, which species was affected, and how. The register also includes information on what action was taken and whether the incident was escalated.

Single point of contact for all reports of marine and coastal disturbance

**0345 201 2626**

Public passes information to hotline

Database held by hotline coordinator with information on :

- Date and time of event
- Specific location
- Information about the species and number of animals involved
- Activity causing disturbance
- Severity
- Affect on species
- Actions and outcomes

Date of incident	Location	Latitude	Longitude	Reporter's name and contact	Animal group affected	Species	Number	Disturbance Type (Observed / Perceived / Potential)	Level (1: Limited / 2: Severe but not illegal / 3: potentially illegal)	Witness account	Cause	Details of who was involved	Affect on species	Notes	Site owner	Designation

Cause	Details
Aircraft (helicopter, plane, glider, microlight)	
Angler(s)	
Boat (fishing)	
Boat (leisure)	
Boat (tripper)	
Coastal user/walker(s)	
Coasteering	
Dog/Dog walker(s)	

Affect on species	Number
Abandonment of nest/young	
Dispersed/scattered pod	
Displaced from area	
Displacement or crash dive L3	
Distress/abnormal behaviour	
Injury and/or death	
Multiple	
None observed	



# Potential Causes of Disturbance

Using information compiled from the register, we have categorised the potential causes for marine and coastal disturbance in Cornwall into the following groups.

For more detailed information on the top causes of disturbance, please see page 10 - 11



- **Aircraft (helicopter, plane, micro-light)**
- **Angler**
- **Boat (fishing)**
- **Boat (leisure)**
- **Boat (survey)**
- **Boat (tripper) - business**
- **Coastal user/walker**
- **Coasteering**
- **Lifeboat**
- **Jetski**
- **Natural disturbance**
- **Other (ballistics, firearms/bird scarers, organised events etc.)**
- **Photographers**
- **Rescue**
- **Paddle sports (kayak/canoel paddleboard)**
- **Surveyors**
- **Swimmer/snorkeler/surfer**
- **Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV/drone)**





# Disturbance Events in Cornwall

## 2014-2020

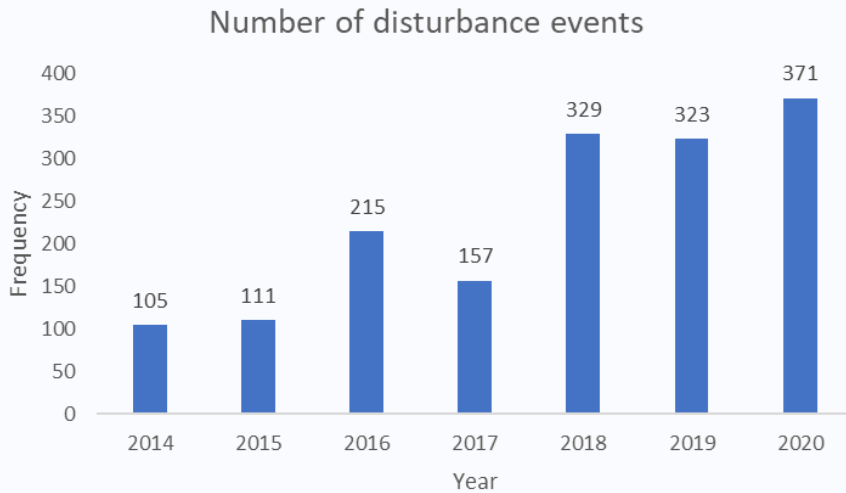


Fig 1. Frequency of reported marine wildlife disturbance events in Cornwall between 2014-2020. Reports have increased over time, likely due to increased public awareness and recording effort, which is reflected in the rise in incidents.

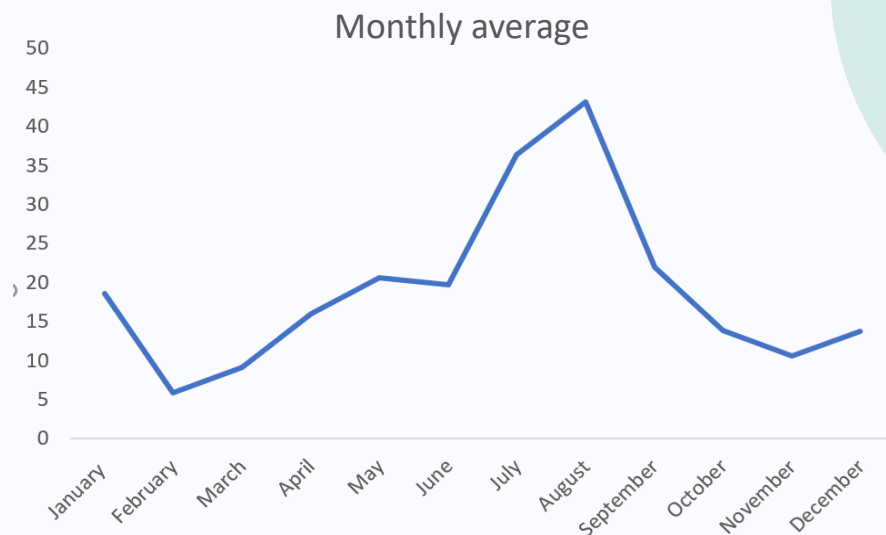


Fig 2. Monthly average of reported marine wildlife disturbance events in Cornwall between 2014-2020. Reports increase steadily from February to June. There is then a steep increase in reports around July and August, during the peak tourist season before decreasing from September onwards.

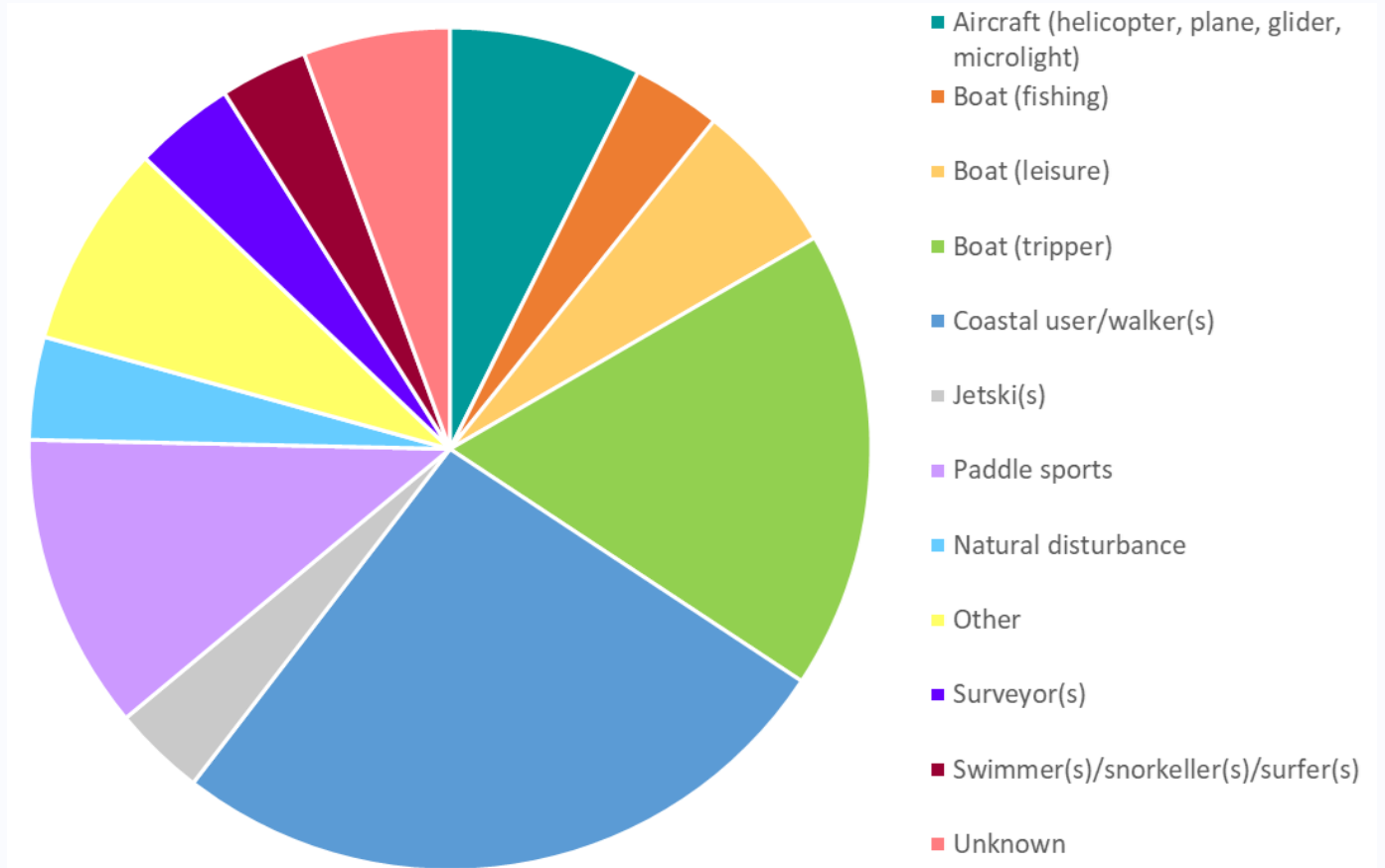
The number of reported disturbance events in Cornwall has tripled in the last 6 years between 2014 and 2020.

It should also be noted, however, that during this period, there has been a substantial effort to improve public awareness of how to report wildlife crime and disturbance incidents and as such, recorder effort is also likely to have greatly increased.

Looking at the monthly average of reported disturbance events, there is a clear seasonal peak in July and August, which coincides with the peak visitor season in Cornwall.

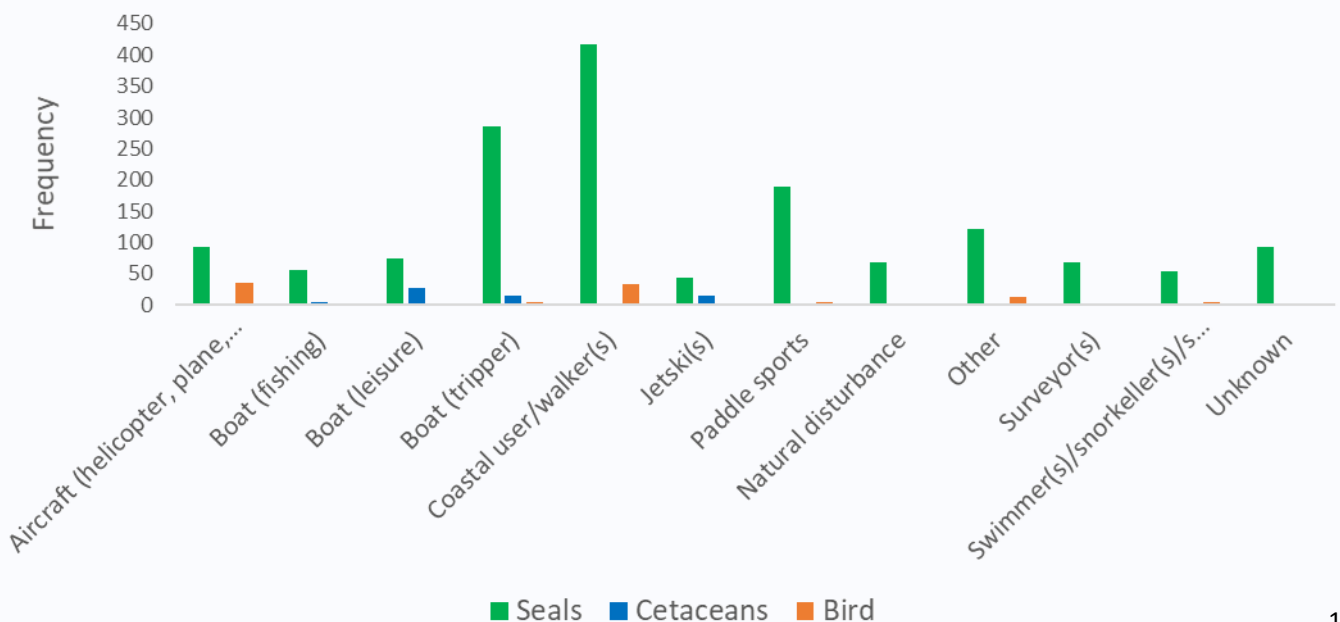


# Causes of Marine Wildlife Disturbance



For representative purposes, some categories of cause have been grouped together in 'other' due to their low frequency without significantly affecting the proportions, to better display the data in this format.

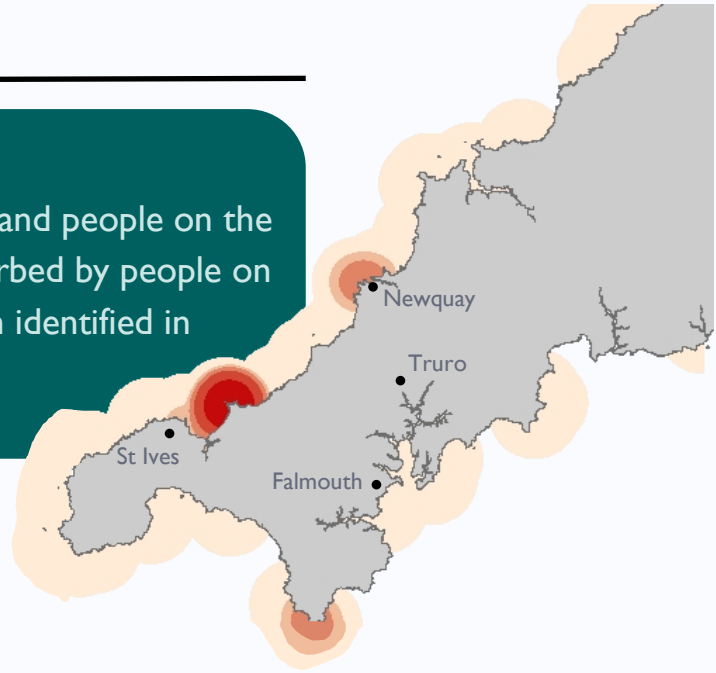
There are a wide range of causes of marine disturbance, presented in this pie chart, impacting marine and coastal wildlife in Cornwall. Coastal users/walkers were the top cause of marine disturbance during 2014-2020, followed by tripper boats and paddle sports.



# Top 3 Causes of Disturbance and Location

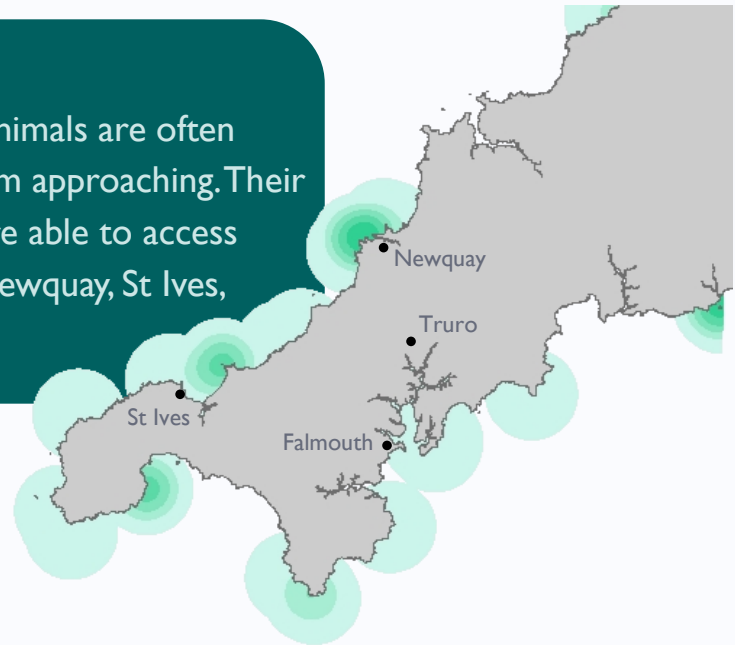
## 1. Coastal user/walker

This includes cliff and coastal walkers, dog walkers and people on the beach. Seals and seabirds are most frequently disturbed by people on the cliffs and on beaches. Three hotspots have been identified in Newquay, St Ives, and the Lizard.



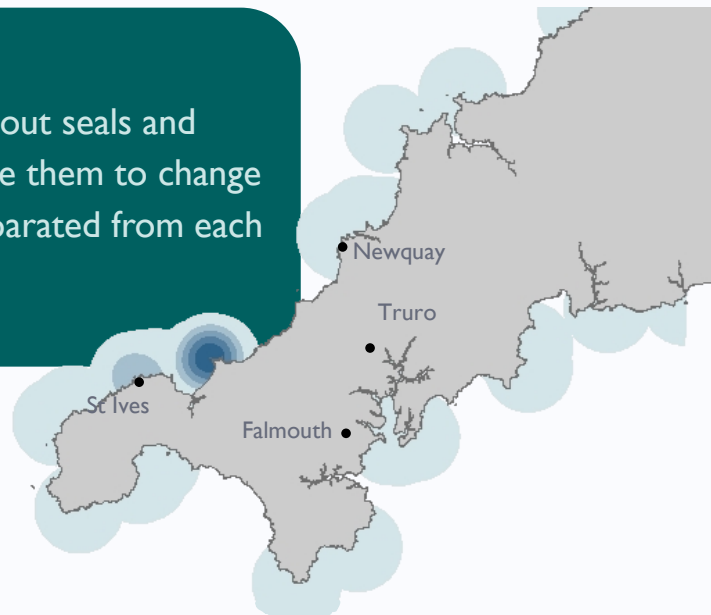
## 2. Paddle sports

This includes kayaks, canoes and paddleboards. Animals are often spooked by these vessels as they do not hear them approaching. Their recent popularity also means that more people are able to access sensitive sites. Hotspots have been identified in Newquay, St Ives, Mounts Bay, and the Lizard.

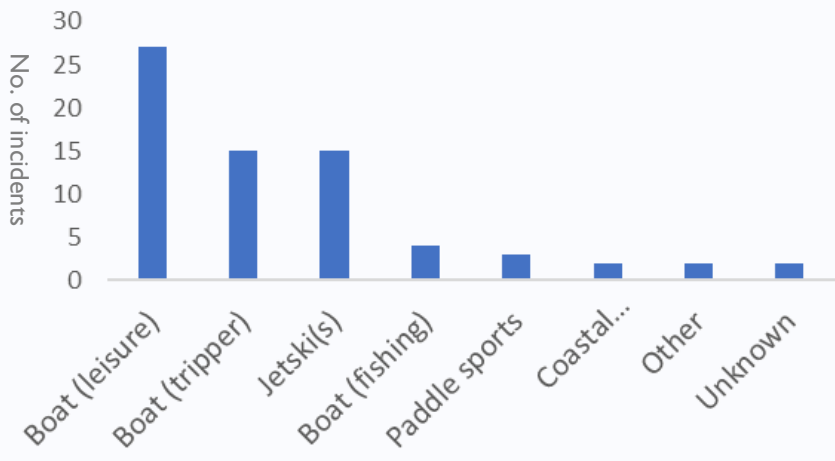


## 3. Tripper boats

Some tour operators may get too close to hauled out seals and nesting sea birds, or may pursue cetaceans or cause them to change direction, stop feeding, stop resting, or become separated from each other. This is a significant issue in St Ives Bay.

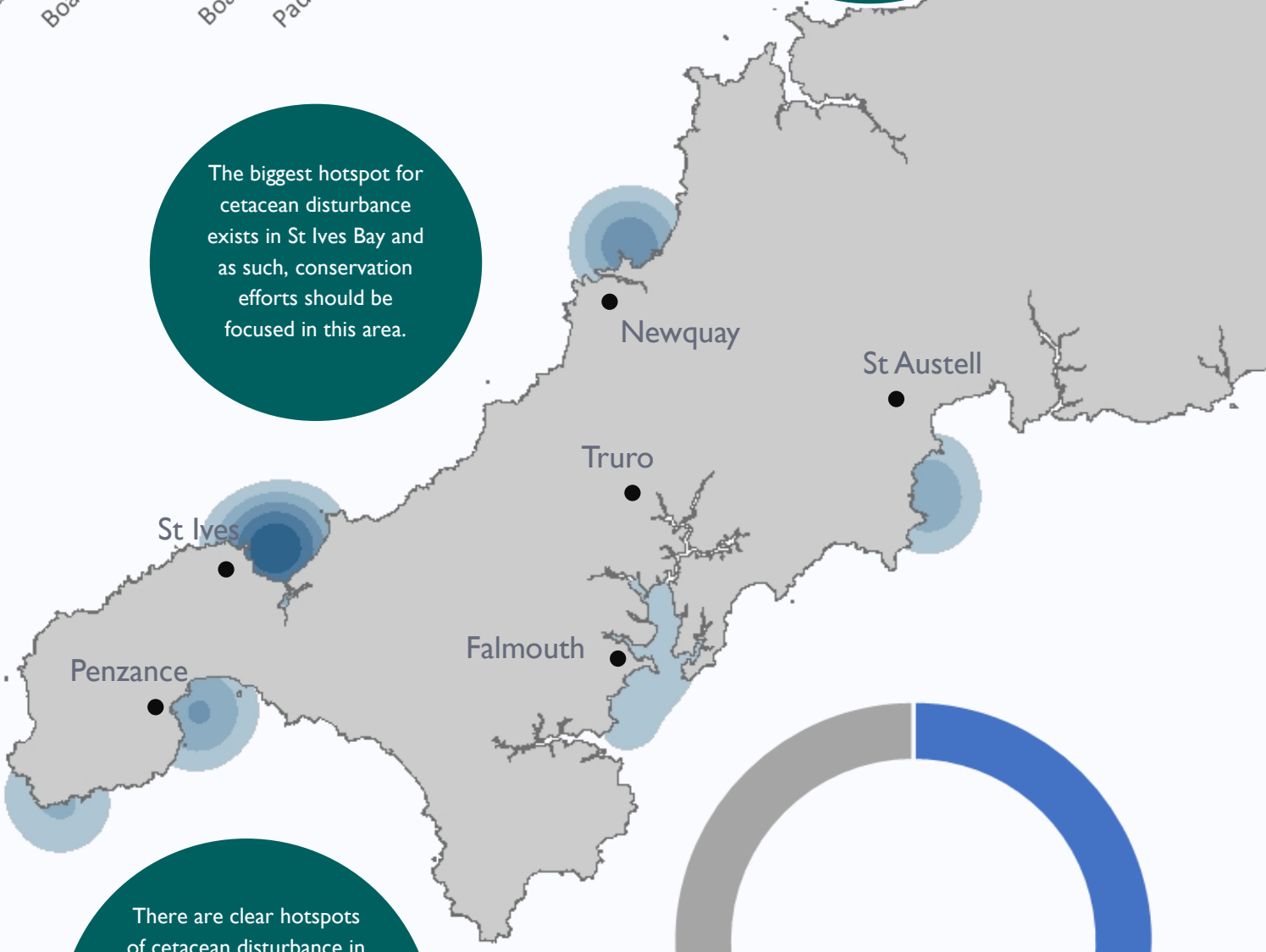


# Cetaceans - Cause of Disturbance and Hotspots

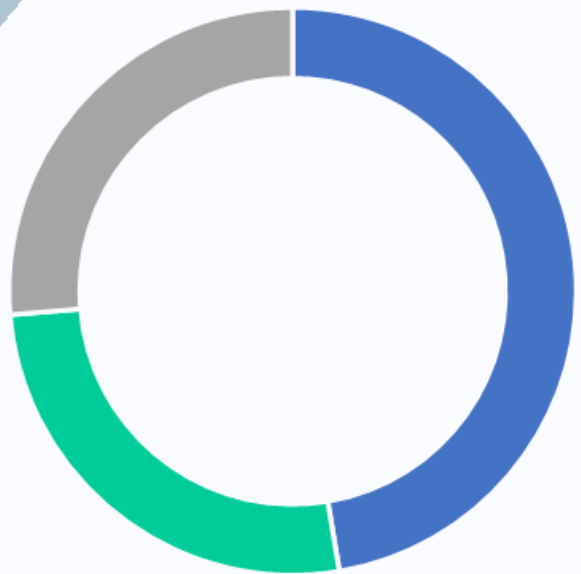


Privately owned leisure boats are the biggest threat to cetaceans. Engagement with this sector is essential for future cetacean conservation.

The biggest hotspot for cetacean disturbance exists in St Ives Bay and as such, conservation efforts should be focused in this area.

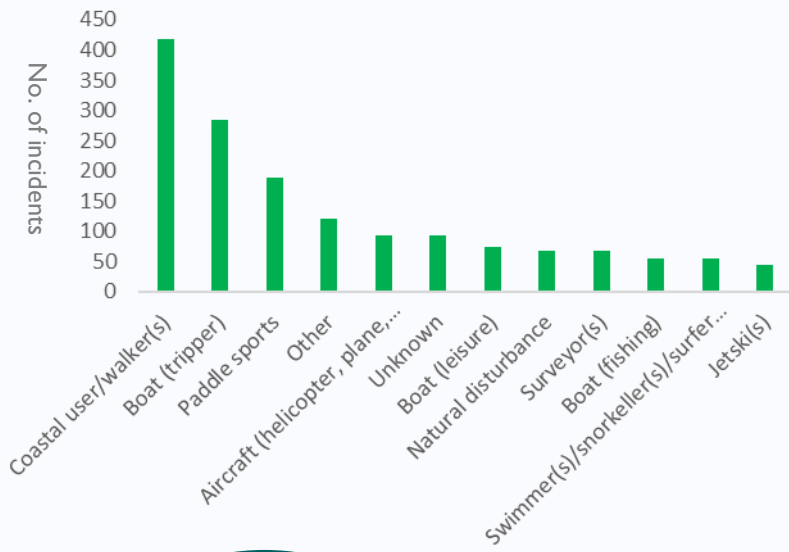


There are clear hotspots of cetacean disturbance in locations associated with harbours and access points for private leisure boats, such as Newquay, Falmouth, St Ives and Penzance.



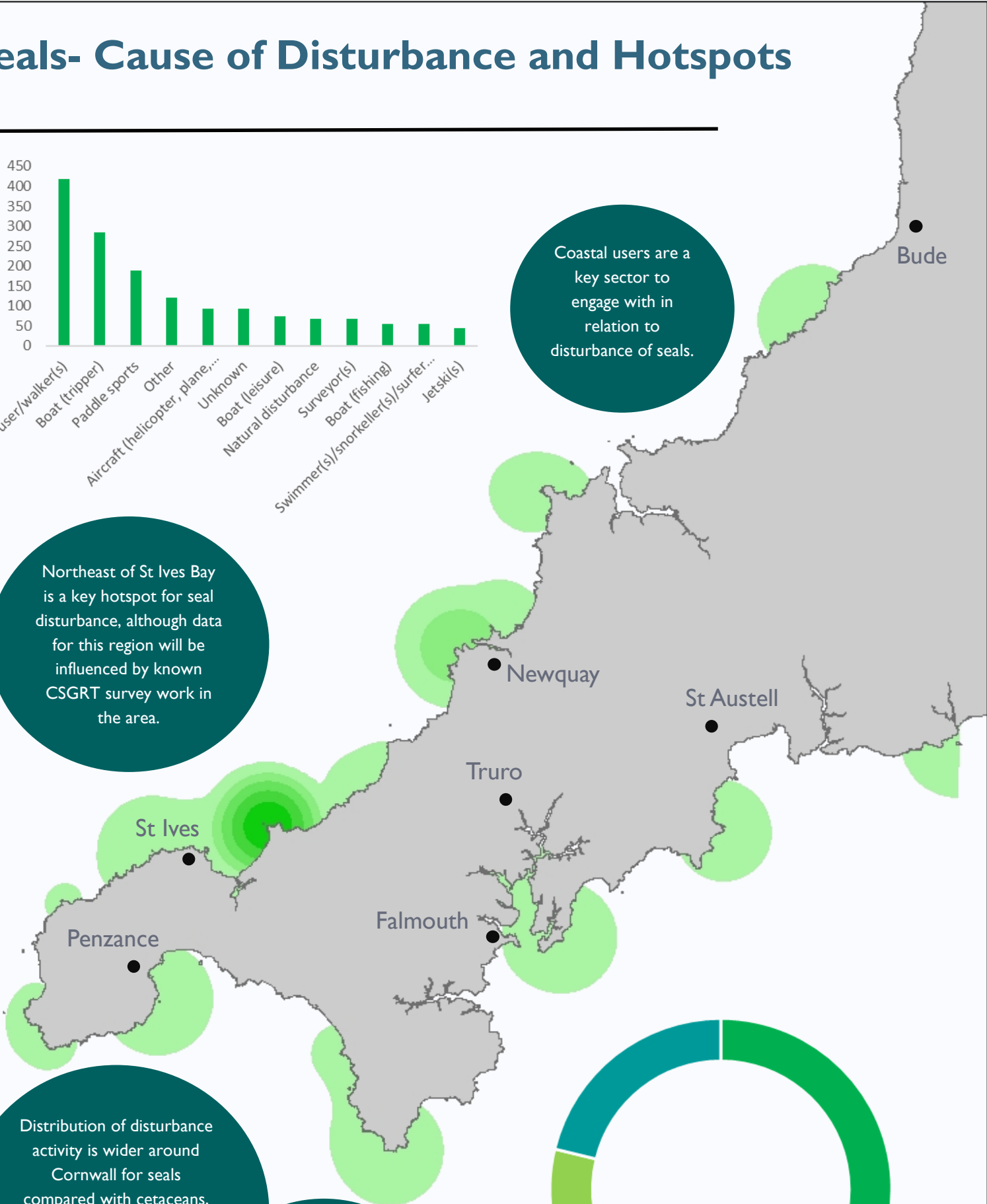
Relative disturbance of cetaceans caused by the top 3 user groups  
 ■ Boat (leisure) ■ Boat (tripper) ■ Jetski(s)

# Seals- Cause of Disturbance and Hotspots



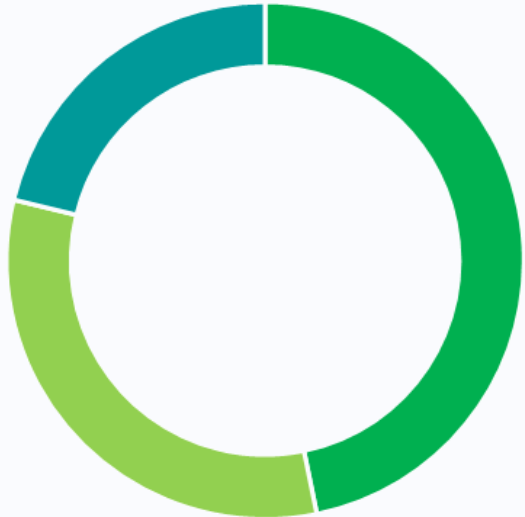
Coastal users are a key sector to engage with in relation to disturbance of seals.

Northeast of St Ives Bay is a key hotspot for seal disturbance, although data for this region will be influenced by known CSGRT survey work in the area.



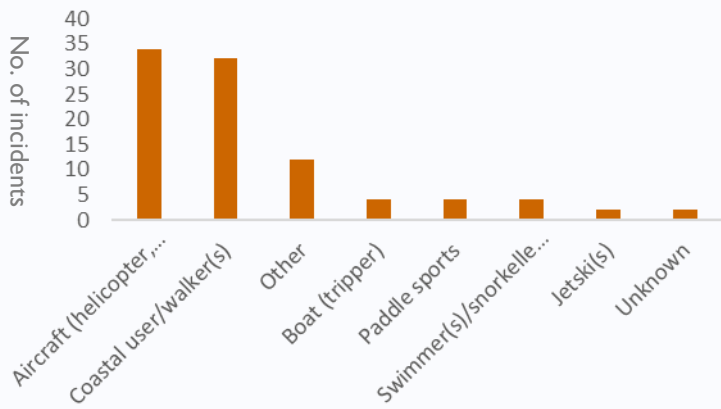
Distribution of disturbance activity is wider around Cornwall for seals compared with cetaceans, though this is likely due to correlate with haul outs and CSGRT survey effort.

Engagement with tripper boats and paddle sports, such as kayaks and paddleboards, would also be valuable.



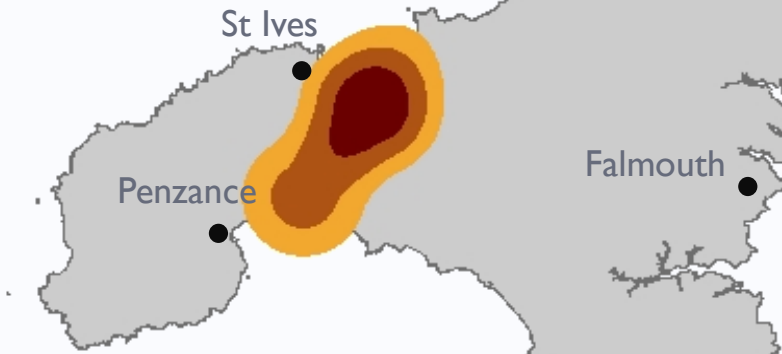
Relative disturbance of seals caused by the top 3 user groups  
 ■ Coastal user/walker(s) ■ Boat (tripper) ■ Paddle sports

# Seabirds- Cause of Disturbance and Hotspots

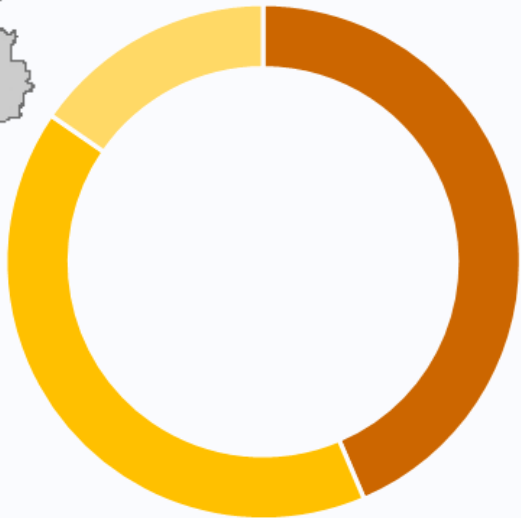


Disturbance of seabirds is known to be under-recorded in Cornwall. This needs to be rectified to understand the impacts better.

Hayle RSPB reserve is causing a central hotspot of bird disturbance due to focused data collection in this area, due to on-site wardens.



Aircraft and coastal users are key sectors to engage with, however seabird data is heavily under-represented.



Relative disturbance of seabirds caused by the top 3 user groups  
 ■ Aircraft (helicopter, plane, glider, microlight) ■ Coastal user/walker(s) ■ Other

# Conclusions and Recommendations

- Disturbance of marine and coastal wildlife is an increasing problem in Cornwall. However, reports of disturbance events are expected to continue to rise as awareness of the need to report, and the existence of the disturbance register hotline, is improved. **It is recommended that promotion of the Cornwall Marine and Coastal Code Group (CMCCG) and the disturbance register is increased to improve data collection across the county to represent the issue better.**
- There is significant underreporting of sea bird disturbance to the disturbance register, including that of rafting birds, therefore **increased efforts needs to be made to engage the birding community such as Cornwall Birds (CBWPS), British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), to improve data collection.**
- Looking at the monthly average of reported disturbance events, there is a clear seasonal peak in July and August, which coincides with the peak visitor season in Cornwall. It would therefore be beneficial to not only **increase awareness activity during these summer months**, but to **focus on activities that connect with the visitor audience such as press campaigns and working with the tourism sector, for example Visit Cornwall, to look at effective ways of communication and engagement.**
- There are a wide range of causes of wildlife disturbance in Cornwall, ranging from jet skis to drones. Across all animal groups, however, **coastal walkers, boat tripper (business) and paddle sports are the top three causes of marine disturbance of wildlife, highlighting the need for engagement with these sectors to tackle the issue and reduce disturbance events.** We recommend these various 'causes' are assessed against behaviour change models to determine what intervention is best suited to each to achieve optimal results in the long term. This may include novel ideas not currently practiced at present.
- Our review of the data highlighted hotspots of disturbance activity for certain species, such as St Ives Bay for cetaceans and Mounts Bay for paddle sports. It would therefore be beneficial to **focus limited time and resources in these hotspot areas.**
- Professional boat tour operators, identified in the CMCCG database as Tripper Boats, are identified as one the top causes of disturbance in Cornwall. It is therefore recommended that, not only is this sector engaged with, but that **all professional boat tour operators should attend a Wildlife Safe (WiSe) course to reduce disturbance around marine wildlife in Cornish waters — [www.wisescheme.org](http://www.wisescheme.org)**



The poster features a photograph of a boat on the water with a dolphin leaping nearby. Text on the poster includes: 'Wildlife safe operator accreditation', 'Keep marine life safe!', 'Learn about best practice and the law', 'WiSe Course', 'Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> March', 'St Ives, Guildhall: Council Chamber', '09:00 to 14:00', 'Booking essential', 'To book a place: Email [info@wisescheme.org](mailto:info@wisescheme.org)', 'For more information: [www.wisescheme.org](http://www.wisescheme.org)', and '£100 + VAT includes training, course materials, WiSe boat sticker and flag, use of WiSe logo, inclusion on WiSe website and full membership of WiSe – the UK national training scheme and professional standard accreditation.'

Wise course poster advert, March 2021



# Conclusions and Recommendations (cont.)

- Privately owned leisure boats are shown to be the biggest threat to cetaceans. Engagement with the private boating sector is essential for cetacean conservation, and it is suggested that this could be done via **work with harbours and ports and ensuring information and engagement is available at private vessel access points around Cornwall's coastline.**
- Coastal walkers have been identified as the top cause of disturbance to seals and sea birds in Cornwall. **It is recommended that work is done with the South West Coast Path Association, as well as other rambling groups, to develop coastline interpretation and engagement to reduce disturbance by walkers. Engagement would also be beneficial at all coastal access sites, such as beaches and harbours.**
- There is a significant lack of data related to the Isles of Scilly, although from personal communication it is known that wildlife disturbance is a serious and increasing issue around the Islands as well as here in Cornwall. **This report recommends that efforts are made in promoting the disturbance database in this area to improve data collection and to help target suitable intervention.**
- It is recommended that all sectors represented in the causes of wildlife disturbance are brought together to discuss and find solutions to the issues being faced. **A collaborative water user disturbance working group should be formed, who will lead county engagement work and influence their peers and other industry representatives.**
- **Improved understanding through training sessions (available through training providers such as Footprint Ecology) would be valuable for interested groups and organisations to develop the correct understanding of strategic approaches to assessing, managing and monitoring recreational impacts in protected landscapes/sites** This will enable improved data collection and appropriate action.
- As flagged in this report, Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust carry out detailed systematic surveys on disturbance events on Atlantic grey seal populations in Cornwall which provides an invaluable insight into the issue on that specific species at specific sites. We would **encourage further recreational studies and assessments to be carried out both in county and beyond, particularly to look at nationally important sites for sensitive species across Cornwall.**
- This report should be used to demonstrate that **action is required to mitigate the significant and serious issue of marine and coastal wildlife disturbance across the UK in addition to Cornwall and the South West.**







Seals disturbed into the sea by jet skis, photo credit Cornwall Seal Group Research

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[www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk)

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