

Travel



100(B)(7-14C,F-16C,RO-8D,12C*,R-5B,W,G-11C)

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Adventure vacation on an island: tagging seals

During the summer of 1985, Debbie Vesely of Bloomfield Hills was a volunteer on an Earthwatch expedition called, "Closely Watched Seals" on Miquelon Island, off the coast of Newfoundland. For three weeks she helped with tagging, observations in blinds and compass readings.

Her adventure, which cost \$1,800, is one of many offered by Earthwatch locations around the world. This is her story.

By Deborah Vesely
special writer

SLOWLY AND carefully I eased out of the small motorboat onto an unstable patch of sand still skinned with high tide. I walked towards the group of harbor seals basking in the August sun. A rush of excitement went through me. This is what I would talk about the moment I walked among the seals of Miquelon Island.

I had come to this French island off the coast of Newfoundland as a volunteer for Earthwatch, a non-profit organization which funds and provides volunteers to support research expeditions around the world.

Earthwatch finds volunteers to help scientists. The volunteers pay their own way and help fund the research through their assistance. From Nepal to East Africa, the Amazon to the American West, Earthwatch volunteers spend their free time assisting research and going to some of the most exotic locations in the world.

As I approached the seal herd, an adult raised his head, alarmed at my presence. I stopped and stared at the seal who sleepily lowered his head among the others. I could see the net strung in the water to catch the seals for tagging.

EARTHWATCH SPONSORS this tagging program, which helps us to learn about the seals' haul-out sites, interactions between the seals and maternal behavior.

As I moved closer, more heads popped up. The seals were getting restless and some flushed, barreling toward the safety of the Barachois, or Bay of Miquelon Island. The seals crashed into the water as I came near them, but some stubborn adults and confused juveniles remained on the sandflat.

With my next step, they rushed toward the water. I ran towards them, yelling and waving my arms to steer them to the net. A big adult remained undisturbed. I came within five feet of the animal before it moved slowly into the water.

The other seals torpedoes and porpoised — both methods of swimming fast — from the sandbar into the net, a perfect flush. The roundup began and ended in 10 minutes. The seals managed to get through the worn net and within minutes weaners, seals less than a year old, were bobbing around the boat and following us back to the cabin on the shore of the bay.

This Earthwatch expedition was called "Closely Watched Seals" and brought a group of five volunteers to assist professors and graduate students in the behavioral sciences.

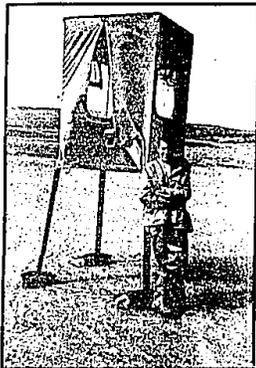
The project was to observe and record the movements and manners of grey and harbor seals of the North Atlantic gathered in the Barachois from May to late August.

THE ISLANDS of Miquelon, Langlade and St. Pierre have been part of France since the 16th century when they were claimed by Jacques Cartier. The islands flushed momentarily during the Prohibition when they became an important way station for illegal whiskey. But the islands have always been the home of seals, thousands of birds, migrating whales and wild horses.

On an earlier attempt to tag, we were able to catch a female weaner who was a little too curious and brave. The graduate students lugged her onto the shore as she flicked and complained.

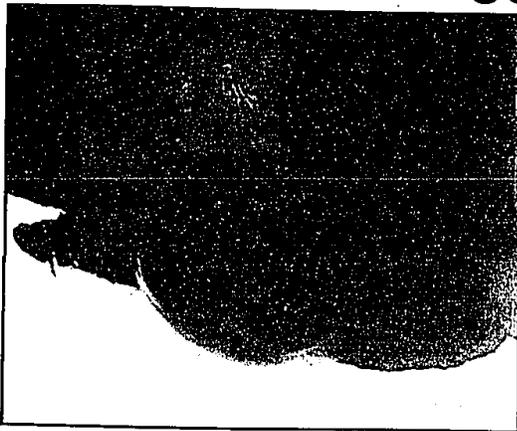
She had a black head, typical of a young seal, and brown eyes like all harbor seals. Her coat was slicked down, a speckled grey and white. Her nostrils opened and closed as she puffed in anger. She grunted and made fighting noises, the only known time they vocalize.

I SLID onto her back and held my hands firmly around her neck, which bunched up when she moved. Her front flippers were tucked close to her sides so she could not struggle free.



Photo/Deborah Vesely

The author poses next to a blind used to spot seals, such as the fellow on the right.



Photo/Catherino Trainor

This seal had been previously tagged so I eased my grip and stepped back. She galloped into the water like a fat inchworm, dove and popped up 20 feet away, whiskers twitching and blowing bubbles.

The work of the volunteers was simple but not always desired. Sitting by the Goulet, a narrow opening between the Barachois and the sea, was a dreaded job. Even in August the islands of the North Atlantic can turn cold and wet.

THE JOB was to count the seals, to identify and estimate the seals' direction of travel, either into the Barachois or out to sea. By observing the seals in their aquatic environment, information is gathered on travel migration and the role of the seals in the marine ecosystem.

Walking along the sand, past fresh water bogs, to the Goulet, only a short distance from the cabin, seals and tern birds hover above making threatening calls. Playful seals made a greeting as I took a seal in the fine white sand. The more daring ones bobbed close to the rocky shore, where washed up sand dollars and sea urchins can be found.

Scanning the Goulet, I saw two shiny black heads huddled close together like inseparable twins. I lifted my binoculars to identify their age class. I could already tell they were harbor seals by the size of their heads and the distinctive droop to the forehead.

When I lifted my binoculars the heads disappeared. They appeared some minutes later heading into the Barachois. Everytime I raised my binoculars they would dive down. They were too fast and I was not fast enough.

OCCASIONALLY I saw a seal porpoise to sea. The seal would raise its whole body out of the water in a row of leaps and come gracefully down in a crescent curve. Grey seals would also proudly swim by. Because of their big size the greys are not tagged.

The adults are easy to spot because of their huge grey nose extending like a trunk. Large folds of fur adorn their heads and cover their tiny black eyes. The grey seals don't stop, like the curious harbor seals, but continue on their way.

After my three-hour shift, I headed towards the cabin to relax. The cabin where I stayed was built in the early 1950s to provide shelter

to weary and lost fishermen, and has the dates and names to prove it carved on our bulkheads.

Our cabin was a small wooden house separated into four rooms, each with four beds and a picnic table. The fourth room was sometimes occupied by a French family on holiday. We slept in sleeping bags on foam or air mattresses. There was no running water so drinking water was taken from a nearby well.

BEHIND THE cabin were tall grassy fields where wild horses roamed. The view from the cabin was of land on the other side of the Barachois, bumpy with sand dunes. To the right was the Goulet, visible only on clear days. To the left, mountains covered with wind-stunted forests towered over summer homes.

All of our fresh food was brought from the town of Miquelon, a half hour drive by truck from the cabin. Miquelon imports all of its food from France and nearby Canadian provinces so visitors can indulge in French chocolates and cookies. For dinner our meals were spaghetti, hamburgers, steaks, pizza and baked cod.

Fresh bread was always available directly from the town bakery. We ate and cooked in a dome-like structure behind our cabin. Inside, we had a refrigerator, grill and a gas stove. One night we feasted on mussels collected from the sand flats. For dessert we had fresh strawberries from surrounding fields, mixed with French cream.

After dinner, we watched the sun slowly set then disappear fast into the horizon. Some evenings we played frisbee. The bright orange saucer whirled with the wind carrying it up and around. The young harbor seals came to see this fluorescent object.

THEY BOBBED up and followed the frisbee along the shore, coming quite close sometimes. The frisbee often got away, crashing into the Barachois. The seals swam away in fright but came back quickly, their eyes even wider with curiosity.

Other seal observations were conducted from blinds scattered on sandflats where the seals haul-out and tagging occurs. From the blind, data on organization and behavior on

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land is gathered. Records of fighting, torpeding and the disturbances between the seals are to be made while in the blind.

THE OBSERVATION blinds are three meters tall. The observer sits in a rectangular canvas with three windows and a wooden floor. The box is mounted on four iron legs which stretch into the sand. The seals are not disturbed by the blind so haul-outs can be watched from as close as 10 meters.

Half an hour later I heard splashing and grunting in front of the blind and to my right. I rose to look out the window. Some harbor seals were gathering. They torpedoes, swimming like bullets with white water flowing from their sides, up to land; they hopped inland.

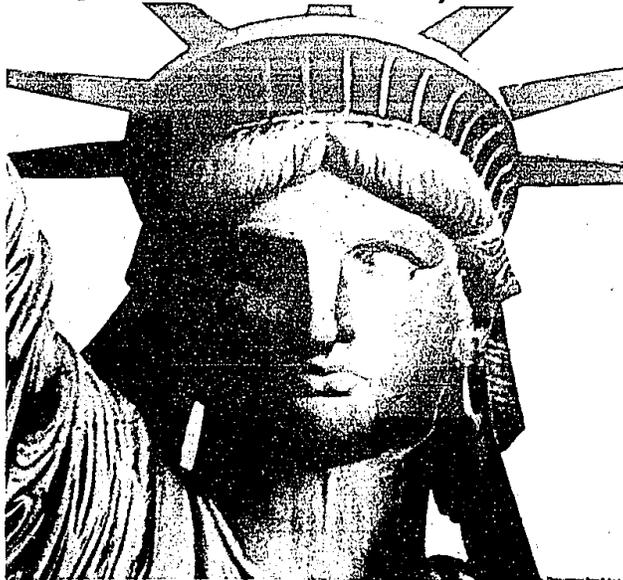
Weaners gathered in the water and adults rested on shore. I heard fighting noises coming from the middle of the group and saw head rocking and tail raising. One weaner could not get comfortable among the other seals and would torpedo onto land, hop around then swim off. Other seals scoffed at him.

AN HOUR later about 45 seals were to my right and all was calm. They spread their back flippers like a fan to absorb sunlight and warm their bodies, one reason for haul-outs. A row of weaners and juveniles, one-to-five-year-olds, lined the group. They all faced the blind and my right window. They laid on their sides with their heads slightly up, blinking and scratching their bellies with their front flippers.

The day of departure, I was sad to leave Miquelon Island. Time had gone by fast. I had learned so much about the seals by observing them. From the plane I saw green landscape and blue lakes, the same view as three weeks before, but now it seemed like so much more.

For information on Earthwatch, write P.O. Box 127, Belmont, MA 02178 or telephone (617)489-3030.

If you still believe in me, save me.



For nearly a hundred years, the Statue of Liberty has been America's most powerful symbol of freedom and hope. Today the corrosive action of almost a century of weather and pollution has eaten away at the iron framework, etched holes in the copper exterior.

Less than a mile away, on Ellis Island where the ancestors of nearly half of all Americans first stepped onto American soil, the Great Hall of the Immigration Center is a hollow ruin. Rooms are vandalized, walls crumbling in decay. Inspiring plans have been developed to restore the Statue and to create at Ellis Island a living monument to the ethnic diversity of this country of immigrants. But unless restoration is begun now, these two national treasures could be closed at the very time we celebrate their hundredth anniversaries. The 230 million dollars needed to carry out the work is needed now.

All of the money must come from private donations; the federal government is not raising the funds. The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Centennial Commission appointed by President Reagan is asking every American to contribute. The torch of liberty is everyone's to cherish.

Could we hold up our heads as Americans if we allowed the time to come when she can no longer hold up hers? You can keep the torch of liberty burning bright. Send your tax-deductible contribution to The Lady, Box 1986, N.Y.C. 10018. Or call, toll free, 1-800-USA-LADY.

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