



Title: “Red Rag to a Bull (3)”

Description: New Zealand sea lion, Tūmai.

Photographer: Henrik Moller

Where, when: Hakapupu (Pleasant River estuary), September 2021

Sustainability? After poking around in my camera bag to investigate my other lenses, thankfully the sea lion became besotted by my (much less expensive!) red *New World* shopping bag. I used the bag to carry rice-bags for supporting my camera on the ground when lying down to photograph birds.

Sealions are remarkably dextrous. He delicately picked the bag up, tasted it, and flung it about. Eventually he tossed it into the water. He then spent 10 minutes playing with it, charging in and then away, or dominating it in a death roll.

I called this series of photos, “Red Rag to a Bull” to reflect some of his might and energy. But this was not an angry bull – he displayed a mix of curiosity, play and joy, not aggression. He was just like a giant puppy with a new ball. My red bag made this sea lion’s day, and he mine.

Some people have rising concern and unreasonable fear of sea lions which in turn makes mobilising conservation action for them all the harder. Animal-human conflicts and apprehension hamper shark, snake and bear conservation around the world, especially when the threatened species are located close to towns and cities.

By law you should stay at least 10 m away from any marine mammal when you encounter them on land. I often see photographers go closer, and dogs are a particular menace for disturbing them.

If you are freaked by encountering a sea lion, your best advice is to be utterly boring! After this experience at Hakaupupu, I asked Jordina Whyte, chairperson of the NZ Sealion Trust, for guidance on safety around sealions. Here are some edited main points of her response in her words:

- “I have not heard of a single instance where someone on land has been bitten by a sea lion apart from researchers when catching and tagging them.
- It is even very rare in the water, with almost every case I've heard of where a sea lion makes biting contact with a human is because a diver or surfer has panicked and either intentionally or accidentally whacked or kicked the sea lion in the face. In one case a few years ago, a pāua diver freaked out after encountering a sea lion in the water and stabbed him with his spear - even then the sea lion got the worst of it. The absence of unprovoked biting certainly should put people at ease.
- Even these instances have been very minor, generally with a wetsuit being the only collateral damage. Sea lions do explore the world with their mouths, so experienced local divers and surfers have stories of being 'mouthed' by sea lions - usually on their diving flippers, or maybe a foot or ankle - but do not confuse this with biting. They are just curious about people and exploring, though as you have experienced this can feel quite intimidating, especially if you are in their element at the time.
- Paddlers also experience this mouthing of kayak paddles or fronts of boats from time to time. Occasionally a young sea lion will porpoise out of the water quite close to the paddler. Again, this can be intimidating if misinterpreted as aggression. Mostly they are just playing and seeing how you will react. I don't know of any circumstances where a paddler has been swamped or knocked out of their boats/off their boards.
- If you want to avoid unwanted attention, the best advice is to be boring - move quietly away and do not run. Running is exciting, and may be seen as an invitation to chase - what a fun game! - just like with dogs.
- Don't make eye contact, and move away quietly, backing away if you can (provided you know roughly where you're going!). Sea lions do sometimes bluff charge, which you also experienced. It was not luck that the sea lion stopped 1.5m away from you. This is very typical behaviour. They want to let you know they're in charge of the situation, and to see how you will react. They are highly unlikely to make any physical contact whatsoever. Often if you hold something out, like a backpack, or even a pair of binoculars, they'll pull up just to the point where they can sniff and poke the object with their noses. They see it as an extension of you, and they're curious about you.

- The 'be boring' also applies to paddlers. Again, don't make eye contact or splash around, as this becomes interesting to them. Just move quietly to shore as quickly as you can without causing a ruckus, and get out. Surfers certainly routinely use this method if they don't want to cruise the waves with a sea lion friend.

Photo notes: Exposure for 1/320s, 600 mm focal length, f/6.3, ISO-200.

Digital specs: 3,984 x 2,813 pixels (11 MP).

Key words: New Zealand Sea lion, *Phocarctos hookeri*, marine mammal, species recovery, play, curiosity, aggression, Henrik Moller, Aotearoa, New Zealand, Sustainability.

Price: \$150 (incl. GST) for use of the digital image.

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Donation: The price includes a \$100 donation to a sustainability organisation or project of your choice, or otherwise for the *New Zealand Sealion Trust* <https://www.sealiontrust.org.nz/>.

I recommend that the donation goes to the *New Zealand Sealion Trust* because it is a not-for-profit organisation that tracks sealion recovery on the mainland, supports research, and engages in vigorous public education and advocacy for these majestic and misunderstood critters.

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Henrik Moller

29 November 2021.