The provision of supplementary heat for hand-raised harbour seal pups (*Phoca vitulina*)

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**Background**

• Hundreds of stranded harbour seal pups (*Phoca vitulina*) are brought to wildlife rescue centres every summer.
• Pups are often in poor body condition and have difficulty maintaining body temperature.

**Objectives**

To examine if:
1) pups would position themselves close to an available heat source.
2) pups provided with supplementary heat would have better survival rates than those without.

**Methods**

• In 2008, pups < 9 kg, with body condition score ≤ 2 (thin to emaciated) and < 7 days of age were assigned to heat (n=25) or no-heat (n=42) treatments.
• Heat lamps were positioned at one end of enclosures to create a thermal gradient.
• Pups received supplementary heat for 21 days.
• Daily observations of pup position in relation to heat were recorded.

**How often were pups on the heated side?**

![Graph showing percentage of observations on heated side across different ambient temperatures](image)

- Pups were significantly attracted to heat under cool conditions.
- Heat-seeking declined as ambient temperature increased.

**Did heat affect mortality rates?**

![Chart showing percentage of pups ≤ 7 kg](image)

- There was no effect of heat on mortality rate for animals > 7 kg.
- There was a trend (p<0.1) for better survival for small pups (≤7 kg) when provided with heat.

**Conclusion**

- **Pups in poor body condition being reared for release prefer, and may benefit from, access to supplementary heat. This heat-seeking behaviour is especially prevalent at cool ambient temperatures (<16 °C).**

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