NO PREP

Seals, Sea Lions, and Walruses

Pinnipeds Explained

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Seals, Sea Lions, and Walruses: Pinnipeds Explained

Meet the Ocean's Furry Divers

When most people picture marine mammals, whales and dolphins come to mind first. But there's another group just as fascinating—the pinnipeds, which include seals, sea lions, and walruses. These animals are perfectly adapted to life between two worlds: the sea, where they hunt and swim, and the shore, where they rest, breed, and raise their young. While they all share streamlined bodies, flippers, and layers of insulating blubber, each species has unique traits that set it apart.

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Seals: The Silent Swimmers

True seals, also called earless seals, are masters of stealth in the water. They lack external ear flaps, giving their heads a smooth, rounded appearance. Instead of walking on land, seals move awkwardly by wriggling their bodies, but in the ocean, they are graceful and agile. Their short flippers and torpedo-shaped bodies make them fast swimmers, perfect for chasing fish, squid, and other prey. Harbor seals, for example, can dive for more than 30 minutes and reach depths over 1,500 feet! While not as noisy as their cousins, seals use growls and slaps to communicate, especially during mating season.

Sea Lions: The Noisy Performers

Unlike seals, sea lions have visible external ear flaps and large, strong front flippers. These allow them to "walk" on land by rotating their hind flippers forward, a handy skill when hauling out onto beaches or rocky shores. Sea lions are also famous for their loud barks, which they use to defend territory and interact socially. Highly social and curious, sea lions often gather in large groups called colonies. They are also excellent hunters, able to chase schools of fish with teamwork and speed. Their

playful behavior makes them popular in aquariums and zoos, but in the wild, they are hardworking predators and devoted parents.

Walruses: The Tusks and Titans

The most distinctive pinniped is the walrus, instantly recognizable by its massive tusks, which are actually elongated canine teeth. Both males and females grow tusks, using them for dominance battles, breaking through ice, and hauling their heavy bodies onto land. Walruses can weigh over 3,000 pounds and rely heavily on their thick blubber for warmth in the Arctic. Unlike seals and sea lions, walruses specialize in eating benthic creatures—mostly clams and other shellfish, which they suck from their shells with powerful suction. Walruses are social animals, often lounging in large, noisy groups on ice floes. Their presence is critical to Arctic ecosystems, but also makes them vulnerable to climate change as sea ice disappears.

Key Information

Feature	Seals	Sea Lions	Walruses
Ears	No external flaps	Visible external flaps	Small, with tusks present
Land Movement	Wriggle on bellies	Walk on all fours	Use tusks and flippers
Social Behavior	Quieter, less social	Loud, very social	Loud, gather in herds
Diet	Fish, squid	Fish, schooling prey	Clams, shellfish
Special Trait	Excellent deep divers	Strong front flippers	Giant tusks

Case Study: California Sea Lion Comeback

California sea lions were once hunted heavily for their pelts, blubber, and meat, and their populations plummeted in the 1800s. By the mid-20th century, only small groups remained along the Pacific coast. Conservation laws such as the Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972) changed everything, banning hunting and allowing populations to recover. Today, California sea lions number in the hundreds of thousands. While this is a conservation success, challenges remain—entanglement in fishing gear, ocean pollution, and climate-related changes to fish availability. The story of the California sea lion shows how protective laws and human awareness can help species rebound when given a chance.

1. How do sea lions move differently on land compared to seals?

2. What does the recovery of the California sea lion population teach us about conservation?

Multiple Choice

1. Which pinniped has external ear flaps?
    a) Seal
    b) Walrus
    c) None of the above
    d) Sea lion

2. What do walruses primarily eat?

a) Squid

b) Fish that other pinnipeds eat

c) Seaweed

d) Clams and shellfish

3. What law was crucial in helping California sea lions recover?

a) Marine Mammal Protection Act

b) Endangered Species Act for wildlife

c) Clean Water Act

d) National Parks Act

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Walrus tusks	A) Loud barks and colonies
2. ___ Seal ears	B) Streamlined for deep diving
3. ___ Sea lion locomotion	C) Lack external ear flaps
4. ___ Social sea lions	D) Walk on land using large flippers
5. ___ Seal body shape	E) Used for dominance and hauling out

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Seals move on land by _____ on their bellies.

2. Walruses rely on thick layers of _____ to keep warm.

3. Sea lions often gather in large groups called _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Compare the diets of seals, sea lions, and walruses.

2. Why are walruses especially vulnerable to climate change?

3. Explain one difference in anatomy between seals and sea lions.