How do we know when a harbour seal pup is stranded and when human intervention is appropriate?
Just because a pup is left on its own does not always mean it is stranded.

Before making decisions it is important to understand the characteristic features of healthy and stranded ‘Lone Pups’ at different stages – postnatal, preweaning and post-weaning.
1\textsuperscript{st} POSTNATAL WEEK - STRANDED OR NOT?

Harbour seal mothers do not normally leave neonatal pups for the first post-natal week.

If a young pup appears to be alone – within the haul-out site, or alone on a beach with no other seals – near the start of the pupping season, stranding is suspected.

A stranded newborn pup may be uninjured and outwardly healthy. The following features characterise an outwardly healthy newborn ‘Lone Pup’ who probably needs help:

- Pup has umbilical cord still attached or is birth-weight (~11 kg) or less
- Pup has white lanugo coat – in UK/Ireland this means pup is premature
- Pup seen swimming alone around haul-out site, approaching or following other MPs or LPs
- Pup is not with mother on a seal haul-out site on an outgoing tide
- Pup is alone on beach not at a haul-out site

The following illustrations show healthy, stranded newborn pups that need help. Such pups are often found where the haul-out site is close to the shore and accessible on foot.
Neonatal pup ‘Star’ stranded alone on outgoing tide, umbilicus, wt 7.5 kg
Neonatal pup ‘Tara’ found alone on beach ~500m from haul-out site, 8kg wt with fresh umbilicus
Pup ‘Emil’ observed on previous tide sleeping beside a larger ‘Lone Pup’. Emil left behind when all other seals departed on falling tide. No umbilicus, 11kg wt
Newborn ‘Lora’
Stranded at low tide.
11 kg wt,
fresh umbilicus

‘Lora’ swimming alone at haul-out site on preceding tide
Lone harbour seal pup in lanugo coat

LONE PUPS A FEW DAYS POSTNATAL AT HAUL-OUT SITE

Harbour seal pups who have lost their mother at or shortly after birth will try for a few days to follow other mother-pup pairs and – *in extremis* – larger Lone Pups left at the haul-out site while their other has gone fishing.

These pups will – without milk – gradually lose vigour and strand in an exhausted and emaciated condition. They can often be recognised by their body posture as they will often lie prone instead of on their side or back.

These pups will be less than average birth weight (usually < 11 kg)

Such pups may, especially on sandy beaches, develop sore eyes from sand or eye infections.
LONE PUPS A FEW DAYS POSTNATAL ON PUBLIC BEACH OR SHORE AWAY FROM HAUL-OUT SITE

Pups unattended by their mothers may be washed away from the haul-out site by the tide and wind, and may wash up alone.

Such pups
➢ will be at or less than birth weight (~11kg or less)
➢ may still have umbilicus
➢ will be thin and exhausted
➢ may have visible injuries such as cuts, mouth or eye infections, or dog bites
➢ may lie in prone position
➢ will be dehydrated

IT IS RARE FOR ANY LONE HARBOUR SEAL PUP ON PUBLIC BEACH – AWAY FROM HAUL-OUT SITE – TO BE CARED FOR BY IT MOTHER – BUT IT IS NOT UNKNOWN (e.g. Courbis, 1997). THEREFORE, IF THE PUP IS NOT ENDANERGED ON A BUSY BEACH AND APPEARS WELL-GROWN, ALERT AND UNINJURED, OBSERVE PUP FOR ~24 HRS TO ASSESS SITUATION.
LONE PUPS OF NURSING AGE IN 2\textsuperscript{ND}-4\textsuperscript{TH} POST-NATAL WEEK

After the first week/10 days post-natal, harbour seal pups are often left alone at the haul-out site while their mother goes fishing.

These pups often sleep deeply, and may not always follow other seals around the haul-out site area as they follow the tide.

Healthy Lone Pups in 2\textsuperscript{nd}-4\textsuperscript{th} week can be recognised by:

- weight more than birth weight (usually 13 kg or more)
- relaxed sleeping posture – on side or back
- alert when awake, may be aggressive to human approach
- no visible injuries or breathing difficulties
- lying at or close to haul-out site

THESE PUPS ARE NOT STRANDED AND DO NOT REQUIRE INTERVENTION. THEY SHOULD NOT BE MOVED OR TOUCHED.
This pup is asleep alone on the haul-out site when the others have followed the falling tide. His mother has probably gone fishing. He is not stranded.
This pup was seen alone at haul-out site on July 16 (just after peak pupping in N. Ireland).

On closer inspection it was found to be sleeping in relaxed position and appeared to be a little over birth weight (est. ~13–14 kg). When it woke up it was alert and aggressive to observer.

NOT STRANDED – NO INTERVENTION REQUIRED
PUPS WHO HAVE BECOME PERMANENTLY SEPARATED FROM THEIR MOTHERS IN 2\textsuperscript{ND}-3\textsuperscript{RD} WEEK OF NURSING WILL EVENTUALLY STRAND WITH UNHEALTHY APPEARANCE:

- THIN, UNHEALTHY RESTING POSTURE
- RELATIVELY LOW BODY WEIGHT (~15 KG OR LESS)
- EYE OR NASAL DISCHARGE
- RESPIRATORY PROBLEM
- MOUTH OR MUZZLE INFECTIONS
- CUTS OR WOUNDS
- DEHYDRATED

SUCH PUPS MAY STRAND AT HAUL-OUT SITE OR APPEAR ALONE ELSEWHERE ON SHORELINE.

In UK/IRELAND the expected dates for this would be late July and August.
Pup ‘Leo’ immobile at haul-out site on falling tide, August 14. Emaciated, wt 10kg, Suspected septic arthritis.
Bleeding from around mouth

Photo from L.F. Jensen
POSTWEANING PUPS AGED ~2–6 MONTHS MAY OCCUR, USUALLY IN UK/IRELAND FROM LATE AUGUST TO JANUARY OF THE FOLLOWING YEAR.

THESE PUPS USUALLY STRAND WITH ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING:

- HEAVY BREATHING, COUGHING
- EYE AND/OR NASAL DISCHARGE
- MOUTH/MUZZLE INFECTION
- BLOOD FROM MOUTH, NOSE OR ANUS
- CUTS, WOUNDS, BITES
- SWOLLEN MUZZLE, JAW OR FOREFLIPPERS
- PATCHY FUR, ULCERS ON SKIN, EXTERNAL PARASITES (MITES)
- ENTANGLED IN FISHING NET, USUALLY AROUND NECK
- OIL OR TAR ON FUR
- DULL EYES, DEHYDRATED
- SURROUNDED BY FLIES
- VARIABLE WEIGHT (DEPENDING ON AGE) BUT USUALLY LESS THAN 25 KG
- PUP MAY NOT TRY TO ESCAPE TO SEA WHEN APPROACHED (ALTHOUGH SOME DO!)
Released and tracked weaned pup ‘Cecilia’ 6 weeks after release, stranded with broken and infected ulna (left fore-flipper)

Seal strandings Workshop, Suzdal, 2012
Young harbour seals entangled in fishing net

http://www.fieldtripearth.org/media_image.xml?object_id=2676&file_id=6824
If specialist opinion considers that immediate human intervention is needed to prevent animal’s suffering or death, a decision must be taken on the most appropriate course of action:

- Provide help on site and release (such as removal of entangled fishing net, or transportation back to a seal haul-out area)
- Rehabilitation in a specialized centre and further release
- Rehabilitation in a specialized centre and transferring to appropriate institution for keeping in captivity
- Euthanasia
References