Our Saimaa Seal LIFE

New ways for the conservation of the Saimaa ringed seal

LAYMAN'S REPORT

PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS 2020–2025

METSÄHALLITUS
FORSTSTYRELSEN
MEAHCIRÁÐÐEHUS

Our Saimaa Seal LIFE (LIFE19 NAT/FI/000832)

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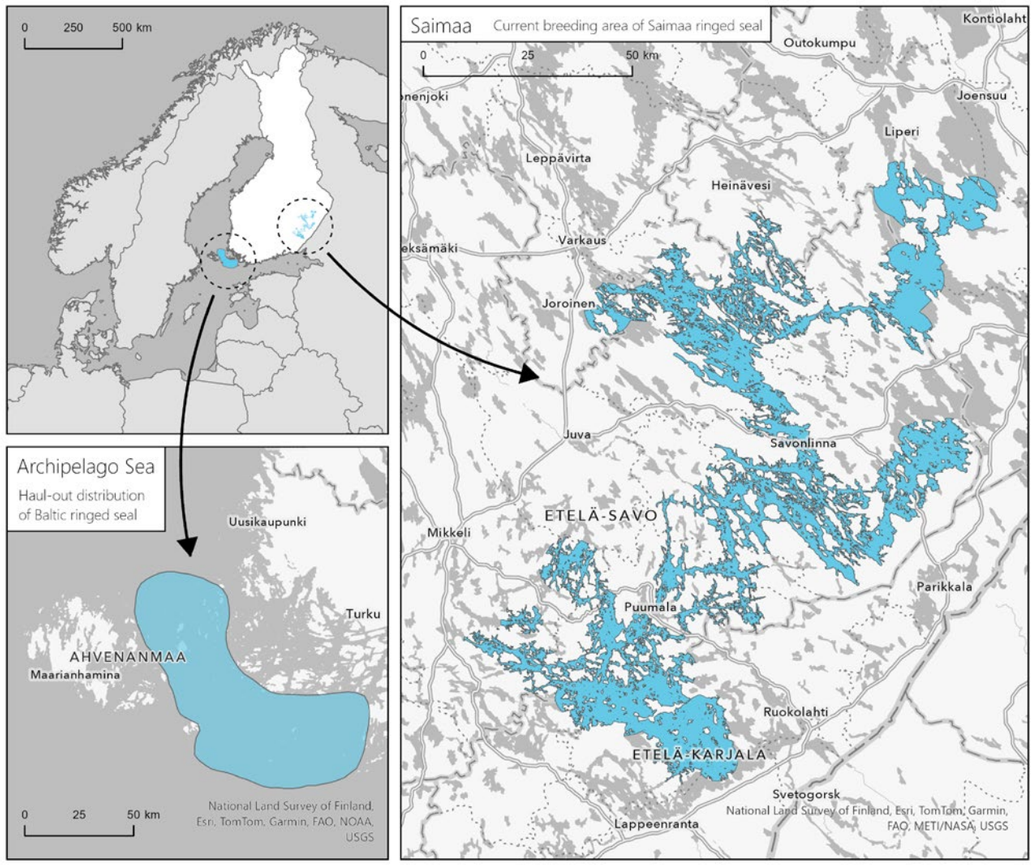
Our Saimaa Seal LIFE

The Our Saimaa Seal LIFE -project achieved significant results in protecting the Saimaa ringed seal. The project aimed to reduce the impact of key threats to the species in a changing climate and to test the effectiveness of conservation methods proven successful in Lake Saimaa for protecting the Baltic ringed seal subpopulation in the Archipelago Sea. Project activities were carried out in Finland, in Lake Saimaa and the Archipelago Sea. The project involved 12 partners. The total budget was €7.1 million, of which the EU contributed €5.3 million. The project officially started on 1 September 2020, but fieldwork began in winter 2021, so the conservation results (e.g., number of man-made snowdrifts, number of seal pups born) are assessed for the years 2021–2025.

Authorities, nature conservation organizations, researchers, and hundreds of volunteers have worked together to promote seal conservation through various means. We have been collaborating systematically for a long time, and in recent years the seal population has continued to grow steadily. However, the species still faces threats from deaths in fishing gear as well as habitat degradation and loss caused by shoreline construction and climate change. New conservation methods are needed, and this project has sought them through joint efforts.



Project implementation areas in Lake Saimaa and the Archipelago Sea. Map: Metsähallitus.

Photo: Jari Ilmonen, Metsähallitus.

During Our Saimaa Seal LIFE project (2020–2025):

- Due to the conservation measures implemented, the Saimaa ringed seal population increased from 425 to 530 individuals.
- We developed new conservation actions and population monitoring methods to address the challenges posed by climate change.
- We examined the health status of the Saimaa ringed seal and raised awareness of the importance of protection of the species.
- We monitored fishing restrictions and provided advice and guidance to safeguard the Saimaa ringed seals.
- We also worked actively to improve the status of the Baltic ringed seal population in the Archipelago Sea.

Our seals – an introduction to the Saimaa ringed seal and the Baltic ringed seal

Saimaa ringed seal *(Pusa saimensis):*

- Endangered ringed seal species endemic to Finland and living exclusively in Lake Saimaa.
- It became isolated from other ringed seals during the Ice Age about 60 000 years ago.
- With new scientific evidence, in 2025 it was recognized as its own species, whereas previously it was classified as a subspecies of the ringed seal.
- The population declined to fewer than 150 individuals by the early 1980s due to factors such as hunting, mortality in fishing gear, and fluctuations in water levels during the breeding season, which destroyed lairs (dens dug in snowdrifts) and caused high pup mortality. Conservation measures were initiated at that time, and the population has grown slowly since then.
- By 2025, the population size reached 530 individuals, compared to 425 individuals at the start of the project.
- Key threats still include bycatch mortality in fishing gear, climate change, human disturbance during breeding, small population size, and loss of genetic diversity.

Saimaa ringed seal.

Photo: Riikka Alakoski, Metsähallitus.

Baltic ringed seal *(Pusa hispida botnica):*

- Classified as near threatened. In the new 2025 assessment by the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (HELCOM), the southern populations are classified as endangered.
- The ringed seal was previously the most abundant seal species in the Baltic Sea, but its population collapsed during the 20th century. The main reasons for this were overhunting and high levels of environmental pollutants.
- The small southern population in the Archipelago Sea (around 200 individuals), which is geographically separated from the main population in the Bothnian Bay, is particularly affected by the impacts of climate change, and all southern Baltic ringed seal populations are in decline.
- In this project we tested the transferability of conservation and monitoring methods that have proven effective in Lake Saimaa to improve the status of the Archipelago Sea population.

Ringed seals spend most of their time in the water, but in winter they need snow and ice for breeding, resting, and moulting. They give birth in snow lairs, and the species' reproductive success depends on sufficient ice and snow cover conditions. Climate change poses a particularly serious threat to ringed seals living in Lake Saimaa and the Baltic Sea, as they cannot move further north when winters become milder.

Baltic ringed seal.

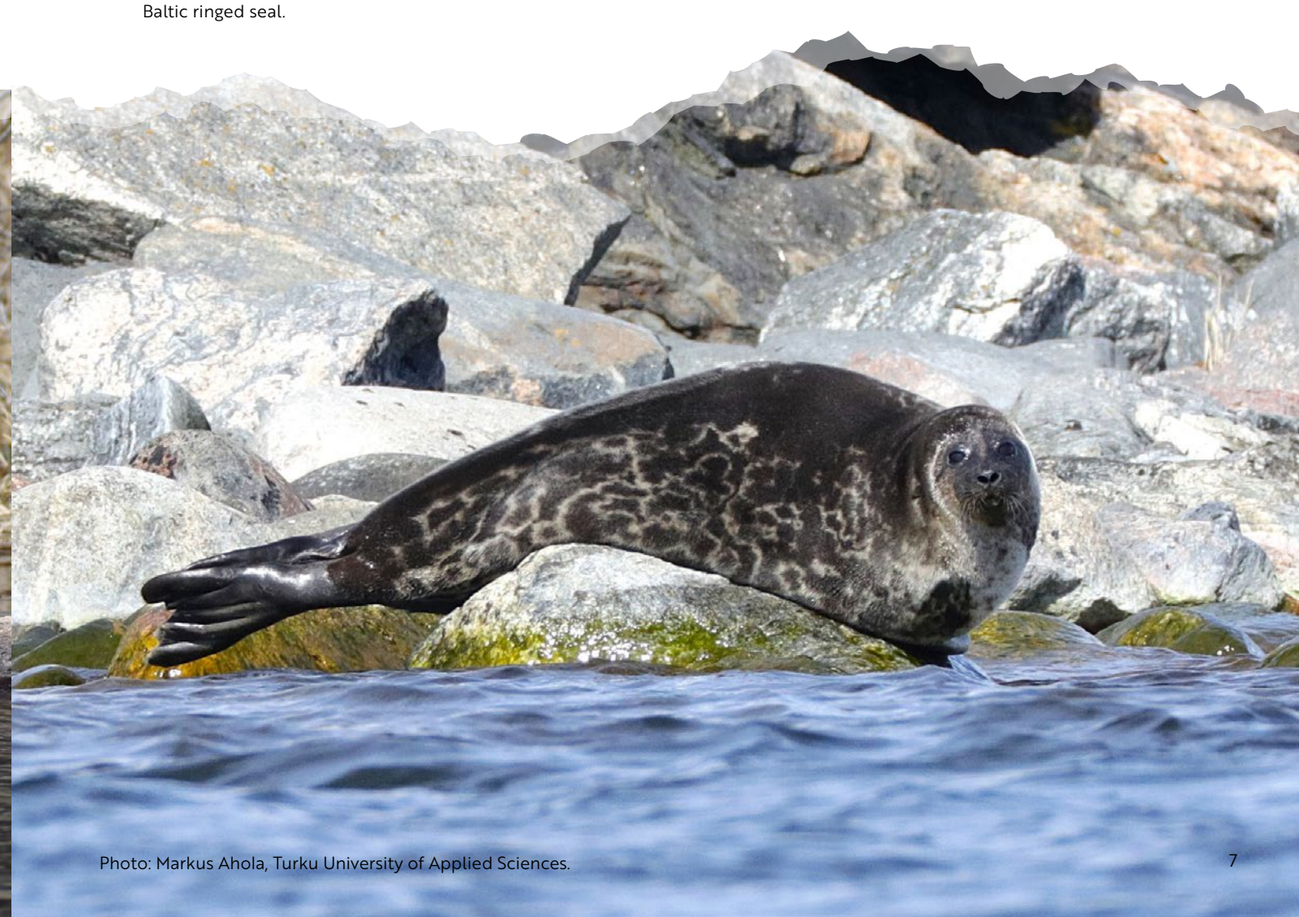


Photo: Markus Ahola, Turku University of Applied Sciences.

The return of a rehabilitated Saimaa ringed seal pup to the wild – a practical example of conservation measures

In June 2024, during the Our Saimaa Seal LIFE project, those working on Saimaa ringed seal conservation received a report of a weak and emaciated Saimaa ringed seal pup that had been spotted on a dock in Lake Saimaa. The law requires helping an animal in distress, and the situation called for quick action. Experts from Metsähallitus and the municipal veterinarian assessed that the pup should be captured, and an attempt made to care for it.

The pup spent two months under the care of Metsähallitus. Its condition was closely monitored, and the rehabilitation progressed step by step toward the goal: returning the seal pup to natural waters with a chance to survive independently. The actions and results of the Our Saimaa Seal LIFE -project are presented through the pup's true story. Join the pup on its journey. *

Photo: Miina Auttila, Metsähallitus.

Photo: Jari Ilmonen, Metsähallitus.

*The project produced four illustrations promoting seal-friendly tourism, which were made into posters and postcards in two languages. The drawings, created by Anna Pakkanen, are also featured at the beginning of each chapter in this Layman's Report. Each illustration is accompanied by guidelines intended for the public.

Chapter 1

Spring Seal Pups – Concrete Measures for Conservation

Secure a peaceful breeding season. Keep away from islets and shores with snowdrifts. Illustration: Anna Pakkanen

Man-made snowdrifts and artificial nests

Ringed seals live beneath solid ice during winter. They create breathing holes in the ice and dig their lairs into snowdrifts on top of the ice. Some adult seals lounge in their resting lairs, while females use the lairs as secure birthing sites where they can safely care for the pup. These can form multi-chambered lair complexes, sometimes over 10 meters long and several meters wide.

Mild winters have reduced the quality of the seal's breeding habitat and increased pup mortality. However, humans can provide practical help. By building man-made snowdrifts, we can secure the seals' breeding opportunities, especially during winters with little snow when sufficient natural drifts do not form. Most of these man-made snowdrifts are built by volunteers. Metsähallitus coordinates the volunteer network and plans suitable locations for the snowdrifts.

Creating man-made snowdrifts is an effective conservation method. During the project, a total of 1,130 snowdrifts were built with the help of volunteers. Of these, 50% contained a haulout or birth lair and over five years, a total of 171 pups have been born in them.

Photo: Riikka Alakoski, Metsähallitus.

When there is not enough snow and ice to build man-made snowdrifts, ringed seals can be helped by installing artificial nests. In the project, we continued the development of artificial nests that began in 2016, led by the University of Eastern Finland. A functional artificial nest provides the mother and pup with the same kind of protection as a snow den.

In the Our Saimaa Seal LIFE -project, we prepared manufacturing, installation, and repair instructions for two of the best-performing artificial nest models out of seven tested designs. The artificial nests are floating structures that can be installed either in open water or on ice. They provide shelter for the mother and pup during snowless and even ice-free winters. During the project, an increasing number of artificial nests were offered to the seals. In the final winter, 41 artificial nests were available, and throughout the entire project, more than 120 were deployed, about half of which were used by the seals.

Artificial nests were also accepted by Baltic ringed seals. In the Our Saimaa Seal LIFE project, we piloted artificial nests in the challenging outer archipelago conditions of the Archipelago Sea. Conditions in the Archipelago Sea are not suitable for the floating nests developed in Saimaa. Four nest models were tested in the Archipelago Sea, with 13 units installed in the outer archipelago. The results are promising: Baltic ringed seals also find artificial nests there and can use them. In 2023, a pup was confirmed to have been born in an artificial nest, and several adult individuals have been observed near the nests during the breeding season. In the future, nests need further development to better protect pups from white-tailed sea eagles and terrestrial predators.

Floating artificial nest on the shore. Photo: Mikko Suonio, Metsähallitus.

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Under favourable conditions, a pup is born in a snow lair in February–March, but during mild winters it may be born—or left early on—without the protection of a lair. Breeding peace is an essential part of a pup's life. People moving on the ice can help ensure a calm start for the pups. As part of the project, we produced guides that provide instructions for moving on the waters and ice of Lake Saimaa, as well as information about the endangered Saimaa ringed seal.

Volunteers also help with population monitoring

Later in spring, the annual lair census begins when the weather warms and the roofs of snow lairs collapse, making them detectable. Metsähallitus organizes the census, with participation from the University of Eastern Finland, WWF Finland, the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation, and local volunteers. Depending on conditions, lair census is carried out by kicksled, snowmobile, skiing, or with a small hydrocopter. Conducting lair census requires a permit to deviate from the prohibition on disturbing Saimaa ringed seals.

The censuses are a huge effort both on a Finnish and global scale: about 70 percent of Lake Saimaa's shoreline is checked annually, totalling roughly 11,500 kilometres. This would not be possible without the contribution of volunteers.

Around one hundred volunteers participate in lair census each year. In addition, about twenty volunteers annually help monitor Saimaa ringed seals by photographing them—more on that later. Expertise from local volunteers familiar with the area was also utilized in surveys during the Baltic ringed seal moulting season in the Archipelago Sea. During the project, approximately 10,000 kilometres were travelled by boat in the Archipelago Sea for surveys aimed at identifying the most important occurrence areas.

In 2025, a record-breaking 114 pups were born. During the entire project (winters 2021–2025), a total of 492 pups were born. In spring 2024, a pup that later came into care was born—still unaware of the adventures ahead.

Artificial nest on an islet in the Archipelago Sea. Photo: Jussi Laaksonlaita, Turku University of Applied Sciences.

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Chapter 2

Pup’s Independence – Seal-Safe Fishing

Fish in a seal-safe way. Fish with a lure, a fishing rod or a tight-funneled fish trap. Illustration: Anna Pakkanen

The mother nurses the pup for 7–12 weeks while also teaching it the fishing skills. The pup remains under the mother’s gentle care until mid-May. At the end of April, the pup’s grey woolly coat changes into ring-patterned adult fur.

After weaning, small and inexperienced pups have a much higher likelihood of dying in fishing gear compared to adults. In our Saimaa Seal LIFE -project, we addressed this problem by developing a seal-safe fish trap model for recreational fishers as an alternative to gill nets and by promoting the use of seal-safe fishing gear.

Seal-safe fyke net

During the project, the Finnish Food Authority examined all sufficiently intact ringed seals found dead to determine the cause of death. In addition to diseases, necropsies can confirm drowning. Every year, several seals are reported dead in fishing gear, and the actual number is estimated to be up to three times higher.

Gill nets are the most dangerous fishing gear for seals, and their use has been restricted in the core range of the Saimaa ringed seal. In addition, traps or fyke nets with an opening that is - or can be spread - wider than 15 cm are prohibited. A fyke net that is closed from above must be equipped with a restrictor (essentially a steel grate) that under no circumstances allows an opening wider than 15 cm.

Photo: Timo Seppäläinen.

In the project, we developed a seal-safe fyke net suitable for non-commercial fishers. Various models were tested for catch efficiency, and as a result of the project, in autumn 2025 we published guidelines for a trap that proved to work well for perch fishing in test trials.

During the project, two pups were reported dead inside commercially used fyke net models, which is why in summer 2025 we tested different sizes of grate models to assess both seal safety and catch efficiency. The test results are still being analysed and will be taken into account in the update of the Saimaa fishing regulation in spring 2026.

Information and Skills – How to Fish Seal-Safely

During Our Saimaa Seal LIFE project, the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation organized a total of 135 workshops where seal-safe Saimaa fish traps were built. The workshops were held for joint owners and water area managers, the general public and volunteers, schoolchildren, and other groups, including Members of Parliament and staff at the Parliament Building. In these workshops, over 1,700 participants built about one thousand Saimaa fish traps. The skills for building seal-safe Saimaa fish traps have also spread internationally. Participants in trap-building events have come from countries such as Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, and China.

At the popular "Exchange gill nets for seal-safe fishing traps" events, local fishers had the opportunity to exchange dangerous gill nets for seal-safe Saimaa traps, which volunteers crafted in workshops. During the project, an estimated 150 gill nets were replaced with about 600 seal-safe traps. In addition, one commercial fisher handed over one and a half kilometres of obsolete gill nets. In return for receiving a trap, fishers signed an agreement to refrain from gill net fishing in Saimaa ringed seal breeding area in the future. Fishers also received information on seal-safe fishing methods, fishing legislation, and current restrictions through materials such as the project's *Fish right with a fish trap* brochure and a photo presentation from the trap-making workshops.

Photo: Hanne Kosonen, The Finnish Association for Nature Conservation.

Working Together for Seal-Safe Fishing in Lake Saimaa

Fishing supervision helps prevent and detect possible violations. During the Our Saimaa Seal LIFE project, the fisheries wardens of Metsähallitus monitored fishing and organized training sessions with fisheries area inspectors across the entire breeding range of the Saimaa ringed seal. During the project, we observed that long-term supervision and communication about seal-safe gear are starting to make an impact. Thanks to monitoring and awareness efforts, the number of traps which are dangerous to seals is now very small, and illegal gill nets are rarely found. However, gear that poses a risk to seals is still discovered every year, so supervision remains necessary. Most unsafe traps belong to fishers who are unaware of the local fishing regulations and their content, which means that communication on the topic is also highly effective.

Photo: Hanne Kosonen, The Finnish Association for Nature Conservation.

Chapter 3

Pup Growth – Care for injured and distressed Saimaa ringed seals

Keep the seal on the rock. Let the seal dry its fur in peace. Illustration: Anna Pakkanen

In the Our Saimaa Seal LIFE -project we produced a handbook on Saimaa ringed seal welfare and health and developed a network of local veterinarians for treating sick and injured Saimaa ringed seals. The method was put to a real-world test in summer 2024 with a pup that required care.

At the end of June 2024, a small, thin, and weak pup was found in Lake Saimaa. The pup had repeatedly spent long periods lying on a pier, so it was decided to capture it and transfer it to Metsähallitus' care facilities.

No illnesses or injuries were found to explain the pup's poor condition; it had most likely received insufficient nutrition even before weaning, possibly due to the loss of its mother. The pup was treated by rehydration and feeding, starting with liquid fish mash and later whole vendace. Because of starvation, it took a long time before its digestive system could handle larger amounts of solid food. Eventually, by August, its weight began to increase.

During the project, a handbook on Saimaa ringed seal welfare and health was prepared, describing the key aspects of the species' biology, health monitoring, and assessment of the need for treatment. The handbook is intended primarily for experts working in Saimaa ringed seal conservation, veterinarians, and others involved in the treatment or evaluation of treatment needs. During the project, we also organized veterinary training sessions which were attended by about 20 participants.

Upon arrival, the pup weighed 8 kilograms, and during the care period it grew to 18.5 kilograms. It also gained an additional 10 cm in length. The pup was fed with Saimaa vendace with a total intake of about 90 kilograms of it during its stay. After two months, it was time to release the pup back into the wild waters.

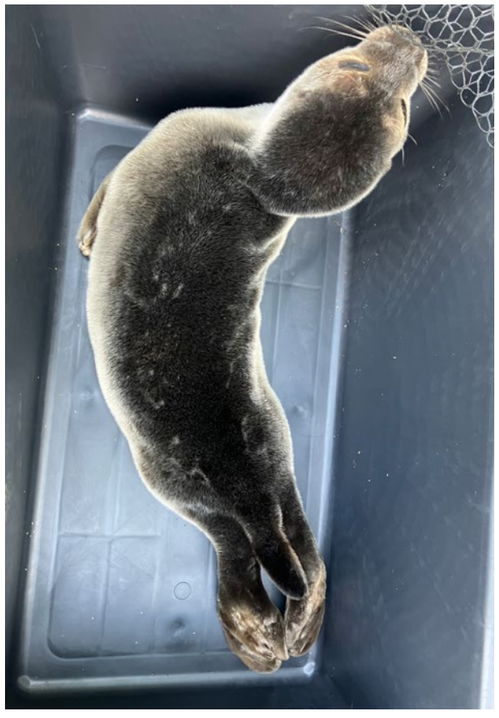

Photo: Riikka Alakoski, Metsähallitus.

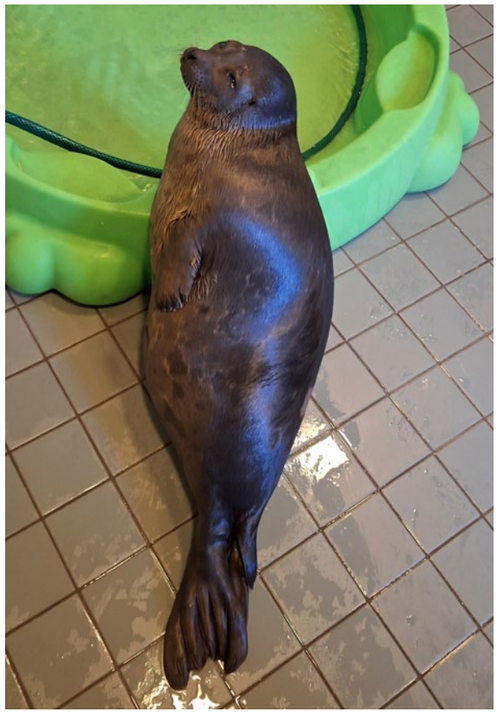

Photo: Miina Auttila, Metsähallitus.

Chapter 4

Wild and free pup – Ways to safeguard the seal's life in nature

Observe the seal from a distance. Do not approach a wild animal. Illustration: Anna Pakkanen

Photo: Jake Kukowski

At the end of August, the pup was strong and ready to return to natural waters. The pup was originally captured in Pihlajavesi basin but released into Kolovesi National Park, a location chosen for its minimal human activity—such as gill net fishing—thanks to the park's protected status. Since the goal of the care was to return the pup to the wild, great care was taken during its treatment to ensure it did not imprint on its caretakers or become tame.

Specialists from Metsähallitus carried out the pup's care in close cooperation with the veterinarian from Korkeasaari Zoo and municipal veterinarians.

Tracking the seals – Monitoring now and in the future

The ringed patterns in the fur of the pup that was in care have been photographed, and a numbered flipper tag has been attached to its hind flipper. These allow the pup to be identified for the rest of its life and its survival to be monitored without disturbing the animal. No tracking transmitter was attached to the released pup.

Photo-ID Research

Individual Saimaa ringed seals can be identified by their fur patterns, which are permanent and unique, much like human fingerprints. These patterns remain unchanged throughout the seal's life, making individual identification possible. The results of photo monitoring are used to estimate the size of the Saimaa ringed seal population. The importance of photo monitoring is increasing as the reliability of lair censuses declines due to milder winters. Each spring, Saimaa ringed seals are photographed by the University of Eastern Finland, Metsähallitus, the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation, WWF, and about twenty volunteers. This effort produces tens of thousands of images annually.

Based on the photos, it is possible to monitor the lives and movements of individual Saimaa ringed seals as well as their social relationships, for example, seals that spend time together on the same haul-out rocks. From repeatedly photographed seals and newly observed individuals, it is also possible to estimate the population size. During the project, this counting method was compared to the traditional population assessment method based on lair censuses, and it was found that the methods produce similar results. To obtain reliable estimates of the Saimaa ringed seal population, at least a four-year Photo ID data series is needed, and the systematic monitoring that has been started should be continued.

In addition to Lake Saimaa, photo monitoring was also tested in the Archipelago Sea. As a result, a total of 160 Baltic ringed seal individuals were identified, which is more than half of the estimated population in the Archipelago Sea. A particularly effective method proved to be the WWF live camera placed at popular moulting sites, which also allowed the public to follow the seals' spring activities. Turku University of Applied Sciences utilized the live stream for individual identification and population assessment of Baltic ringed seals.

Translocations of Saimaa ringed seals for a more diverse gene pool

The Kolovesi basin, within Lake Saimaa, is now home to the seals Amalia and Jelena. During the project, we relocated a total of three seals within Lake Saimaa. The purpose of these translocations was to keep the genetic diversity of the Saimaa ringed seal population as broad as possible and to prevent the isolation of different seal groups.

A wider and more diverse gene pool helps Saimaa ringed seals cope better with changing environments caused, for example, by climate change or chemicals.

In spring 2023, an adult female seal, Amalia, was translocated from Pihlajavesi to Kolovesi, and a male seal, Tuukka, from Pihlajavesi to southern Lake Saimaa. In spring 2024, an adult female, Jelena, was also moved from Pihlajavesi to Kolovesi. Such translocations can influence the genetic makeup of the seal population in the long term, and future research may reveal whether they have helped increase genetic diversity. If Jelena or Amalia give birth to a pup fathered by a local male seal, the pup will inherit genes from two different seal groups.

The monitoring of the translocated seals was carried out using a small satellite transmitter glued to the seal's back fur, which detaches no later than during the next spring molt.

Photo: Samuel Bloch.

The satellite transmitter provided information on the movements of the translocated seal after the transfer and also produced data on, for example, the seal's dive times and depths for research purposes. Individual seals can be monitored throughout their lifetime using their fur patterns, and DNA samples enable tracking into future generations. During the project the University of Helsinki developed a method to determine, for example, which seal individual has been resting at a haul-out site based on hairs found there.

More information about the Saimaa ringed seal and its conservation

How else can we ensure that the endangered Saimaa ringed seal can live peacefully in its own habitat? One important way is to increase awareness about the species and the importance of its protection.

Handbooks, brochures, and educational materials produced in Our Saimaa Seal LIFE-project can be found on the project's website: www.metsa.fi/projekti/yhteinen-norppamme-life/hankemateriaalit/

Seal-Friendly Tourism

During the project, we developed guidelines for tourism businesses in the Saimaa area. The principles of seal-friendly tourism in Saimaa area ensure that entrepreneurs take the presence of the Saimaa ringed seal in their areas into account when planning their operations and services.

Through tourism entrepreneurs, customers receive information about the Saimaa ringed seal and its conservation. The information package includes details on, among other things, the biology and behaviour of the Saimaa ringed seal.

In addition, we launched our own logo for companies committed to the seal-friendly tourism guidelines. Entrepreneurs who adhere to these rules are entitled to use the logo in their online communications.

Seal knowledge through seal excursions

We have surveyed local tourism entrepreneurs and the public to find out whether enough information about the Saimaa ringed seal is available and how strong an attraction the seal is for regional tourism. Based on the results, both businesses and citizens receive good information about the seal, and the Saimaa ringed seal is a significant draw.

Many companies have incorporated the seal into their business activities and made use of the seal-friendly tourism information package.

Game camera photo: University of Eastern Finland.

Among participants in seal excursions, almost all felt they received an appropriate amount of information about the Saimaa ringed seal and its conservation efforts during the trip.

Furthermore, according to a visitor survey in Linnansaari National Park, the Saimaa ringed seal is well-known among park visitors. The majority of respondents feel they have sufficient knowledge of how to act in a seal-friendly manner when moving around Saimaa. Observing the seal is one of the planned activities for many visitors, and for a small portion, it is even the most important one.

Maintaining this level of awareness requires active communication and collaboration with businesses to ensure that entrepreneurs and citizens remain well-informed.

Active Nature Education

The Finnish Association for Nature Conservation delivered the popular Saimaa ringed seal lesson 200 times in daycare centres and schools, reaching over 4,500 people in total. In addition, the mobile *Norpan Saimaa exhibition* toured the Saimaa region during the project in public venues such as libraries and schools. The traveling exhibition was displayed in 40 locations and reached approximately 17,000 people. In guided workshops, about 780 students learned how to build a seal-safe Saimaa fish trap. We also organized Finland's largest class trip—a streamed cruise to the seal waters of Savonlinna—where one school class participated on-site, and around 3,000 people joined via livestream and recording. Furthermore, the seal puppet theatre toured the Saimaa region in 2024–2025, performing nearly 70 shows for over 1,700 people. The Saimaa ringed seal and conservation work were also presented during annual visits to children's seal camps and through two rotating exhibitions: the first combined art and environmental education, while the second

Illustration: Anna Pakkanen

focused particularly on the role of volunteers in protecting the Saimaa ringed seal.

During the Our Saimaa Seal LIFE project primary school pupils explored biodiversity from different perspectives and practiced age-appropriate skills through various themes by using the WWF-designed learning module on biodiversity. The learning module guides pupils toward a sustainable lifestyle and helps them identify and practice ways to make an impact.

The multidisciplinary learning module brings together materials from WWF, the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation, Metsähallitus, and other online sources to support teaching. With these resources, schools can implement a multidisciplinary learning module in line with curriculum objectives. In this module, pupils in grades 1–6 learn about the Saimaa ringed seal and its conservation, as well as the protection of endangered species in general. All materials are freely available for teachers and educators to use and can be accessed online nationwide. In training sessions organized by WWF and the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation, we shared information about the Saimaa ringed seal for teachers.

Guidance and Information Sharing

We provided information about the Saimaa ringed seal to visitors to nature areas through various means: we placed informative signboards at excursion harbours across Saimaa. At Sarviniemi, a popular destination in the Greater Saimaa area, Etelä-Karjalan virkistysaluesäätiö (foundation for South Karelia Recreation Area) built a 1.5 km accessible trail along the Saimaa shoreline, along with other structures and signboards to support hiking. In addition, the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment supplemented the on-site markings of the restriction on motorized vehicles in the water area between the Porosalmi tourism area and Linnansaari National Park in Lake Haukivesi with signs and boards.

We also shared information about the Saimaa ringed seal by producing guides and brochures. The brochure the *peace-loving Saimaa ringed seal*, prepared by the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment of South Savo, provides instructions in four different languages how to move on the waters and ice of Saimaa. In addition, information was shared through various discussion and training events. The risks associated with winter movement for seal breeding were addressed in snowmobile club meetings, as well as in discussion and training sessions for municipal building control and land-use planning officials concerning shoreline construction and land-use planning.

We also shared information and results about seals through the international seal cooperation network and at international scientific conferences, including in Australia. In addition, we visited seal rehabilitation centres in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Our conservation work was featured in several international media outlets.

Innovative Saimaa Seal communication

We captured Saimaa ringed seal conservation work in a documentary film produced by DocArt, which tells the story of the seal and its unique habitat in Lake Saimaa. The film also highlights researchers, authorities, and volunteers dedicated to protecting the seal. The movie "*Operation Saimaa Seal*" was a nominee for the

Photo: Hanne Kosonen, The Finnish Association for Nature Conservation.

European Wildlife Awards in 2025. In Finland, the film has received over 600,000 views and, in addition to being screened at several film festivals, its international distribution has begun.

Together with Juha Taskinen's team, we produced four episodes of "Seal School," which covered the impacts of climate change, fishing with a seal-safe trap, and considerations when planning shoreline construction. The team also interviewed citizens in Savonlinna market square, asking what kind of animal they think the Saimaa ringed seal is. The episodes were published on YouTube in May 2024 and were viewed over 3,000 times during the project.

We also implemented Saimaa seal communication in a new way, combining live music with nature photography. In collaboration with Metsähallitus, the Rantasalmi Wind Orchestra, and Vision Saimaa Photography, we created a visual concert production titled *Our Saimaa Seal*. We organized a total of 15 concerts for schoolchildren along the shores of Saimaa and at various public events.

The Saimaa Ringed Seal as a symbol of nature conservation

In the project, the Natural Resources Institute Finland studied Finnish attitudes toward the Saimaa ringed seal and its protection. About 1,500 people responded, 500 of whom were residents of the Saimaa region. Respondents considered it particularly important that the seal exists and will continue to do so in the future. They viewed the seal as a symbol of nature conservation and of the Lake Saimaa region. There was broad support for increasing conservation measures. For example, the development and use of seal-safe fishing gear and the construction of man-made snowdrifts during low-snow winters received strong support.

The survey also assessed the perceived benefits of conservation programs of varying scope. Finns support a moderate expansion of conservation measures to help the seal population grow. The benefits of broader protection proved to outweigh the costs in the cost-benefit comparison.

Photo: Timo Seppäläinen.

Results of Our Saimaa Seal LIFE -project

In 2025, the Saimaa ringed seal population reached

530 individuals, compared to 425 at the start of the project.

Each year, more than

300 volunteers participated in lair censuses and the construction of man-made snowdrifts, contributing nearly 3,500 workdays in total.

To improve breeding habitat conditions of Saimaa ringed seal,

1,130 man-made snowdrifts were created, 50% of which contained a birth or haul-out lair, resulting in a total of 171 pups born over five years.

Around 150 gill nets were replaced with

600 seal-safe fish traps.

Through environmental education, we reached over

23,000 people, and the documentary film received more than 600,000 views.

A livestream featuring Baltic ringed seals in the Archipelago Sea was viewed nearly

400,000

times during spring 2024.

In the Archipelago Sea and Åland, the most important habitats for the Baltic ringed seal were identified, two new protected areas were established in the Åland archipelago, and the Baltic ringed seal was added as a protection criterion for four existing protected areas.

Photo: Timo Seppäläinen

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