

## Seals and the City: Pinnipeds are Returning to Urban Waterways

Kelly Michalak<sup>2,3</sup>, Afia Azaah<sup>2,3</sup>, Kevin L. Woo<sup>1,2</sup> & Kristy L. Biolsi<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>SUNY Empire State College  
Metropolitan Center  
325 Hudson Street, Fifth Floor  
New York, New York 10013-1005

<sup>2</sup>St. Francis College  
Psychology Department  
180 Remsen Street  
Brooklyn Heights, New York 11201

<sup>3</sup>Center for the Study of Pinniped Ecology & Cognition  
St. Francis College  
180 Remsen Street  
Brooklyn Heights, New York 11201

Urbanization has drastically changed the way in which species interact with their environment. Some generalist species thrive in highly modified habitats, whereas specialists may decline to the point of local extinction. One such group of animals, Phocidae, had once commonly inhabited the waterways of New York City; however, due to a number of potential interacting anthropogenic factors, their presence in this urban habitat was eliminated over a hundred years ago. Recently, the general public began to report sightings of individual seals at various haul out locations along the NYC foreshore. Given these reports, and our own preliminary questionnaire surveys, we conducted naturalistic observations of primarily harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*) and grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) between the wintering field seasons from 2011-2016. Here, we conducted both land-based and boat-based observations at Orchard Beach, and Hoffman and Swinburne Islands. Our results show that seal populations are fairly stable on an annual basis, with a slight increase in the total number of individuals between each field season. The stability in annual populations is encouraging, as it indicates that pinnipeds are indeed returning to previously used locations that are within their natural seasonal range. Moreover, the return of large megafauna to urbanized waterways suggests a likely positive change in ecosystem health – one that is equally favorable for supporting other species. This research was funded by awards to the Center for the Study of Pinniped Ecology & Cognition (C-SPEC), Psychology Department of St. Francis College, SFC Faculty Research Grants, and Faculty Development Awards from SUNY Empire State College.