Lesson 16

Harbor Seals

Because they live in close proximity to the shore, harbor seals are a familiar sight along the New England coast. You may have to look closely to see them because their coloring provides them with a good camouflage; their gray and black mottled coats are hard to see against the seaweed-covered rocks on which they spend much of their time. During the winter months, they inhabit the waters around Cape Cod and along the Massachusetts shoreline. Their dense fur and thick layer of blubber keep them so well insulated that in summer they seek the colder waters of Maine and the Atlantic provinces of Canada.

Harbor seals are equally at home on land and in the water. As the tide ebbs, they climb onto rocks along the shoreline. They return to the water at high tide to forage for crabs, fish, and squid. Harbor seals may seem lethargic as they lie basking in the sun, but actually they are replenishing their blood supply with fresh oxygen. Whether hunting for food or escaping from sharks and killer whales, harbor seals burn up oxygen rapidly when they are in the water.

Because of their sleek bodies and powerful rear flippers, harbor seals can swim up to fifteen miles an hour. They can also maneuver swiftly. They use their front flippers to brake and steer. Their excellent eyesight is necessary for survival. Harbor seals must watch for predators in the murky New England waters. Healthy harbor seals that stay out of harm’s way can live for thirty years.

An adult harbor seal weighs over 200 pounds and eats up to twenty pounds of fish a day. This makes the seals unpopular with those who fish for a living. In fact, seals were so unpopular in the 1800s that the state of Maine offered a bounty of five dollars for every harbor seal killed. Then the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 made harbor seals a protected species. The Act was updated in 1994. It is now against the law to kill, capture, or harass them in any way.

Female harbor seals give birth in late May and early June. Newborn pups weigh about twenty pounds. They feed on their mother’s milk until they are weaned at six to eight weeks. Within hours of being born, they are able to swim and are completely at home in the water. Young seals stay close to their
mothers. The mothers keep a **wary** eye on them until they are able to take care of themselves.

Some seals who ran into problems can be seen by visitors to the New England Aquarium in Boston. Sick or injured seals that could not survive in the wild are brought there for medical treatment. They are kept in a holding tank outside the building. Once restored to health, the harbor seals are released into the ocean to enjoy its limitless freedom but also to face whatever dangers lurk there.

▶ **Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.**

1. Why are harbor seals unlikely to be spotted in midocean?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

2. What happens to the tide when it reaches the high-water mark?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

3. Are harbor seals **lethargic** in the water?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

4. Which single word describes both the body shape and coat of the harbor seal?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

5. What is the meaning of **camouflage** as it is used in the passage?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

6. Why do you need sharp eyes to see harbor seals basking on the rocks?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
7. What is the meaning of **bounty** as it is used in the passage?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

8. Why are harbor seals sometimes difficult to spot in the water?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

9. Why do harbor seals spend so much time lying in the sun?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

10. How does the passage show that seals are good mothers?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

11. Why is it difficult for predators to catch harbor seals?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

12. What is the purpose of the harbor seal's thick layer of blubber?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

13. How do mature harbor seals obtain the nourishment they need?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

14. How does the law protect harbor seals?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

15. What is the meaning of **wean** as it is used in the passage?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
• **Camouflage** is a French military term that has entered English while retaining its original French spelling and pronunciation.

• **Harass** is sometimes pronounced *ha rass’* and sometimes *har’ ess*. While both pronunciations are correct, the second is considered preferable by many dictionaries.

• In some situations, *ebb* and *flow* are antonyms. For example, we speak of the ebb and flow or falling and rising of the tide. (The science teacher explained that the tide *ebbs* and *flows* twice approximately every twenty-four hours.)