

HOW TO EFFICIENTLY PROTECT THE NEW HAUL-OUT OF GREY SEALS (*HALICHOERUS GRYPUS*)

- GUIDELINES FOR THE TOURIST BOAT TRAFFIC IN POLAND

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Introduction:

Recolonization of the southern Baltic Sea by grey seals has been observed since the beginning of the 21st century. In Poland the number of seals observed at the sandbanks forming in the mouth of Vistula River (Nature Reserve "Mewia Łacha") and the length of the period of their presence during the year has been increasing since 2010. Continuous monitoring of the haul-out since 2015 allowed to notice the seasonal regularity of the presence of seals resting on the islets, and at the same time to diagnose the problem of disturbing animals as one of the most serious threats in the newly forming haul-out. The annual increase in the number of seals and their final year-round presence resulted in an increase in tourist interest in this area, and consequently the appearance of the first commercial boats focused on observing seals in their environment. Each year together with the number of seals the number of tourist boats increases.



Fig 1



Fig 2

The lack of regulation caused the boats move carelessly, which consequently disturbed the animals. The owners of vessels regularly conducting "seal cruises" have noticed that it is in their interest to take care of the welfare of animals jointly, guaranteeing the success of tourist surveys. As a result of an agreement between the Hel Marine Station UG and the shipowners, it was possible to establish the preliminary rules for moving around the seal haul-out by boats. However, the recorded increase in tourist interest in this area and the appearance of new boats each year require developing the guidelines for all users (Fig 6). The developed guidelines will allow to regulate tourist traffic to minimize the anthropogenic pressure in the mouth of Vistula River, while securing the safety of animals in the haul-out. This is aimed to lead to stability of seals in this unique habitat.

Fig 1 and 2 : photos of seals that are disturbed (fig 1) and completely calm (fig 2) from the view of the boat

Two graphs below are shown to illustrate the problem. One tells about the number of observed boats (Fig 3), and the other about the number of disturbances observed (Fig 4). As you can see, the number of observed units increases every year. The number of regularly observed boats increases, especially in the period from June to September, when the tourist season lasts and regular seal-watching trips begin.

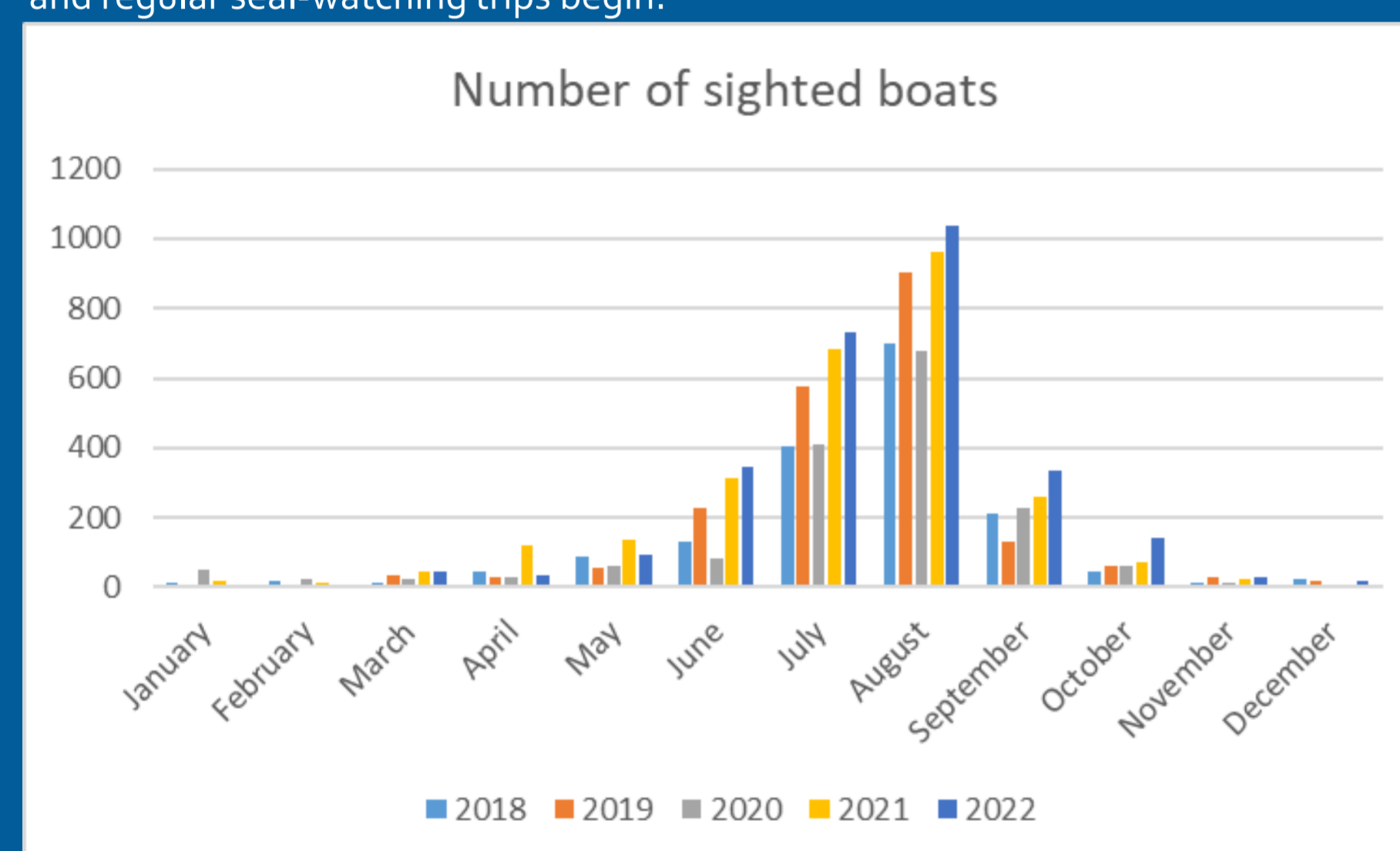


Fig 3 Number of sighted boats

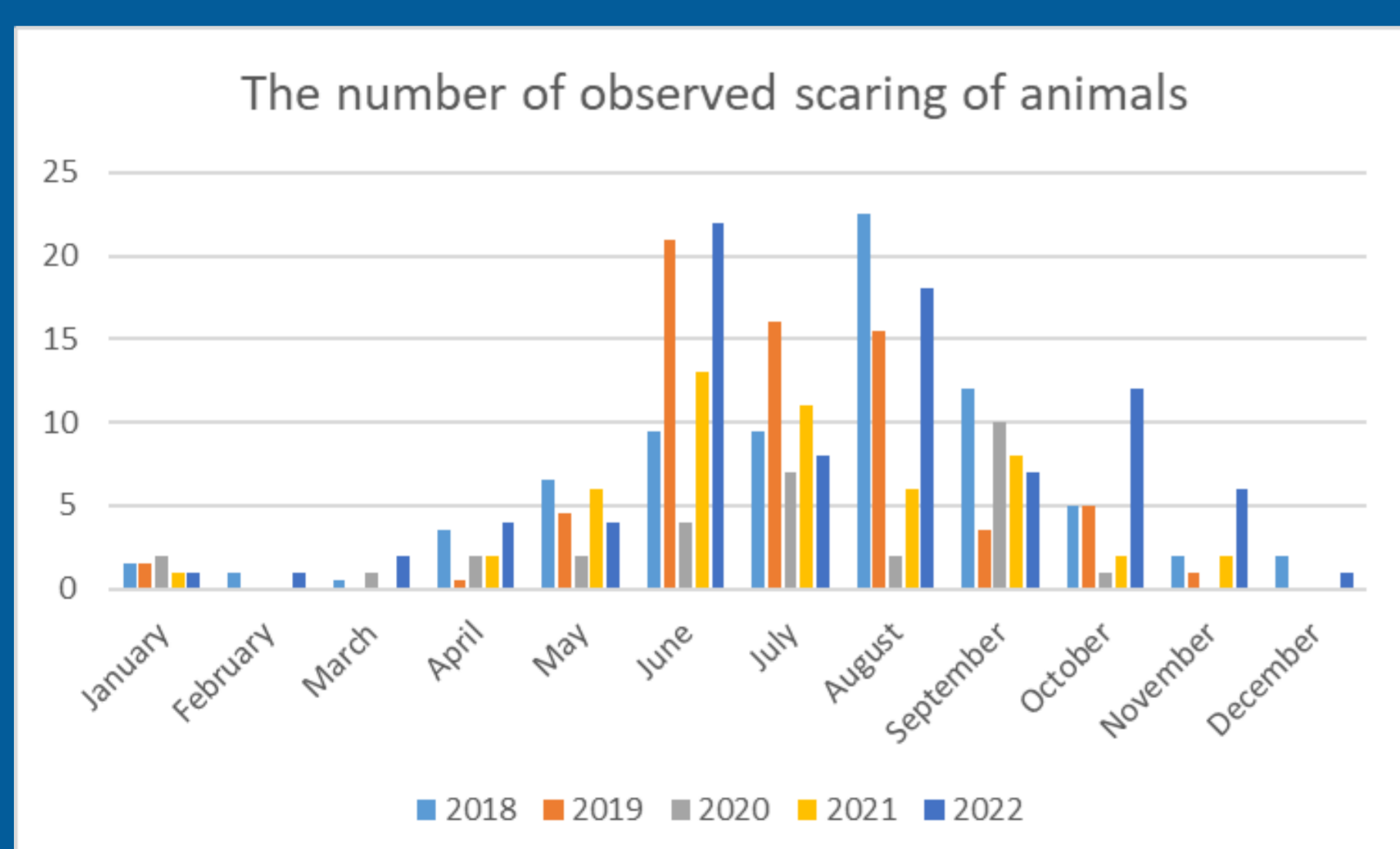


Fig 4 Number of observed scaring of animals



Fig 5 Examples of the most frequently observed tourist boats focused on seal watching

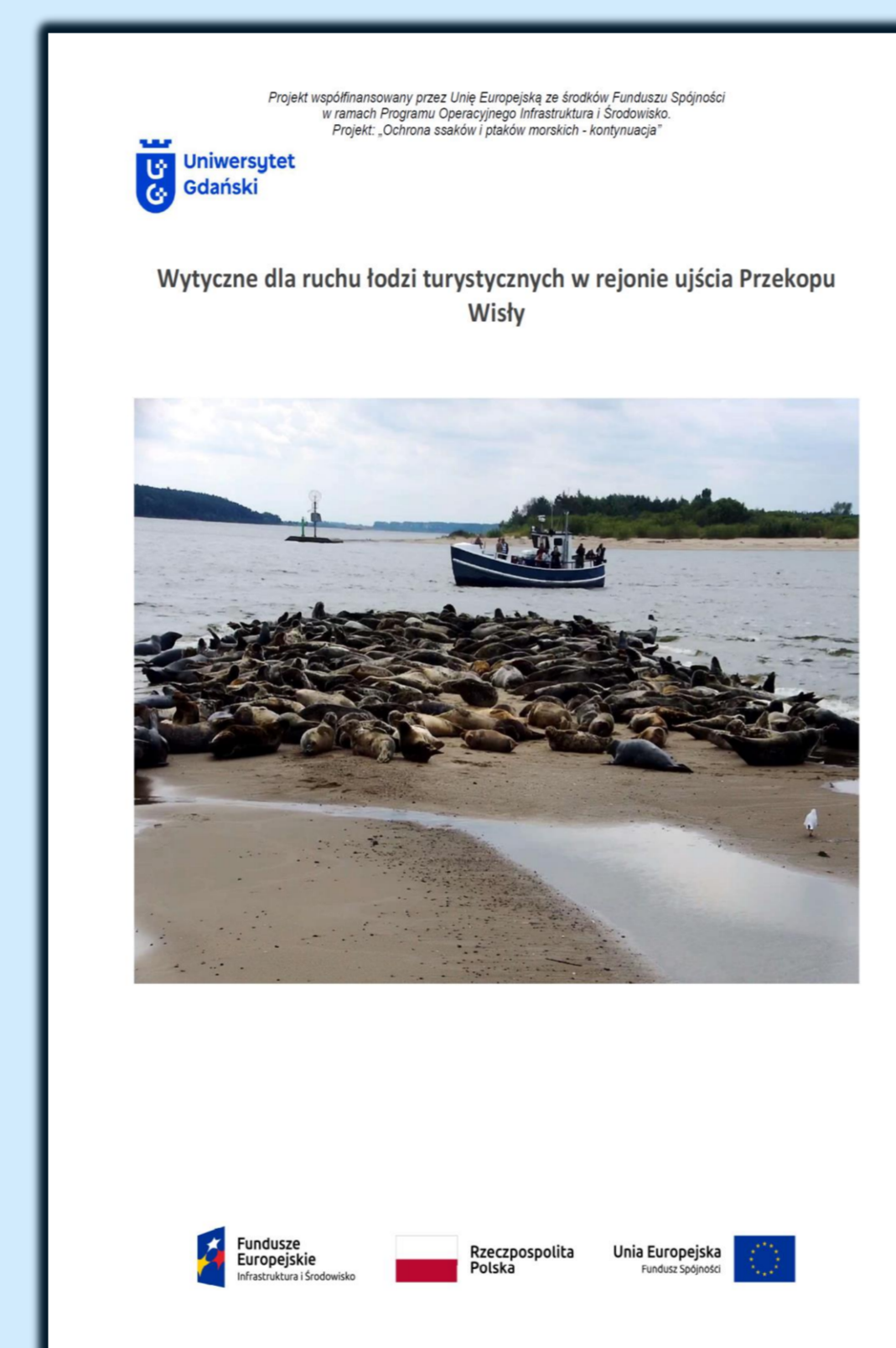


Fig 6 The title page of the study

Guidelines and Recommendations

The rules in the guidelines are based on the principle that a human is a guest in this environment, so he should adapt to the environment and animals inhabiting the area:

- Tourism activities should not have any negative impact on the behaviour of animals,
- Trips should not interfere with the legal regulations in force in the area as well as the protection of seals resting on land or swimming in its vicinity,
- The captain and the crew who conduct the trip near the seals haul-out should be knowledgeable about the specific condition area, sea and weather conditions,
- Each tourist trip should have an appropriate educational value for the participants.

Specific solutions have also been proposed so that the general points can be met:

- Keep a distance of at least 200 meters from islets - taking into account maneuvers or changing weather conditions. Observe the seals constantly - if any disturbing behaviour of seals is noticed back off slowly and immediately and stay further away
- Due to the dual-environmental nature of seals, during observations and approaching the haul-out, their access to both the sandbanks and the free way back to the water should not be blocked, and swimming seals should not be followed,
- There should be no more than 5 tourist boats near the islands at the same time,
- In the area of the Nature Reserve "Mewia Łacha" and in the surrounding waters (distance of 500 m from the islets) boats speed should be maintained at the maximum speed of 5 knots,
- Keep silence around the seal herd, do not shout, whistle and volume down marine radio
- Do not make sudden movements of the boat and of the people in the boat that could scare the animals,
- If seals swim around the boat, keep all hands and feet inside the boat for passenger safety, do not throw food or any objects.
- Taking photos is allowed, however, you should pay attention not to lean out of the boat, do not make sudden movements and do not use a flash.

Next steps to better protect the seals haul-out in the mouth of the Vistula River::

- Implementation of the guidelines by the relevant authority necessary to enable monitoring of its effectiveness
- Introduction of the certification of the boats conducting the seal-watching tourism to minimize the number of incidents leading to unnecessary disturbance of seals by new and inexperienced captains and help direct tourist traffic.
- A necessary condition for obtaining a certificate should be basic knowledge about the area, legal regulations applicable in the Reserve Nature "Mewia Łacha" and basic

knowledge of the biology and behavior of grey seals living in this area

- Granting certificates to boats should affect the self-controlling by the tourist boat owners
- Routine inspections in-situ of all boats in the area should be carried out by the responsible authority.
- Observance of the same rules by all users would unify the behavior of the boats and enable wild animals to get used to the safe presence of humans in the vicinity of their habitat.