Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

Neil the Seal: A Wildlife Management Dilemma

Source: Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania, Neil the Seal Management Plan (November 2026)



Essential question: How should wildlife managers balance the needs of a protected wild animal with public safety?

Video: https://youtu.be/0xwRgFReoXw?si=hu3IiU6kcnwN68LL

Part 1: A Celebrity Seal Causes Trouble

Neil is a male southern elephant seal born in southern Tasmania, Australia, in October 2020. He has become famous because he regularly comes ashore near people: beaches, parks, boat ramps, roadsides, and neighborhoods. Southern elephant seals are protected marine mammals. Adult males can reach 3,800 kg, and Neil will continue growing as he matures.

Southern elephant seals are protected marine mammals. Adult males can reach 3,800 kilograms. They spend long periods foraging at sea and come ashore (haul out) to rest, molt, and breed. Molting means shedding outer skin and fur; resting on land for weeks is normal behavior.

Elephant seals once bred in large numbers around Tasmania and King Island, but intensive sealing eliminated those colonies. Recent births in southern Tasmania suggest breeding may be returning. On the shore, males may spar and push one another. Neil often lacks seal companions, so he sometimes investigates human-made objects.

Elephant seals spend long periods at sea foraging, but return to land to rest, molt (shed their outer skin and fur), and eventually breed. On land, males often push and fight to establish dominance. Neil generally returns to Tasmania twice each year where his stays ashore may last four to six weeks. His behavior is natural, but his choice of crowded locations creates unusual challenges.

Neil is often alone, and he sometimes investigates or pushes against cars and other structures. His online popularity draws visitors who may approach too closely, disturbing him or putting themselves at risk. Wildlife managers must protect Neil, people, and property without interfering with his natural behavior.

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1. Why do elephant seals return to land even though they spend much of their lives at sea?

2. In what ways does Neil's presence create human-wildlife conflict?

3. Why might Neil push or interact with vehicles and other objects?

4. Give one potential benefit and one potential drawback of Neil's social-media popularity.

Part 2 - Four Management Approaches

Tasmanian wildlife officials prefer coexistence when risks can be managed safely. Their plan identifies four approaches. They are not always mutually exclusive: enrichment can be combined with other actions. Managers reassess conditions and escalate their response if risks become unacceptable.

Approach	What managers may do	Key trade-off
1. Non-intervention and site management	Monitor Neil. Post signs; establish barriers, safe distances, and access restrictions.	Least direct disturbance, but depends on a manageable site and public cooperation.
2. On-site seal management	Use barriers and deterrents to influence movement within the area.	May reduce immediate danger, but directing a large seal can be difficult and stressful.
3. Seal enrichment	Offer robust objects for Neil to push or investigate away from vehicles.	May redirect natural behavior; interest may fade or create unintended risks.
4. Relocation	With veterinary oversight, sedate, lift, and transport Neil to another site.	High-risk, resource-intensive; Neil may return to familiar places.

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5. Which approach generally causes the least direct disturbance, and why is it preferred?

6. How could an enrichment object reduce interactions with cars or infrastructure?

7. Why might enrichment work for a short time but become less effective later?

8. Why should managers evaluate each haul-out site rather than follow one fixed response?



Neil with Enrichment

Part 3 - You Are the Wildlife Manager

HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO: Neil has settled near a popular waterfront park. Residents want access restored, visitors are gathering for photos, and officials are concerned about injury and property damage.

Field observation	Day 3 report
Health	Neil appears healthy and alert.
Location	Grassy area beside a public parking lot.
Visitors	Crowds gather for photographs; some ignore signs.
Behavior	Neil occasionally pushes parked cars.
Road	A busy road is approximately 20 meters away.
Habitat	A beach and route to the sea remain accessible.

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9. Identify two risks at this site. Include risks to Neil and to people.

10. Which approach would you try first? (Refer to page 1) Explain why it fits the field observations.

11. Describe three specific actions you would take to reduce risk.

12. What observations or measurements would show whether your strategy succeeded?



Part 4 - Compare Options and Defend a Decision

Complete the decision matrix using evidence from Parts 1–3 and the official management approaches. Use "low," "medium," or "high" where appropriate, and briefly justify each rating.

Management option	Risk to Neil / People	Ability to reduce public risk	Main limitation
Non-intervention / site controls			
On-site management			
Enrichment			
Relocation			

Final CER - Should Neil Be Relocated?



Prompt: When Neil hauls out in a populated area, should officials prioritize keeping him in place with safety measures or relocating him? Use the scenario and management plan to defend a conditional, evidence-based recommendation.

CLAIM — State your recommended strategy and the conditions under which it should be used.

EVIDENCE — Cite at least three specific facts or observations from the case study or plan.

REASONING — Explain how your evidence supports your recommendation. Address public safety, animal welfare, and one limitation or trade-off.