

Fur seals navigate Bass Strait pipes

By Selina Bryan

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Australian fur seals from Kanowna Island, in Victoria, are using Bass Strait pipelines to find food and navigate through the water. (AAP: Victoria Police Media)

- [Video: National Geographic's Crittercam shows fur seals are using Bass Strait pipelines to feed from and navigate. \(7pm TV News VIC\)](#)
- [Map: Walkerville 3956](#)

Researchers have found pipelines on the floor of Bass Strait are providing attractive habitats for Australian fur seals.

They presented their findings at the fourth international bio-logging conference in Hobart this week.

The Deakin University researchers are using 'Crittercams' supplied by National Geographic and GPS tracking devices to find out what seals are getting up to beneath the surface of Bass Strait.

One video from a Crittercam shows a female seal swimming from Kanowna Island off the southern-most tip of Victoria, across Bass Strait to Tasmania.

It appears to be using an underwater gas pipe to navigate by and feed off.

Researcher Dr Kathryn Wheatley from Deakin University says the seal's behaviour was surprising.

"We originally kind of spotted her through her GPS which was fairly straight and we actually thought there was a mistake with it, because usually they're all over the place," she said.

"Then it was corroborated with the video evidence that actually showed she was following the pipeline."

The researchers are monitoring how much time seals are spending around underwater infrastructure.

Deakin University's Associate Professor John Arnould says the female seal could be seen chasing fish along the pipeline.

"This is the first time it's been documented a fur seal or sea lion is following a man-made structure underwater," he said.

Bass Strait hides a range of pipelines, including electricity, power and gas.

It is also home to a growing number of seals.

"The Australian fur seals are recovering very slowly from over-exploitation that ended in the early 1900s," Dr Wheatley said.

Dr Arnould believes the pipelines are improving seals' foraging in the fairly barren Bass Strait by attracting other marine life.

"The water flow is changing around the pipeline, it might mean that there's more food available for fish and octopus around the area which then might make it easier for the fur seals to encounter some prey," he said.

The seals may also be using pipelines for navigating.

Dr Wheatley says the female seal appeared to be doing just that.

"She went off the pipeline for a bit and came back on so that's another way of looking at it is in this featureless Bass Strait these guys can actually use this in terms of navigation, that's one less thing they have to think about," she said.

The researchers recently received an Australian Research Council grant to continue the work over the next three years.

Dr Wheatley says they are hoping to document more seals showing similar behaviour over that time.

"It's fairly important because researchers never really looked at man-made infrastructure and how it affects the seals in previous studies, so obviously in future studies it will be important to include that information in habitat modelling and finding out why these seals are going to these places."

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