

EVALUATION REPORT FOR HERITAGE LOTTERY FUND

DONNA NOOK - SEE THE SEALS SAFELY

YH-11-07041



Lincolnshire
Wildlife Trust



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Donna Nook seal colony is an amazing natural spectacle on the Lincolnshire coast. This project sought to address a number of shortcomings identified over recent years which affected the visitor experience and the wildlife the nature reserve was there to protect. Despite some challenges, most notably the highest tides ever recorded in the UK causing damage to visitor infrastructure, the project has been hugely successful. The very high visitor satisfaction, positive feedback from new and existing volunteers, along with the continuing success of the internationally important grey seal colony is testament to this. Visitors said *"its lovely to see the seals in such a natural environment"* and a wheelchair user 3719 *"wasn't sure if would be able to see but is great"*. A volunteer said *"I feel we now offer a much better, more professional experience for visitors"*. The HLF funding has delivered long lasting impact for visitors, volunteers, local community and wildlife.



BBC Radio 4 presenter Helen Mark could not stop smiling!

This report has been compiled by Janet Mellor (Trustee) in consultation with Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust staff and volunteers:

Paul Learoyd: Chief Executive
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Lizzie Lemon: Outer Humber and Coast Assistant Warden
Emma Wilmot: Senior Education and Community Officer
Rachel Shaw: Senior Communications Officer
Graham King: Tutor 'Dealing with the Public'
Volunteer Seal Wardens

1. WHAT WE WANTED TO HAPPEN (Extract from HLF application March 2012)

1.1 The Heritage Background

The LWT Donna Nook Nature Reserve extends for 10km along the Lincolnshire coast, covering 1,150 ha, of which 341 ha has been designated as National Nature Reserve by Natural England. The reserve consists of dunes and inter-tidal areas. It is part of the Humber Estuary Site of Special Scientific Interest and an important element of the Humber SPA/Ramsar and Humber SAC.

The reserve has the largest and most accessible breeding colony of grey seals in England (3% of the British population and 1.3% of the World population), which now attracts 70,000 visitors between October and January. This is a significant influx of visitors to an isolated area, in inclement weather, needing sensitive handling by all organisations involved, and offering a valuable learning opportunity.

The principal access for seal watching is from Stonebridge car park (50 cars) and along a 600m all-abilities path (constructed in 2009). During the seal season this car park and the approach roads are overwhelmed. Relief is provided by a neighboring landowner who allows charged parking on his field. The shortest route to the seal viewing area is across the dunes and this uncontrolled access is causing significant and hazardous damage to important dune habitat.

The area is rich in birdlife and is popular with birdwatchers.

The site is a MOD bombing range and plane spotters use the same area of dunes being damaged by seal watchers.

1.2 Why we wanted to do the project

Visitor numbers have increased dramatically: seven-fold increase over the last twenty years. The seal pupping phenomenon at Donna Nook receives visitors from all over the UK and Western Europe and is the primary impetus to year-round tourism in coastal Lincolnshire.

- a) Without the Trust's management, large numbers of visitors, photographers and pupping seals would be a detrimental mix leading to human injury and pup mortality. We have tested the double fence proposal and it will ensure better separation and protection for both visitors and seals.*
- b) The site presents a valuable educational opportunity, but interpretation needs improvement to provide an enjoyable and stimulating experience for visitors of all ages, about seals, reserve and the wider marine environment.*
- c) Unmanaged access across the dunes from the privately operated seasonal car park has become a serious issue, with an increasing number of eroded and hazardous 'paths'. The regular use of the dune top by plane-spotters has caused further damage. Preventing access across the dunes is not a viable solution. A safe and robust path is the obvious solution.*
- d) We have a team of 50 volunteer wardens, mainly retirees, some young adults qualified but unemployed. We would like to attract a wider range of volunteers, and create a more satisfactory volunteering experience through greater training and better onsite facilities.*
- e) The Coastal Warden is responsible for 14 reserves and needs support during the seal season. A seasonal warden/project officer for two years would provide this support, with the possibility of developing into a regular appointment.*

- f) *Photographic guided tours roaming on the beach amongst the seals presents a serious management and education problem. In the past two years significant progress has been made, however there remains a hardcore (280 in 2011) which the seasonal warden will engage.*
- g) *Timely to execute this project in the same period as the managed realignment project.*

1.3 Project aims

- *To facilitate learning for visitors of all ages and abilities about the seal colony and the Donna Nook National Nature Reserve*
- *To provide a shelter where visitors can engage with volunteer wardens about the seals, reserve, marine environment and Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust's activities*
- *To improve safe access for all visitors to view the seal colony whilst improving protection for the seals*
- *To protect the dunes SSSI from excessive damage by visitors, and to provide a clearly defined route from the overflow car park to the seal viewing area*
- *To develop participation by a wider range of volunteer wardens for the seal seasons*
- *To improve welfare provision for volunteer and staff wardens on site during the winter seal season*
- *To develop the LWT's presence on the reserve during the winter seal season to educate and improve visitors' behaviour, especially the photographic community on the beach*



2. WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

2.1 Summary Timetable of project delivered

Project permission to start: July 2012, to end June 2014.

July-Sept 2012: Removed old and installed new seal fence, installed removable site cabin for volunteers protection and visitor engagement, purchased volunteers PPE.

Sept 2012: Appointed seasonal Project Officer, recruited more volunteers, induction & training for volunteers, temporary interpretation in cabin. Printed first edition of Volunteers' Handbook.

Spring 2013: Used experience of season 12-13 to design interpretation for cabin and site.

Early 2013 Natural England refused permission for cross-dunes path from overflow car park to be constructed as originally intended. Re-consideration of access issues.

Sept 2013: EA behind timetable on installation of managed realignment project at Donna Nook. The car park was completed fairly early in 2013 season but was soon in a terrible condition, due to flooding and failure of construction. Seasonal PO engaged again 2013-14. Repeat for volunteers' induction and training. Visitor surveys commence.

December 2013: Seal season cut short by major East Coast tidal surge. Viewing area closed to visitors because of significant disturbance to wildlife and seal season effectively lost. Majority of infrastructure lost but replaced by LWT insurance cover and Natural England funding. NE agreed to renewal of seal path and revised fence plus some improvement to cross-dunes path. Serious underspend so HLF revised contract Nov 13 extended to include season 2014-15, agreed marine interpretation hut and other visitor facilities on site.

July 2014 HLF contract extended to Jan 2016, seasonal PO seasons 2014-15 and 2015-16 to ensure full delivery of volunteer and visitor engagement. All damaged or lost infrastructure replaced. Local schools package agreed. Marine hut and interpretation agreed and additional visitor equipment on site.

January 2016 project concluded.

2.2 Staffing

The regional warden was responsible for several other reserves and consequently could not devote sufficient time to expand management at the seal colony. The engagement of a seasonal Project Officer to manage the site during the busy visitor season proved highly successful, not least because the Trust was able to recruit an individual who was very good at engaging with both volunteers and visitors and interested in, and capable of, developing the interpretation offered to visitors. This individual was re-engaged for 2013/14, 2014/15 and 2015/2016 seasons. The Trust has recently evaluated staff resources in the region and has appointed this individual to the position of Outer Humber and Coast Assistant Warden.

The presence of an officer during the seal season has enabled the Trust to:

- Engage and manage volunteer seal wardens much better on a day-to-day basis.
- Provide better training on the job for seal wardens particularly with knowledge of and a manner for visitor engagement.
- Engage with the photographic community regarding safe engagement with the seals. Some elements of this community have caused significant problems with access onto the beach where the seals pup and this is now better controlled.
- Take action quickly when unforeseen or unpredictable events occur on site (this is a particularly remote site).

2.3 Site vulnerability

As events during this project have demonstrated, coastal reserves are constantly subject to change and occasional extreme events. Prior to the project, we could not have anticipated two storm surges during the timescale of the project! However the experience, particularly the December 2013 tidal surge, has led to the Trust devising far more detailed emergency plans so that we are better placed to deal with future events. It remains a fact that sites such as Donna Nook will be subject to major events which will have profound impact on wildlife and visitors. We will constantly review how we manage this and other sites for visitors.



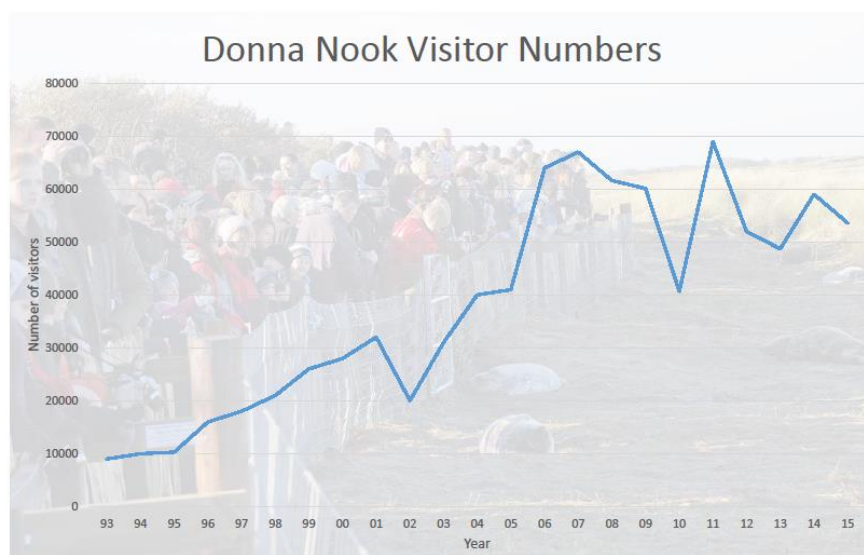
Aftermath of 2013 tidal surge flooding

2.4 Finance

The project was delivered within budget however, several factors resulted in changes to the project expenditure, most significantly the re-consideration of access issues and the damage caused by the major tidal surge in 2013.

With the agreement of HLF an increased allocation was given to people engagement elements of the project while achieving the infrastructure improvements through alternative means. The project was extended to ensure this could all be delivered.

The project attracted additional funding in support of extra work including from a small charitable trust Paw Print and Natural England, primarily in response to the devastating floods in December 2013. We saw donations by visitors double over the period of the project.



3. THE DIFFERENCE MADE BY THE PROJECT

3.1 The Difference Made To Heritage

3.1.1 The reserve as a whole

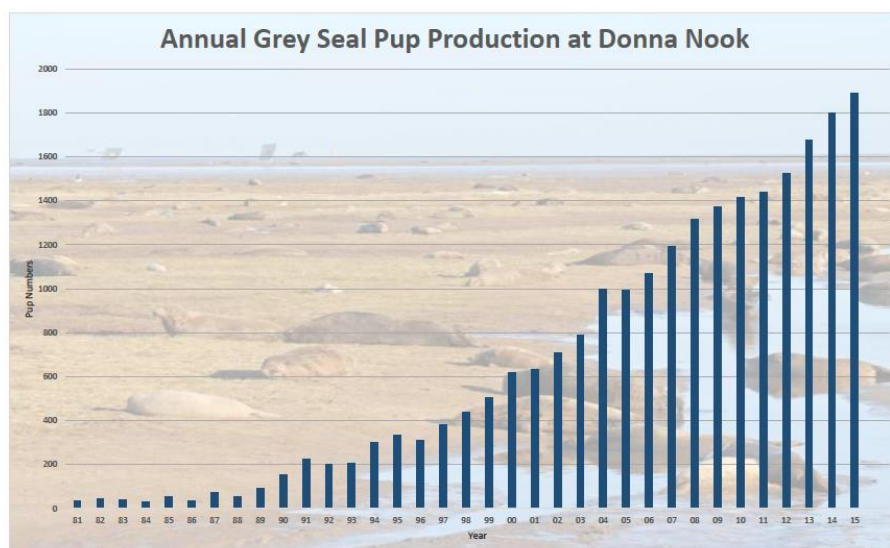
The improvements made to the viewing area have all helped to concentrate the huge number of visitors into a small area, thus protecting both the remainder of the seals and the rest of the reserve from potentially damaging impact. Further, the project has allowed us to engage these visitors in wider marine issues. These improvements include:

- surfaced path from main car park allowing easier access for all abilities
- upgrade of sections of dune path from overflow car park, ensuring safe access route whilst reducing uncontrolled access over dunes with resulting damage to important habitat
- flexible cabins on site allowing us to extend the delivery of interpretive material
- increase in amount and quality of interpretive material
- availability of robust benches
- interpretive materials such as quiz and children's story book



New cabins for visitors and volunteers

3.1.2 Protecting the seals



The new double fence is now a mainstay of Trust management of the viewing area – with all the human visitors kept behind the double fence, the seals appear largely unaffected by the presence of so many people. This habituation is demonstrated in the event of unauthorised entry by a member of the public or a member of staff entering the area operational purposes. Under such circumstances animals get very distressed. Moreover, the double fence and the resurfaced path enable all visitors to see the seals safely and at very close quarters. The seals are undisturbed and the humans are safe.



New double fencing and surfaced path

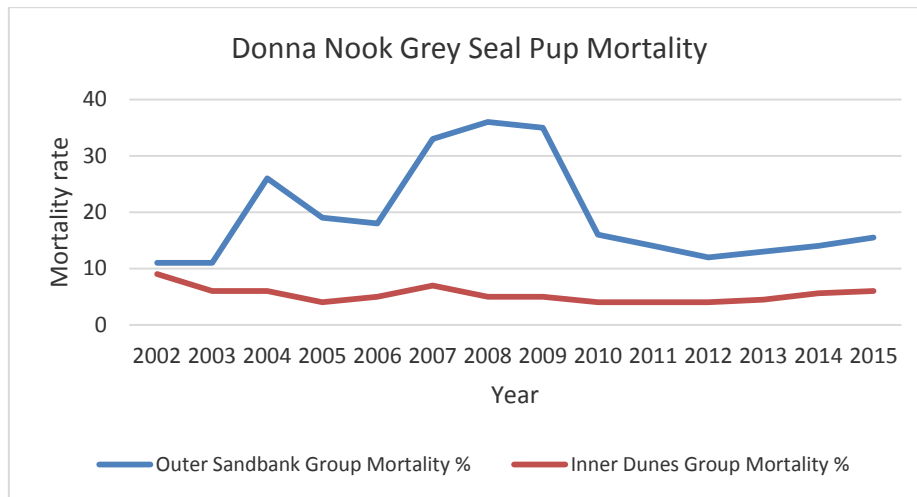
The warden's handbook enables the voluntary wardens to provide answers to the vast majority of questions about the site, seals and pupping and to ensure a consistency of information; a better informed public provides its own protection for the seals. The training on 'Dealing with the Public' has helped volunteer wardens to better understand their role and also give them the skills to deal with any potential conflict situations.

There has been a recent history of incidents with visitors and especially photographers seriously disturbing seals on the outer beach causing an increase in pup mortality. During this project there has been wide involvement of the internet e-community, especially photographers throughout Europe to try to curb the worst excesses of photographers' demands by promoting the Nature Photographers' Code of Conduct.



Unauthorised access to beach by photographic group

In 2014 a total of 44 people went out on to the beach to view the outer group of seals. Of these 36 were visitors from Europe and the remaining 8 from the UK. In 2015 no-one went out onto the beach during the seal season. It is gratifying to see that with all this extra effort, pup mortality in the outer group remains much lower than in the years up to and including 2009, when large numbers of visitors mostly photographers (peaking at over 200 per day) were going out onto the beach.



Visitor viewing area behind the fence

3.1.3 Interpretation

Prior to the HLF project the Outer Humber and Coast Warden had several years of providing on-site interpretation for visitors and had gained an insight of the type and style of information which was required. We were able to use this experience, along with skills brought by the Project Officer and other Trust colleagues, when compiling new weather-resistant, high quality interpretation for different age groups during the HLF project. We have installed seven small panels along the fence line conveying succinct educational information in the form of children's questions and answers. There are also interactive interpretation boards, where children place their heads into gaps for photos, encouraging long term care of the marine environment.



New interpretation at the fence

In the main cabin we have installed interpretation about:

- other seal colonies in the UK
- seal's diet and position in the food chain
- where seals go as informed by satellite trackers
- birth of seals
- how to find out more information about seals and Donna Nook
- how to become a volunteer



We have compiled a quiz (in Appendix 2) for children to complete during the visit which has proved successful in engaging their interest. As a reward for completing the quiz, children are given a copy of Sammy the Seal booklet to keep (attached) based on learning from similar species protection projects run by Wildlife Trusts. This has proved enormously successful in engaging children to learn more about the seal's life cycle, what they eat and their habitat.

In the third year of the project we provided an additional cabin devoted to the marine environment of the North Sea. This has coincided with the national discussion about Marine Conservation Zones and highlights:

- what lives in the North Sea
- how busy the North Sea is – oil and gas extraction, windfarms, shipping, ferries, fishing
- the importance of Dogger Bank

Towards the end of the project we were able to utilise underspend to purchase cameras for use on site. This will enable us to make videos of seal behaviour in the future which can be shown on computers in the cabins.



3.1.4 Improved access to the site

The Trust has not been able to find a solution to providing additional car parking for the Donna Nook reserve and so remains reliant on the Environment Agency's car park and the adjacent landowner making his field available for charged car parking during the seal season. As a result of the managed realignment project the EA's car park is now formally set out and provides an adequate facility for the majority of the year. On busy days during the seal season visitors are reliant on the temporary car parking and they use the improved path across the dunes to access the seal path. The improved dune path is working tolerably well although it falls below the standard the Trust originally intended. The Trust continues to work closely with the landowner to achieve mutual benefit. A refreshment van parks in the EA car park at busy times and is much used by visitors. The Trust does not envisage any significant improvements to access in the near future.

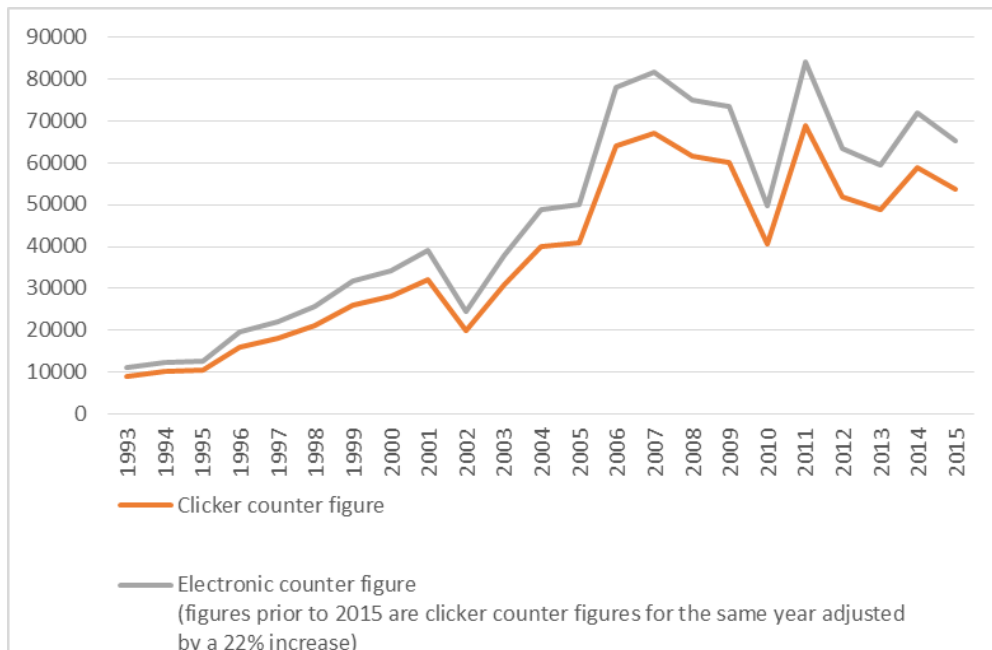


Car parking in landowner's adjacent field

3.2 The Difference Made For People

3.2.1 Visitor numbers

Visitors to Donna Nook during the seal pupping season have increased dramatically in the past twenty years, reflecting wider public appreciation of the wildlife spectacle. Prior to the HLF award we have relied on approximate visitor numbers taken by user a clicker counter. We purchased an electronic counter under the HLF project to provide more accurate information, and have now adjusted our previous figures to reflect the apparent inaccuracy. It would seem likely that the annual total will remain between 60 and 70,000 given the current situation.

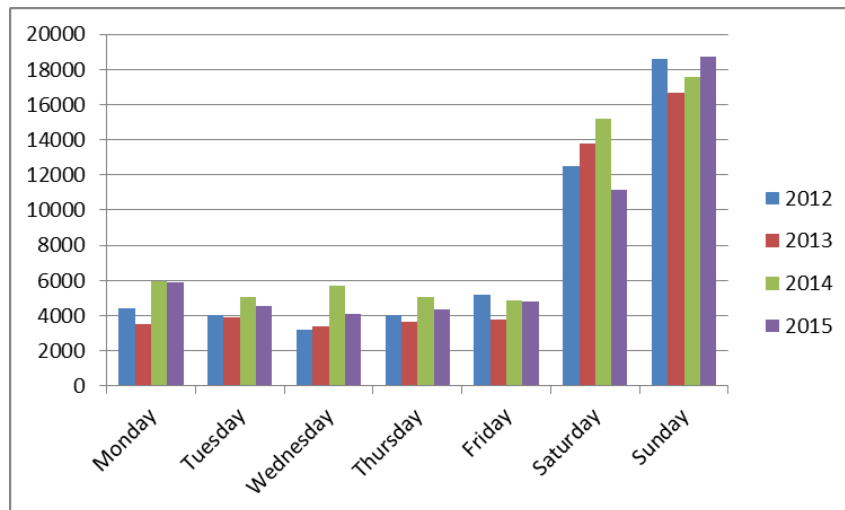


The lower number of visitors in 2010 was due to extremely bad weather. The reserve viewing area was declared closed for the remainder of the seal season following the surge tide 5 Dec 2013, and although small numbers of people continued to visit, it is not surprising that visitor numbers (48,700) were down on the previous year. It is worth noting that prior to the surge tide, visitor numbers were up 8% on the previous year.



The developing Blakeney and Horsey grey seal breeding colonies (rookeries) in Norfolk are now attracting more visitors so it is possible that visitor numbers at Donna Nook have peaked and stabilized. The Trust has no wish to increase visitor numbers as the site is extremely busy on peak days and it is proving quite difficult to alter visitor preference away

from November and December weekends. All our media communications suggest to visitors that they will enjoy a better experience if they come midweek, and repeat visitors now appreciate that visiting midweek is advantageous. Sundays remain the busiest days with a peak of 4,692 visitors on 22 November 2015. The table below shows total number of visitors on each day of the week per year. While we have not been able to show any significant reduction of Sunday visitors in 2015 there was a decrease in Saturday visitors, hopefully indicating a future trend.



3.2.2 Group visits

The number of educational visits has increased during the HLF project. The Trust encourages groups to book so that not too many book on any one day, and to minimise the number of coaches in the car park. As a result of the HLF project we are now able to provide schools with worksheets and a quiz, Sammy Seal booklets as well as providing a quality meet and greet introduction by wardens. The number of groups visiting is now manageable.



	2012	2013	2014	2015
Primary	211	194	485	223
Secondary	0	50	57	21
Higher Ed	267	268	507	486
Adults	167	306	234	271
Total	645	818	1283	1001

2014 - A record 1,057 children visited on educational trips. Primary school visits, with 9 schools bringing a total of 485 children, and university groups, 11 higher education providers bringing 510 students, made up the majority of these. Only two secondary schools visited bringing a total of 60 children. An additional 234 adults visited as part of the 8 adult groups including WI's and U3A's.

2015 - The number of children visiting on educational trips this year was 730. Eight primary schools visited bringing a total of 223 children, one secondary school of 21 students and eight higher education providers brought a total of 486 students. An additional 271 people, mainly adults, visited as of 14 groups including WI's and U3As.

During the period October 2014-January 2015 Education staff from the Trust's Far Ings Centre delivered interactive assemblies with an entertaining presentation with props to 17 primary schools across North and North East Lincolnshire, plus one special needs Secondary school (twice to different ages). In addition each school received an information pack about Donna Nook, the work of the Trust and a copy of the book 'Sammy's Adventure'. The purpose of these assemblies was to spread interest and knowledge of the wildlife of the North Sea, and Donna Nook in particular, prior to a site visit by the school. 3,517 pupils received the assembly presentation, representing a sizeable learning opportunity in an area of significant social deprivation.

3.2.3 Visitor survey results

Visitor surveys were carried out during the 2014 and 2015 seasons by the Trust using the questionnaire in Appendix 1. 85 surveys were achieved in 2014 and 56 during 2015.

Asked the number in their group:

One	7%
Two	61%
Three	13.5%
Four	14%
Five	1.5%
Six	1.5%
Seven	1.5%

The ages of the children brought:

30% under 5
50% 5-10
13% 11-14
7% 15-18

A large proportion of visitors are couples, and the majority of families are bringing primary age children. This is important information considering the appropriateness of interpretation and engagement on site.

Asked where they were visiting from:

39% Lincolnshire including N and NE Lincs
11% Yorkshire including W, N and S Yorks
10% Nottinghamshire
5% Derbyshire
4% East Yorkshire (ie North Humberside)
3% Derbyshire
18% other parts of England comprising 8% SE, 4% W Midlands, 2% East, 2% Northwest, 1% Southwest, 1% Northeast)
3% outside the UK!

Asked if they had visited before:	2014	2015
Said no	40%	68%
Said yes not every year	27%	25%
Said yes most years	26%	7%

We clearly have an appreciative audience which enjoys the spectacle on a frequent basis and we have also encouraged an increase in new visitors. The reduction in 'most years' visitors could be attributed to the provision of regular information on social media, keeping people updated and engaged without necessarily visiting.

Asked if the information on site was helpful, visitors gave answers on a range (from 1 being strongly disagree to 5 being strongly agree). 5% gave grade 4 and 95% gave grade 5, indicating overwhelming success of our recent interpretation.

Asked if the volunteer wardens were friendly and informative, only 4% of visitors replied that their grading was lower than a 5 or was not appropriate as they had not spoken to a warden. This would confirm that our briefing and training programme has been worthwhile.

All our visitors agreed that the double fence was an essential part of the site management. This is good news as it supports our management objectives and lessens the possibility of damaging beach visits. 97% of visitors stated that their enjoyment of their visit rated grade 5.

Asked if the visit was what they expected, the majority said yes. 41% said no, but their comments included 'better', 'seals closer than expected', 'more seals than expected', 'thought it would be a more 'managed' site, it's lovely to see the seals in such a natural environment', 'fence is different from 18 years ago, better than we expected', 'thought there would be one or two seals miles away on rocks', 'wheelchair user - wasn't sure if would be able to see but is great'. There were no adverse comments except about how cold it was!

Asked if there was anything we could improve, visitors replied toilets and parking. Both of these issues are well understood by the Trust and will be kept under review, but given the location extremely difficult to improve. On site signage makes the situation very clear to visitors. Parking is either the Environment Agency's Stonebridge car park which has been recently improved or the private parking provided by the adjacent farmer who is not prepared to lease land to the Trust. The nearest public toilets are in the village, and Portaloos are provided by the adjacent landowner for his patrons. A few people suggested a café but the Trust is not pursuing this, preferring instead to work with local businesses to improve their offer.

Other comments included: 'Very impressed with all work done - new fence, path, info etc', 'wheelchair access has improved', 'donation boxes should be more prominent', 'main carpark needs to be bigger', 'more seating near path. Portaloos in main car park', 'more signs along road to get to site', 'impressed with way we have retained wild feel of site while incorporating required management', 'stop people parking on road near car park, double yellow lines?', 'you should charge people to come'.

3.2.4 Volunteer warden recruitment, numbers and range

	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Total No of volunteers	49	50	53	49
No of skilled volunteers	4	5	5	9
Total hours	2384	2361	2380	2106
Skilled hours	575	633	546	139

During the 2015 season 12 new volunteers signed up to warden in 2016. The number of skilled volunteers has increased as a result of the training provided by HLF. The Trust will continue to provide this training when there is a significant turnover in volunteers. The drop in skilled hours during 2015-16 was due to the unexpected departure of one person who had previously devoted considerable time.

We have tried to recruit a wider range of volunteers by working with local universities and colleges, but our best method of recruitment is through advertisements on site. The advantage of this is that recruits are aware of the challenging weather and site conditions before they start! We have also recruited a few volunteers through Facebook. The majority of our volunteers, though not all, are older people. As a result of the HLF project we are in a very good position regarding the numbers and quality of our volunteers.

3.2.5 Volunteer training, welfare and wellbeing

Courses held	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
First aid	8	8	6
Dealing with the public	9	9	5

Volunteer Wardens at Donna Nook attended a four hour course 'Dealing with the public' which was delivered by a recently retired Police Inspector. The aims were: to clarify the role of the Volunteer Warden; identify and develop effective communication skills; identify potential conflict situations; develop conflict resolution skills; and to give effective evidence gathering procedures.

Volunteer wardens were also given scenarios and allowed the opportunity to devise a strategy before taking part in role-plays. Different types of interaction were introduced to allow students to try methods of dealing with realistic situations. Following a debrief session the students received relevant literature including the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trusts' guide 'Dealing With Violence and Aggression'.

The four hour First Aid course provided has been appreciated by volunteers, who now feel more competent at judging whether to call assistance to site. Very few volunteers have wished to claim mileage allowance for travel to site or training.

With funding from HLF and support from Paramo Directional Clothing Systems we were able to provide our volunteers with highly identifiable hats, fleeces and good quality waterproof and windproof coats and hand warmers for use on their shifts at Donna Nook, which has proved highly successful for both volunteers and the visiting public.

The volunteers' space in the cabin has proved highly successful and is greatly appreciated for respite from the weather with light and heating. This is a significant improvement on what had been provided previously and, despite initial reluctance by the volunteers to ask or accept something, was needed.



3.2.6 Volunteer wardens' feedback

We asked four volunteers to give us their feedback on the success of the project. Their answers seem to say it all so are included in full and unedited.

Bethan – a long term volunteer

"Life as a warden at Donna Nook has improved greatly over the past few years. The improvements to the path make it a lot safer without any trip hazards. It is nice and wide so visitors can stand and view the seals, making it easier for people passing and when groups are talking to wardens. The huts have provided the wardens with a place to safely keep their possessions (more clothes, hot drinks and snacks) and shelter when the weather is really too bad to be outside. The new coats are of a very high standard and withstand the sometime very inclement East Coast weather very well. Along with the high visibility waistcoats the wardens are very identifiable. The increase in the number of gates in the fencing is reassuring in case there is another incident when the seals need access to the dunes. Wardens are more confident in performing their role as we have had first aid training and courses of how to deal with the public. To enable us to remember all the facts about the seals we have a volunteer handbook.

There are also many improvements for the visitor - the space provided in the 2 huts allows them to shelter and look at lots of useful information about the seals, wildlife and flora on the reserve. The wider, level path allows access to parents with buggies and they can keep their young children wrapped up warm in their pushchairs. Visitors who have difficulty walking and use aids or wheelchairs have now got safe access to view the seals. The double fencing is a much better deterrent to little fingers trying to touch these wild animals and lessens the disturbance to the seals.

As well as information in the huts there are further facts available on signs attached at intervals along the length of the fence about the cycle of life on the beach during the season.

Children who visit are given the book about Sammy the Seal, can take part in a quiz and a look under the question and answer boards. Donna Nook is a fantastic place to educate children about nature. Talking from experience as a grandmother, the questions and wonder does not stop at Donna Nook. It is fascinating for children to witness birth, death and procreation at first hand."

Judith – long term volunteer

"I have been a volunteer seal warden at Donna Nook for the last 8 winters. It is a fabulous local nature reserve managed by Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, where the public has the opportunity of getting very close to Atlantic Grey seals.

8 years ago the path and fencing were very basic – the path just sand, and when it got covered in puddles which froze, was extremely dangerous. I know-I fell!! There was 1 fence and people and children could poke their hands through to try and stroke the seals risking losing a finger. We now have a double fence and a natural looking but proper path that no longer freezes. There is now very little disturbance to the seals as people stay behind the fence and the colony is growing each year.

As volunteers we now all have the same informative handbook so we should be giving out the same facts about the seals. The new huts are an enormous asset – providing lots of information on marine life and detailed information about the seal colony and they provide us with shelter if the weather gets terrible! We also have a small shop selling goods – all seal related – and making additional funds for the Wildlife Trust.

Visitors love the information provided which now include weather proof boards on the fence, leaflets, and a big success with children has been the book 'Sammy the Seal'. Both adults and children alike are thrilled to be so very near to the seal colony and if lucky witness a birth. Always exciting for people!

This year we were provided with excellent waterproof jackets, fleece and a hat in a distinctive red with 'volunteer seal warden' embroidered on them so we were easily identified as wardens. We get asked lots of questions by the visitors who come whatever the weather. Groups of school children and university students regularly visit and are always full of questions.

Many of us undertook courses on First Aid and Managing the Public. Both very useful courses as so many visitors now come to Donna Nook. I feel we now offer a much better, more professional experience for visitors than we did 8 years ago probably reflected in the ever increasing visitor numbers.

Donna Nook gets national recognition in photography magazines, camping and caravanning magazines, wildlife magazines, newspapers and of course on TV. Only this month I read in a photography magazine that it is one of the best places for wildlife photography in the UK. We get visitors from all over Britain and Europe and people follow the main warden on her Facebook Page.

The additional funding from The Lottery has massively improved visitors' experiences and has helped us volunteers to be more professional, and that in its turn, is reflected in our enjoyment each winter of helping to look after the public and the seals in this great natural spectacle."

Gerry – volunteer since HLF

"As a reasonably new volunteer warden at Donna Nook Seal Sanctuary I have been asked my views on the Heritage Lottery Funding received. My view is that is absolutely fundamental to maintaining what is a unique experience for the 60,000+ visitors during October to December each year. I say unique as where else can you get so close to wild animals in their natural habitat at their most vulnerable time of year? Lottery funding has been fundamental in providing a safe environment for visitors and seals alike. With the disastrous floods of a few years ago the funding was imperative to restore the site fencing and walkways to a safe environment so visitors could continue to enjoy this spectacle. Fencing and smooth pathways mean that the site is now easily available to all, young and old including easy wheelchair and pushchair access.

From a warden's perspective, funding has also allowed the Lincs Trust to provide us with the required clothing to withstand an eight hour day in low temperatures, wind and rain so that we can fulfil our aims of providing information and assistance to our visitors throughout the season. The new cabin containing the shop and wardens area provides a welcome hiding place for coffee and biscuits before returning to duties.

New graphics in our visitor information areas, information leaflets and child's books enable us to teach the younger visitors the importance of our wild life heritage and enables school trips to experience a wonderful experience. I have been lucky enough to be involved in a few of these visits from local schools and to see the children's drawings made after the visit was very gratifying."

Enid (volunteer since HLF funding)

"The experience of wardening at Donna Nook is very satisfying. The provision of a warden's handbook makes the gaining and therefore giving of information to visitors a positive experience. It provides most answers to the questions asked and also provides some continuity between the information wardens give. To gain all the information provided in the handbook would probably take many seasons to acquire.

The fencing, particularly now it is a double fence system, really helps in the wardening role. It provides a clear barrier between the seals, who do like to lie near the fence, and the public. This keeps both the public and the seals safe. The gap is sufficient to deter people trying to touch the pups but does not detract from viewing. The visitors respect the fencing and the protection it provides, and many do comment on its presence positively.

The clothing provided has kept us all snugly warm and dry and makes us clearly visible to the public. I think it also gives the public confidence to approach us and ask questions. It has been noticeable this year how many more visitors have been asking questions and encouraging their children to do so.

Having somewhere safe to store personal possessions and to take shelter if the weather is really bad is ideal. The hut also gives a focus for visitors to view photographs and read more about the seals. I have had visitors ask me further questions based on the information they have seen and read in the hut. They might not have asked these questions if this information had not been available.

The introduction of the quiz and story book for children has been a great way to introduce young children to the life of seals. The quiz has engaged whole families in looking for the answers on the information boards. The children really seem to enjoy making a choice of the answers and then lifting the flap to find out whether they are right or not. This can only enhance both their experience and their knowledge. I wonder how many story books have been taken into school for "show and tell" sessions! I always suggest this when I have given any out. The parents always seem very pleased with the story book as well."

3.3 The Difference Made for Communities

3.3.1 Impact of digital communications

The Trust's decision to have a **Donna Nook Warden Facebook** page was to ensure correct and accurate information was disseminated to the public. We were aware of individuals starting their own Facebook pages about the seals and that conservations were already happening on social media. The aim of the Facebook page is to use it as a tool for visitor management rather than encouraging more visitors by posting photos of cute seals. The large number of likes and viral nature of some of the posts shows interest and engagement not necessarily prompting a visit.

The Donna Nook Warden Facebook Page was created in October 2013 and gained a huge following after the storm surge. It immediately became apparent just how effective it was in conveying information to our audience very quickly. It has continued to be a useful medium for informing people about the progress of the season and to directly answer questions regarding visiting.

By January 2014 there were over 5,000 people following the page. As of 02/03/16 there are 13,142 people regularly following the Donna Nook Warden Facebook page. The graph below shows that most people 'liked' the page during the grey seal pupping season (Source: Facebook Insights)



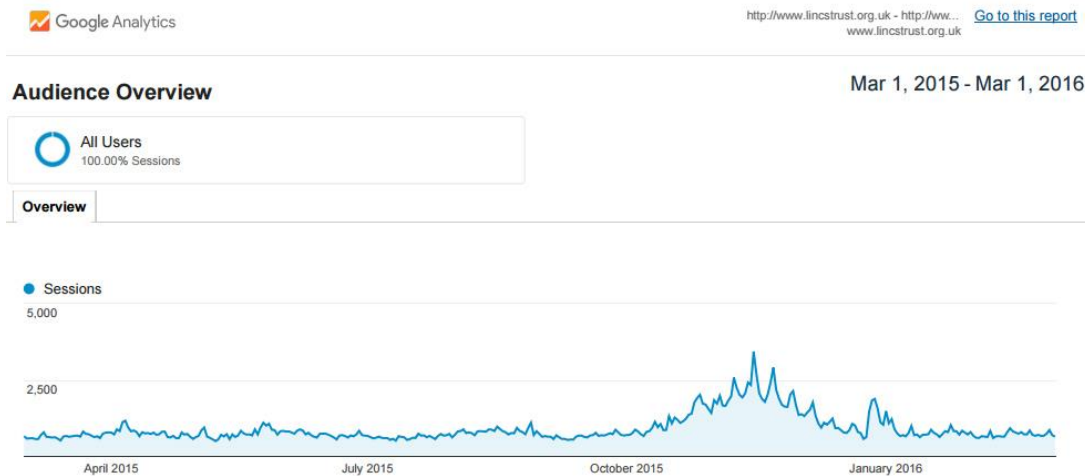
Going 'viral'

Facebook allows the Donna Nook Warden page to reach far more people than just the people who follow the page. Sharing of posts creates a viral effect. The announcement of the first pup born in 2015 was seen by 75,518 people. (Source: Facebook Insights)



Website

The Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust website sees a surge of interest during the Donna Nook pupping season. The graph below, showing page views of the website across the year, reveals a significant peak during this period. As a result the Donna Nook information pages are the most popular pages on the website, generating over 25% of page views. (Source: Google Analytics)



Top ten most popular pages on the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust website between March 2015 and March 2016

Page ?	Pageviews ? ↓
	873,114 % of Total: 100.00% (873,114)
1. /donna-nook	94,041 (10.77%)
2. /donna-nook/weekly-update	70,339 (8.06%)
3. /nature-reserves/donna-nook/viewing-seals-donna-nook	47,623 (5.45%)
4. /discover-learn/building-bird-nest-boxes	44,994 (5.15%)
5. /	41,108 (4.71%)
6. /gibraltar-point	40,488 (4.64%)
7. /whisby-nature-park	34,644 (3.97%)
8. /wildlife/reserves	28,091 (3.22%)
9. /donna-nook/location	22,286 (2.55%)
10. /willow-tree-fen	18,310 (2.10%)

Note: The forward slash/at number 5 represents the website homepage.

3.3.2 Other media coverage

The Trust has faced criticism in the past for promoting the site through the media, perceived by locals to cause overcrowding and congestion on local roads. This led the Trust to avoid media engagement or at least delaying any site visits until after the peak season. This approach was realised to be becoming counter-productive with the media generating their own stories without informed comment from the Trust. We now have more constructive engagement with the media, seeking to control the message but still only initiate for targeted reasons. Interviewers are primed to:

2013 - Interviews were given to various local newspapers, local radio and TV. In all cases, contact with media was not initiated by the Trust; eg Radio Lincolnshire rang and said they were coming the following day, would we have someone there to be interviewed. There was obviously increased interest following the surge tide and Donna Nook seals made it to the front page of The Times and into other national press.

2014 - Various local newspapers – Grimsby Telegraph, local radio – BBC Radio Lincolnshire, and TV news programmes – Estuary TV and Look North, informed us they would be visiting the site and requested interviews.

The Blakeney NNR colony was featured on BBC 1 Countryfile programme and may well now continue to be the seal colony that is used for media promotion. It has far more restricted access resulting in lower visitor numbers and associated pressure. We will now consider deferring national grey seal story requests to that site.

2015 Local newspapers - The Grimsby Telegraph, Lincolnshire Echo, Yorkshire Post, Cleethorpes People, Louth Leader, Horncastle News were provided with updates on request but generally published information they found online. Interaction with local papers enables us to pass on information relating to visitor guidelines and suggestions of visiting during quieter periods. Nationally, Donna Nook appeared in The Guardian's 'A week in pictures' and The Telegraph's 'Top 10 wildlife holidays in Britain'. A telephone update on BBC Radio Lincolnshire was done on their request and Radio 4's Open Country programme included Donna Nook in their item on the Lincolnshire coast. Once the seal season was over a live interview was done with BBC Radio Humberside. Regional ITV news programmes published updates taken from existing sources and featured photographs sent in by the public.

3.3.3 LWT membership recruitment

Recruiting new members of the Trust is a constant marketing and recruitment activity necessary to support the ongoing work of the charity. The Trust has an average turnover of about 10% of its membership annually and new members must be recruited to replace this loss as well as to achieve the overall aspiration for growth. Recruitment of Trust membership has been particularly successfully carried out on site during the past two seal seasons. The recruiters have been able to engage with visitors directly and enabled them to comprehend the scale of the Trust's work and good reasons for supporting the Trust. The Trust's overall membership has grown slightly during the project ensuring its future viability.

In 2015 we signed up 913 Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust members over 344 memberships. A large percentage of memberships were family memberships hence an average of 2.65 members per sign up. A further 60 memberships we signed up for other Wildlife Trusts by our recruiters. The site has demonstrated its potential for recruiting members during a generally difficult time of year for recruiting at other locations.

3.3.4 Impact on local economy

The Trust has engaged with Leeds Beckett University to enable students undertaking the International Tourism Management degree to produce a tourism consultancy report for the Trust to analyse the current tourism provision within Donna Nook and the surrounding areas, and to make valid recommendations based on the research and information gathered (attached). The objectives of the study were:

- To produce primary research to obtain information regarding the views and perceptions of a number of different stakeholders.
- To conduct a critical literature review on wildlife and nature tourism.
- To use a number of analytical tools to evaluate the current tourism provision in and around Donna Nook.
- To make valid and justified recommendations based on the research conducted.

As part of the consultancy project, primary research was conducted with two stakeholder groups- local businesses and tourists/visitors who have visited Donna Nook. Businesses located in a number of nearby towns and villages were contacted asking to partake including Cleethorpes, North Thoresby, Louth, North Somercotes, South Somercotes, Grainthorpe, Humberston and Saltfleet. Examples of the types of businesses contacted include accommodation facilities, restaurants and cafés and local attractions, and this was done so through email communication. Moreover, primary research from tourists/visitors was communicated and collected through social media on the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust's Facebook page, whereby a post asked previous visitors to partake in the survey.

The students completed a SWOT analysis

STRENGTHS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Large seal population - Unique location - Hardworking volunteers - Strong social media presence 	WEAKNESSES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seasonality - Lack of amenities ie toilets - Lack of advertising - Lack of facilities to spend money ie café - Poor roads and signposting
OPPORTUNITIES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Large untargeted market - Car park charge - More trade from birdwatchers - RAF base - Opportunity to create new business 	THREATS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unpredictable weather - Migration of seals to another area - Rise and popularity of other wildlife destinations

The students made a number of recommendations for the development of local businesses including a local craft fair in the vicinity, an information leaflet to promote local businesses and tourism accommodation, a Seal Card to give visitors annual discounts at local facilities, and introducing an Air B&B scheme. A significant finding from the survey of businesses was that while 56% of respondents saw an increase in custom throughout the seal breeding season, disappointingly only 19% stated that they used the seal breeding season in their marketing campaigns.

The Trust has also worked with Lincolnshire County Council to produce a Coastal Communities Team Economic Plan for the East Lindsey Heritage Coast (attached). The study covers the "green" areas of the East Lindsey coast, including Gibraltar Point National Nature Reserve, Chapel Point (Lincolnshire Coastal Country Park), Saltfleetby Theddlethorpe Dunes National Nature Reserve and Donna Nook National Nature Reserve.

While nature tourism is clearly under-recognised in Lincolnshire, and probably less developed than other nearby coastal counties, considerable interest has been shown by many. The publication of research on behalf of the Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership in autumn 2015, estimating nature tourism to be worth £58m across Greater Lincolnshire as a whole, prompted a strong positive response with some excellent examples being cited. There are recommendations for combined action to promote the entire coast. There is a strong commitment from partners but recent announcements on local government funding made by central government have slowed progress and threaten delivery of the team's ambitions and the proposed 'Partnership'.

The Trust will continue to encourage public and private organisations to engage constructively with Donna Nook, maximising the opportunities to enhance the visitor economy and improve perception of Lincolnshire in terms of place.

4. REVIEW

4.1 What we think worked well and why

Seal path and fence has worked extremely well primarily because we tested it before specifying it. After the storm surge it was rebuilt with many more gates that could be opened to release seals in a tidal surge situation.

- Removable cabins have provided much improved space for visitors, volunteers and interpretation, without intruding too much on the 'wild scene' at the reserve.
- Marine cabin, at the far end of the visitor path, offers volunteers and visitors shelter and interpretation about the marine environment, not previously provided.
- Interpretation is now appropriate for all ages, is professionally presented and engaging.
- Engagement of a seasonal Project Officer to cover the September preparation to January clear up period has proved resoundingly successful. So much so that under a staffing review it was agreed to appoint an additional permanent staff post for the north-east of Lincolnshire, with a seasonal remit for Donna Nook.
- Volunteer training, accommodation and management has resulted in more confident and competent volunteer wardens, who feel more cared for by the Trust.
- Use of social media as a means of providing quick up-to-date information for visitors.
- Use of the Trust's website as a means of providing more detailed information for visitors.
- Recruitment site for new members of the Trust.

4.2 What didn't work and why

The main feature of the project which it has not been possible to complete is the cross dunes path. The route has been upgraded to an extent and is more used by visitors as a result. Natural England has recognised that they may need to reconsider this matter in the future but have not approved it so far.

- The original HLF project was for two seal seasons. As a result of underspend and storm surge, it has been possible to extend the project to cover four seal seasons, and with hindsight this has been to the considerable benefit of the project.

4.3 How much of the difference would have happened anyway, even if no project had been undertaken at all?

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that this project has been an outstanding success, and that without HLF funding very little would have been achieved. Without HLF funding this project would not have taken place within the four year timescale. The Trust and Natural England would probably have been forced to carry out improvements to the seal path and fence especially as a result of the storm surges, but the introduction of a Project Officer, improvements to site infrastructure, volunteer management and interpretation would not have been affordable. Over time piecemeal improvements would probably have been made but this type of significant uplift of facility provision is not often affordable by Wildlife Trusts.

The project has been a great success and the Trust envisages that it will continue to work well and continue to develop for many years delivering long lasting impact for visitors, volunteers, local community and wildlife.

5. SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNT

What might we do differently next time?

- Very little, because this project was based on many years of experience of handling visitors on the reserve, so that we were quite clear about the requirements.
- Ensure we have the stated commitment of all regulatory organisations involved before we begin.
- Possibly propose a longer project, although this does have implications for finance and grant suitability.
- Many of the elements of this project are and have been transferable including volunteer training, provision of clothing and marine interpretation.



APPENDIX 1

LWT DONNA NOOK VISITOR SURVEY FOR HLF

Interview day of week..... Interview date..... Interview time.....

Weather.....

1. Where are you visiting from? (First half of postcode or country if non-UK)

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2. How many in your party?

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3. How many children in your party? (Age groups)

Under 5		5-10		11-14		15-18	
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4. Have you been before?

Yes - come most years	Yes – not every year	No – my first visit
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Thanks to funding from Heritage Lottery Fund, the Wildlife Trust has made changes to fence, the temporary huts and information boards. We would like to know what you think.

Questions 5-8: agreement with statement on sliding scale: 1=disagree strongly to 5=agree strongly.

5. The information boards & displays on site were helpful.

1 (No)	2	3	4	5 (Yes)
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6. The Volunteer Wardens were friendly & well-informed.

1 (No)	2	3	4	5 (Yes)
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7. The double fence is a vital part of site management, allowing you to get extremely close to the seals without disturbing them or putting yourself in danger. Do you agree?

1 (No)	2	3	4	5 (Yes)
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8. I have enjoyed my visit today.

1 (No)	2	3	4	5 (Yes)
--------	---	---	---	---------

9. Was your visit what you expected?

Yes	No
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If no, please explain why (this can be positive if visit was better than expected)

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10. Is there anything that would improve your visit here? (DON'T READ OUT OPTIONS)

Parking	Toilets	Viewing	Shop
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Any other comments:

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APPENDIX 2



- Which type of seals are at Donna Nook?
- Why are the seals here?
- What is the male seal called?
- What is the female seal called?
- What colour are the young seal pups?
- What do the pups on the beach eat?
- What do the adult seals eat when at sea?
- What sound do the seal pups make when they are hungry?
- Why shouldn't we touch the pups?
- We don't name the pups because there are too many. If you could name one what would you call it?

Age: _____ What town do you live in?: _____

Parents: Are you a member of a Wildlife Trust? Yes ☐ No ☐

If you would like to receive regular emails about the work of the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust please tick here ☐

Email address: _____

**Take your completed quiz sheet to the Information Hut &
Shop to pick up your prize!**
(Please note - one prize per family)

