

Preface

The need for a handbook to standardize techniques for studying Antarctic seals was recognized during the initial meetings of the SCAR Group of Specialists on Seals. Even during various discussions between experts about the results from various national Antarctic programmes, it became clear that a lack of standardization sometimes made it difficult to make direct comparisons between studies. For example, even apparently small variations, such as the use of different types of tags placed in flippers for long-term identification of individuals had the potential to cause differences in estimates of population parameters. The problems of lack of standardization in data collection were even more critical when less experienced persons were involved. In remote areas such as the Antarctic where the number of personnel on a base or a ship may be limited, scientific and non-scientific staff with no training in pinniped research are sometimes required to record various types of observations on seals. Similarly, from time to time, non-experts may have unique opportunities to record very important observations on seals. Without a standardized format that could be readily available to everyone; it was clear that valuable opportunities and data would be lost and the full scientific value of some studies might not be realised. Consequently, the SCAR Group of Specialists on Seals undertook to produce a handbook of standardized techniques for the study of Antarctic seals, the benefits of which would also carry over to the study of Arctic seals and facilitate more bi-polar comparisons.

Completion of this volume has taken longer than was originally envisaged. Meetings of the Group of Specialists were often dominated by current issues and needs which, at the time, seemed more pressing. The limited resources that were available for this task also meant that everyone had to make sacrifices of their own time and funds to facilitate completion

of the handbook. Similarly, as the volume was being developed, rapid advances were being made in several areas such as immobilization techniques, population estimation and genetics; to mention just a few. Consequently, the chapters have all undergone several revisions to make them as complete, practical and relevant as possible.

The resulting volume is a unique and comprehensive work that covers the techniques, procedures and rationale for the collection of data on the population ecology and biology of Antarctic seals. It will be of value for years to come as new and old seal scientists alike design and execute their research. It will be essential for less formally trained observers who, nonetheless, are required, or simply have the opportunity, to record important observations.

Recently, Dr Richard Laws stepped down as Convenor of the SCAR Group of Specialists on Seals. His contributions to the study of Antarctic biology as a whole, and the study of seals in particular, have been enormous. His critical eye and extensive experience that guided the production of this volume have significantly contributed to the quality of the final product. Recently, I became Convenor of the Group of Specialists and in that capacity I take great pleasure in congratulating Dr Laws and the other authors on the production of this valuable book.

Convenor
SCAR Group of Specialists on Seals

Donald B. Siniff