



Seals appear to be inveterate posers. Wherever a colony is to be found basking on rocks by the shore they will inevitably turn to a casual observer, inviting a photograph. And so, it appears, is the case in the Thames Estuary – not hitherto renowned as a hot spot of seal activity.

No fewer than 708 seals were spotted in the Thames Estuary in a count carried out by the Zoological Society of London recently.

According to an article in the ZSL's newsletter: "Conservationists and volunteers jumped into boats to help tally the number of grey and harbour seals along the Thames, whilst others took to the air for a bird's eye view of the coast, or stuck to solid ground to investigate small creeks and rivers."

Sadly, such abundance is not to be seen in other areas where the creatures were once more numerous.

The ZSL's conservation scientist Joanna Barker said in the report: "Recently, we have seen drastic declines in numbers of harbour seals across Scotland, with populations almost disappearing in some areas. Reasons behind the decline are unclear, but other seal populations may also be vulnerable."

One of my undying memories is of the colony at Machrihanish in Kintyre, where they provided some memorable shots. There has to be a suspicion that sociability may have contributed to their decline to some extent.

- Such a fate is not overtaking a number of less welcome inhabitants of Europe's towns and cities, which are particularly vulnerable to the threat posed by invasive species.

According to the experts at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), urban areas are at higher risk from invasive alien species (IAS) because of their transport links.

“These non-indigenous species represent one of the main threats to the world's biodiversity,” said Chantal van Ham, European program officer at the IUCN.

“Urban areas are quite vulnerable to these species. Often they are introduced, for example, through the trade in plants, but also through accidental arrivals in ports and airports.”

Anyone who has had to tackle Japanese knotweed knows full well about the former route.

The IUCN will be hosting a conference on the issue next Thursday. Participants will include local authorities, policymakers, NGOs and scientists.

Ms van Ham told the BBC: “What we aim to do with this conference is to bring together experts - not only scientists but also different governmental levels and NGOs to see how we can strengthen collaboration and exchange knowledge on how to combat invasive species at the urban level.”

The European Commission is also keen to know people's views on the impact of buildings on the environment. A consultation on how to reduce the environmental impacts of buildings ends on 1 October, so anyone with anything to say needs to get a wiggle on, as they say in Weatherfield.

Improving construction techniques is important to help Europe become a more sustainable

economy, says the EC. The consultation can be accessed at ec.europa.eu/environment/consultations/buildings_en.htm

Pity the EU doesn't have such an enlightened view on energy use when it comes to gas. Speaking of which, Nigel Farage apparently thinks fracking is a great idea. That, I think, is all you need to know.

- The Renewables Roadshow has transmogrified itself into Energy Efficiency Exhibitions (well, actually, it's just changed its name). The tour begins in Exeter on 10 September (time for another wiggle!) and ends in Manchester on the 26th. You'll find there a veritable who's who of the environmental industry – a bit like *Environment UK's* Environment Directory.

Chris Stokes