

Seal or Sea Lion? What's the Difference?

It loves lying in the sun like a house cat, and it's got the face of an innocent puppy dog. But is it a seal or a sea lion? Even though we often refer to both animals as seals, these marine mammals are quite different from each other.

Seals and sea lions both belong to a group called pinnipeds, a term that comes from the Latin for "fin-footed." In general, sea lions are bigger than seals, but looking at the animal's size is not always the most reliable way to spot the difference. In fact, the easiest way is to look at the ears. A seal has no external ears, but instead has two holes on the sides of its head. Sea lions, on the other hand, have clearly visible ear flaps.

In addition, seals prefer to be alone. They are also quiet and typically make low, soft noises. Sea lions, however, are very social and can usually be found in large groups, in which they love to play and bark loudly to communicate.

Seals and sea lions are both great swimmers and hunters, but the way the two pinnipeds swim is quite different. Seals use their smaller front flippers to steer while they push themselves through the water with their strong back flippers. For sea lions, it is the other way around. Since their front flippers are stronger, they use these to move and their back ones to steer.

Sea lions also have back flippers that can rotate forward, so they are able to walk on land. Closely related to the sea lion is the fur seal, which also has this ability. True seals, however, don't have this advantage, and they're left to wiggle their way around when they're out of water.

There are 33 types of pinnipeds globally, and they are found on every continent on Earth. The next time you see one in a zoo or aquarium, remember: seals have no ears, while sea lions have ears you can see. Put simply, if it's unclear, check the ears!