Two species of seal are indigenous to the Netherlands: the common seal (Phoca vitulina) and the grey seal (Halichoerus grypus). In the Netherlands the anatomical and systematic study of these species started early, but further biological investigation - such as feeding ecology and population dynamics - did not take place until the 1920s.

Until the end of the sixteenth century the Dutch regarded the seal as a source of food. The Netherlands under Spanish rule was Catholic and categorising the seal as ‘fish’ allowed people to eat ‘red meat’ during Lent. This habit was changed, probably as a result of the reformation. From the end of the sixteenth century people regarded the seal as a threat to fish stocks, so much so that, in Zeeland a bounty was introduced in 1591 for every dead seal that was presented to the authorities. This bounty had a significant impact on the history of seal hunting. Holland soon followed Zeeland and a similar bounty system was introduced in the Nassau Domains. The bounty system was most successful in Zeeland. This is probably due to the fact that fishing rights were available to every inhabitant of Zeeland, but were licensed and regulated in the other two regions. In the other parts of the Dutch Republic a bounty system for seals was not implemented.

The capture of seals can be historically reconstructed from the records of the bounties that were paid. It appears that there were large differences in the intensity of the hunt. This was influenced by various factors, varying from individual, professional hunters who became more active or decided to stop, to climatological factors that affected the seal population. Political and socio-economic factors also affected the catch statistics. An interesting fact is that, from the mid seventeenth century to the second half of the eighteenth century, not the people from Zeeland, but Frisians from the island of Schiermonnikoog in the Wadden Sea hunted the majority of seals in Zeeland.

The payment of bounties stopped during the French occupation, but resumed after the establishment of the monarchy; initially only in Zeeland, but later in Zuid-Holland, Brabant and Antwerpen as well. In other parts of the Netherlands, seals were caught, even though a bounty was not paid. During this period the most active seal hunters outside of Zeeland were in Groningen. In 1857, regional bounties on seals were abolished, but reintroduced in 1900 - this time for the entire Netherlands. After 1900, the bounty was discontinued and reintroduced several times. In 1942, the bounty for seals was finally abolished during the German occupation. After the Second World War seal hunting was resumed with renewed intensity because the value of the pelts of seal pups.
had increased so much. The annual hunt of seal pups quickly and drastically reduced the population. Hunting was gradually phased out in 1961 and 1962 before being completely abolished as of 1963 following proposals made by Prof. Dr. J.L. van Haaften.

In the Netherlands, the concepts of nature conservation and animal protection developed rather late in comparison to Germany and the United Kingdom. This meant that seals were not regarded from the perspective of protection until the 1920s. P.G. van Tienhoven LLM and Dr. G.A. Brouwer were the first advocates for the protection seals in the Netherlands. At the end of the nineteenth century, Dr. P.P.C. Hoek indicated that more study was needed, but it was only in the 1920s that dr. B. Havinga started the first study of seal feeding ecology in an attempt to quantify the damage seals caused to fish stocks. Seal protection measures were accelerated during the occupation of the Netherlands in the Second World War when Dutch legislation was brought in line with German hunting laws (Reichsjagdgesetz - 1933). Regulations were introduced for the hunting techniques that people could use, hunting was banned during the birth season and lactation and finally the bounty was abolished. After the war, these measures were repealed, but it soon became apparent that seals needed some degree of protection.

The bounty was first introduced in 1591 because there were too few fish in Zeeland, this was mainly due to fishing techniques that were particularly damaging to young fish stocks. These fishing techniques were prohibited and the bounty on seals became part of the regulations providing additional support for recovery of fish stocks. From that time onwards, the reputation of the seal as eating large amounts of fish would pursue the species supporting a negative connotation in which seals were seen as fish thieves that had to be hunted. Hunting seals was therefore not based on facts, but on the seal’s reputation. The bounty paid for dead seals became a form of compensation during periods of economic down turn in the fishing industry. Whether there really was a correlation between low fish catches and the presence of seals was thus not relevant. The seal’s reputation only started to change and make way for a more positive image after the hunt was abolished as of 1963. The seal has since become a symbol for the conservation of the Wadden Sea and the coastal waters of Zeeland.