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FEASIBILITY STUDY ON THE USE OF A REMOTE MONITORING SYSTEM IN THE STUDY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL

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Due to its scarcity and the inaccessibility of its habitat the critically endangered Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) is one of the least studied and poorly understood Pinnipeds and gaining information on basic population and behavioral parameters remains one of the primary conservation priorities. As a consequence, the deployment of remote, non-invasive monitoring systems is being increasingly applied in the study and management of the species. We designed and installed a remote monitoring system in a monk seal pupping cave in the Northern Sporades, one of the species strongholds in Greece. The system consisted of two infrared video cameras and a digital recording system, which were powered by solar energy. It operated continuously for 20 days and enabled the identification of at least four different individuals (two adult females, one juvenile and a newborn pup). Cave occupancy during the monitoring period was high (>70%), which is due to the increased use of the cave by the mother – pup pair. The system provided valuable information on daily haul-out patterns and behavioural interactions between different developmental classes, while it recorded for the first time in Greece in-cave territorial behavior by a lactating female. Considering the geomorphological features of monk seal habitat in the region we discuss how the system can be improved in order to become a key tool in the conservation of the species in the eastern Mediterranean.

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