

Volunteer Help for the Monk Seals of the Aegean

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Abstract

The Central Aegean Project for the conservation of the Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* based in Foça, which has been operating since July 1993, offers the possibility of joining the project as a volunteer. This provides nature enthusiasts with an opportunity to become involved in conservation and research projects. By supplying manpower as well as a financial contribution, volunteers can play an important role in such projects. In the Central Aegean Project, volunteers participate in research and public awareness activities, and assist in the processing of data. Accommodation, group size, working schedule, guidance and the appointment of a responsible person to care for the volunteers' needs are some of the most important aspects to be considered by the project team. Financial aspects also require consideration, such as calculating the financial contribution required in order to meet various costs incurred, including accommodation, transport, fuel, cleaning, photocopying, and other activities. Between July 1993 and November 1998, 55 Turkish and foreign volunteers joined the project and participated in its activities, 40 of whom paid a total participation fee of 14,792 US Dollars. By involving volunteers in public awareness activities a total of 14,854 people in Foça could be reached and informed. If a programme can be run according to several clear guidelines, with a motivated team and a sufficient budget, a volunteer programme can be beneficial for conservation projects. On the other hand, it should be noted that working with volunteers is a time consuming process.

Introduction

Environmental problems have acquired a global dimension and nature conservation has become a very important issue worldwide. Local and regional leaders should play an active role in developing programmes that promote environmental protection, launching a whole range of compatible activities. Within these activities, "Ecotourism" is a concept that allows people to experience nature firsthand, while giving them the chance to add their personal contribution to nature conservation - thus implying more pronounced benefits for both conservation and local development. Offering a volunteer programme can be one of the ways to combine holidays with environmentally friendly activities. Within this concept, the Central Aegean Project offers interested individuals, since July 1993, the possibility of joining a volunteer programme for the conservation of the Mediterranean monk seals in Foça, Turkey.

The Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) is one of the most endangered mammal species worldwide. They used to live throughout the whole of the Mediterranean but nowadays, due to severe habitat loss, only a small number of this species survive. The estimated population at present is about 300-400 animals. Today, one of the last strongholds for the seals is the Aegean and Ionian Sea (Turkish coastline and Greek islands) holding about 250-300 animals in total (UNEP, 1998). In order to take action for the conservation of the Mediterranean monk seal, the Underwater Research Society/Mediterranean Seal Research Group (SAD-AFAG) initiated a pilot project for the protection of the monk seals in Foça in 1993, with support from the Foça Municipality, the Foça Local Seal Committee and the Turkish Ministry of Environment. Before the project began, Foça, which is a touristic central Aegean town, was selected as the first Mediterranean Monk Seal Conservation Area in Turkey by the National Monk Seal Committee in 1991. WWF International has been the main sponsor since the beginning of the project. SAD-AFAG Central Aegean Project is now an established organisation with the aim of (1) lobbying within governmental agencies for the application of a seal conservation policy and the establishment of marine-coastal protected areas, (2) helping to control illegal activities (illegal fishing, illegal coastal development) in the Foça area, (3) carrying out biological research on the seals (population size, behaviour and migration) and (4) increasing public awareness about the importance of the conservation effort (Güçlüsoy & Savaş, 1997; Savaş *et al*, 1998). In terms of "Ecotourism", SAD-AFAG has, from the start of the project, offered volunteers the possibility of joining the project and becoming involved in its activities.

In this paper, various aspects of volunteer participation programme, including its supply of manpower and financial support, are analysed and evaluated in order to clarify its importance and value to the conservation objectives of the SAD-AFAG project.

Volunteer programme methodology

Preparation

Working with volunteers in nature conservation/research projects requires a good deal of preparation in order to gain maximum advantage from the volunteers'

presence, while avoiding extra unexpected work, disappointments and frustration. In order to locate potential international volunteers, contacts were made with travel agencies specialised in recruiting volunteers for such projects. Universities with faculties offering courses in similar subjects were also contacted, so that trainees could be added to the programme. Beforehand, some written information about the project and the volunteer programme was prepared and distributed to the agencies/universities by means of brochures, exhibitions and the Internet. As far as the national volunteers are concerned, high schools and universities were visited in order to attract more volunteers. Further preparation included establishing the aims, structure and planning of the volunteer programme:

Aims

The most basic of all preparations is to determine the aims of the volunteer programme. Once this is clear, it will be possible to design the framework of the programme accordingly. For the purpose of the SAD-AFAG project, the contribution of the volunteers was needed for four main reasons: research intensification, public awareness programme, financial contribution and trainee education.

Structure

After all factors had been considered such as time and duration of participation, accommodation and programme set-up, the following structure was chosen to outline the volunteer programme. Volunteers were given the possibility of joining the project at any time of the year. A minimum of two weeks' participation in 1994, 1995 and 1998, and four weeks' participation in 1995 and 1996, was required by the project. A maximum group size of 6 people were permitted to join the project, to be accommodated in a private house (which last year was substituted by a camping site, since no house was available at a cost-effective price). In summer there was a special programme while the winter volunteers joined in the project's regular activities.

Planning

Considering that the volunteers joined the project in order to see nature and (endangered) animals, the project team tried to ensure that at least 50% of the volunteers' time was dedicated to working directly with nature/animals. A rough daily and weekly schedule was prepared, allowing volunteers to know in advance what to expect. Within the programme a thorough introduction was given to new volunteers, which included office working scheme, responsibilities of personnel, general information about Foça, Turkish culture and customs.

Guidance and Accompaniment

While the presence of volunteers provides additional help, it also creates extra work. It was therefore necessary to appoint a person to be responsible for the volunteers,

to guide and accompany them through their various activities. To promote work efficiency and cooperation, tasks within the volunteer team were also clarified. The project's appointed guide also looked after the well-being of the volunteers, dealing frequently with a variety of problems, such as homesickness, illnesses, cooperation problems between volunteers and between volunteers and staff, cultural differences, language problems etc.

Another aspect that should not be forgotten is the safety of the volunteers. Situations that are daily routine for experienced staff may be dangerous to inexperienced volunteers. It is the volunteer manager's task to see that safety precautions are taken. During seal observations volunteers were always seated in pairs on the observations points on the islands. Life jackets were provided on board the project's research vessel. All team members were informed about the (dis)abilities of the volunteers (this also includes allergies, special medical conditions / medicines etc.)

Activities

The volunteer programme operated by the project has not changed markedly over the years. A rough schedule was prepared and, according to the circumstances, this could be altered at any time. All volunteers joined the seal observations, occurring twice or three times weekly depending on the weather, on the pre-selected observation points inside the Foça Protected Area. Every volunteer had the possibility of participating in some cave checks (monk seals haul out in undisturbed sea caves rather than on open beaches) accompanied by a research assistant. Inside the Foça Protected Area regular, bird counts and plant research were also conducted with the help of the volunteers. A beach cleaning was scheduled every week. Office work consisted of literature study and processing data into the database programme. The public awareness programme of the Central Aegean Project had a regular schedule of several slide shows a week, an information stand at the market place, a brief informative talk at the daily tour boats every morning, the manning of the visitor centre and several nature activities for local children. In addition, every volunteer received lectures on fishing techniques used in Turkey, on the global situation of the Mediterranean monk seal and a thorough introduction to Turkish customs, Foça village life and project house rules.

Evaluation

During and at the close of their stay, a limited evaluation was made in order to gather the volunteers' opinions about the work done, about the cooperation with the project team, the quality of accommodation and guidance.

Payment

After it was decided that volunteers should make a final contribution, the following items were considered in calculating a suitable fee: the price of staying at a pension, house or camping site, use of paper, computer, e-mail, office equipment and furniture, transfer to and from the airport, the need to employ a guide with responsibility

for the volunteers, transportation costs (car and boat fuel, public transport), damage repair, cleaning costs and donation to the project. The prices charged for volunteer participation are given in Table.1.

Table.1 Annual volunteer participation fee for minimum of two weeks or four weeks

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Minimum of two weeks	237 USD	211 USD	-	-	211 USD
Minimum of four weeks	-	-	368 USD	395 USD	-
Each extra week	63 USD	53 USD	53 USD	79 USD	79 USD

The participation fee allowed the project to cover volunteer expenses. Generally, a donation of 10% for the project was added to the fee. In contrast to the SAD-AFAG project, there are projects which run their programme exclusively with volunteer money. However, the main aim of the project team was to gain manpower for the fulfilling of the project's objectives, rather than receiving financial support.

Results

During the period July 1993 to November 1998, a total of 55 volunteers participated in project activities for a minimum of two weeks (Table.2). Out of these 55 volunteers, 14 volunteers joined as students from universities in order pursue their practical trainings. 51 volunteers joined the project during the touristic season between May and October. In total the volunteers joined the project activities on a total base of 216 weeks (Table.2).

Table.2 Volunteer programme between 1994 and 1998

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	TOTAL
Number of paying volunteers	6	2	11	5	16	40
Number of not paying volunteers	4	5	3	3	0	15
Number of weeks joined in total	26	16	94	39	41	216
Financial contribution total (in USD)	1,673	421	4,092	2,579	4,026	14,792
People reached by public awareness with the help of volunteers	818	3,609	4,757	2,432	3,122	14,738
Observation conducted by volunteers / observations conducted in total	12/22	5/51	95/156	31/99	36/195	179/523

The financial contribution paid by a total of 40 volunteers amounted to 14,792 US Dollars (Table.2). 30 volunteers were Dutch, 10 Turkish, the remaining 15 originated from other European countries. Since the promoting company was located in the Netherlands and the first promotion took place only there, it is Dutch participants that cover a considerable percentage (54.5 %) of the total number of volunteers.

Through the activities cited in the methodology section, 14,738 Turkish and foreign people were informed about the project and its conservation efforts (Table.2). Between July 1993 and November 1998, 179 out of 523 observations were carried out by volunteers (Table.2). The number of people informed and the number of observations carried out by volunteers fluctuate due to circumstances that vary every year, such as lack of staff and /or equipment, change in the number of tourists visiting Foça, weather conditions and increase in activities during the years.

The volunteers who joined to the project continue to circulate information on the conservation of the monk seals and the project activities in their home countries. Trainees who joined to the project, for example, gave presentations on the issue in their institutes or universities, and informed other students and the academics.

Conclusion

The ability to deal with people and unexpected problems, and the ability to set-up an efficient schedule and realistic budget determines the success of the volunteer programme. Working with volunteers is a time consuming process, but can still be beneficial for conservation projects if a programme can be run according to the above methodology.

After a volunteer concludes his/her participation an evaluation proves useful in order to understand how the volunteer programme has been experienced. The volunteers, through their contacts with the project, learn about specific on site problems in seal conservation and research. During the course of their stay, it also proves beneficial to determine whether volunteers are satisfied with the programme. This provides the project team with the opportunity to deal with problems as soon as they arise.

The financial contribution of the volunteer programme was calculated in a way sufficient to cover all incurred expenses. It was considered likely that charging a higher fee might generate unrealistic expectations in terms of working directly with nature/animals. However, since the monk seal is rarely seen, and since no guarantee can be given that volunteers will observe or come into direct contact with the animal, the financial contribution cannot be set too high. Similar projects (involving few animal contacts) should only consider the manpower gained by a possible volunteer programme rather than expecting financial support.

References

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