

## **Status and Distribution of Monk Seals *Monachus monachus* (Hermann 1779) along Turkish Coasts**

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The Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) is a critically endangered species with globally decreasing population. Turkey is one of the last places in the world where monk seals still survive. However, information on the recent status of the species in Turkey is limited. In this paper it is aimed to provide recent information on the distribution and status of Mediterranean monk seals on Turkish coasts.

AFAG has performed monk seal research under two main categories since 1987 until now: 1) field surveys (including coastal surveys by boat, snorkel and scuba dives in search of coastal caves and sea watching and seal image production) and 2) interviews with local fishermen for first hand and consistent seal sighting data utilizing a standard seal sighting form. All sighting forms filled have been stored on a dbase programme called FokData with 13 parameters developed for monk seal sightings on Turkish coasts by AFAG, which currently contains 1171 sighting data. 812 sighting records belong to the period of 1992 January - 1997 December considered as recent information of which 63 sightings were directly made by AFAG researchers in the field. Also, AFAG runs a separate dbase programme having 538 sighting records for Foça Pilot Project area since 1993 until now.

Our studies have clearly indicated that distribution of monk seals along Turkish coasts show a discontinuous pattern in contrast with continuous distribution in the near past and that population of monk seals along Turkey declined drastically. At present monk seals mainly use coastal caves on rocky shores for breeding and sheltering and survive along the following coastal regions in Turkey : 1) Black Sea (central coast section, from Amasra until Yakakent), 2) Marmara Sea (Marmara islands and vicinity), 3) Aegean Sea (2 zones: coast between Gallipoli and Behramkale with Gökçeada & Bozcaada Islands and between Foça and Datça), 4) Mediterranean coasts (3 zones: between Datça and Kemer, between Gazipasa and Tasucu, between Samandag and Turkish-Syrian border). The populations in Black Sea and Marmara Sea declined very much so that seals are sighted very rare while in Turkey most of the monk seals remained along Aegean and Mediterranean coasts of Turkey (Kıraç & Savaş 1996, Kıraç & Veryeri 1996, Kıraç et.al. 1997). The main apparent reasons for the decline of the species have been loss of habitat, disturbance to seals through tourism activities, deliberate killing and hunting. However, ranking of these factors vary in different areas.

22 seals have been identified by AFAG during field research or from the images obtained by divers and photographers except Cilician coasts of Turkey while Gücü (this workshop) identified 10 individuals in southern Turkish coasts near Mersin. Therefore, a total of 32 monk seals have been recognized on individual basis along Turkish coasts during past 5 years, however, this number is probably higher. Öztürk (1995) suggests identification of 42 monk seals along Turkish coasts.

## References

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