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**Evaluation of the
Mediterranean monk seal status**

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Evaluation of the Mediterranean monk seal status

In September 1985, the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention included the protection of the Mediterranean monk seal among their priority objectives for the second decade of the Mediterranean Action Plan (Genoa Declaration, 1985). To assist the Mediterranean countries in achieving this objective, the Regional Activity Centre for Specially Protected Areas, in collaboration with Mediterranean experts and concerned organizations, prepared an Action Plan for the management of the Mediterranean monk seal. The main aim of the Plan was to reduce the adverse pressures and ensure the gradual recovery of the species through the implementation of a number of immediate and long-term actions.

In order to know the efficiency of the Action Plan implementation, it was necessary to know the situation of the monk seal populations after its implementation started: an increase in the number of effectives would indicate a successful action plan, while a decrease would show the need to react on the matter, according to the findings. For that reason, several documents were prepared by RAC/SPA at different times. Notably, the document "Current status of Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) populations" (UNEP(OCA)MED WG.146/4) prepared in 1998 to assess the status of the remaining monk seal populations, constituted a thorough review both regarding previous work and concerning the actual situation confronted by the species. It provided an update of the document "Present status and trend of the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) populations" edited by RAC/SPA in 1995. That 1995 document was produced after the meeting of experts held in Rabat on 7-9 October 1994 and was based on the data presented at that meeting as well as on previous publications and reports, in particular the RAC/SPA documents "Present status and trend of the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) Populations" (UNEP(OCA)/MED WG.87/3), 1994; "The Mediterranean Monk Seal", published by RAC/SPA also in 1995; and "The Biology, status and conservation

of the monk seal (*Monachus monachus*)" published by the Council of Europe in 1989 (Nature and Environment Series No. 41).

All these background documentation, the majority of it prepared within the framework of MAP, drove to affirm within document UNEP(OCA)MED WG.146/4 about the last sizeable remaining Mediterranean populations that: "deliberate killing is probably the main threat to monk seals on the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts of Turkey" and regarding the Greek populations that "the decline in numbers is mainly attributed to deliberate persecution and killing".

No doubt, the origin of the problem –and linked responsibility to solve it- is not at all country-related. The same cause acting before has faded the species from the Mediterranean countries where it was historically not so abundant and consequently vanished earlier (see Table 1). That was aided by habitat alteration, including even seal cave visits by tourist trips, which has been a parallel problem accompanying the species towards vanishing. Monk seal critical habitat deterioration is expected to accelerate in the near future if real respectful measures to preserve at least critical habitats (already mandated through several legal frameworks) are not promptly performed.

The implementation assessment of the Action Plan, prepared in 1998 (UNEP(OCA)/MED WG.146/5) for the same meeting than the above mentioned document WG.146/4 showed that legal measures protecting monk seals should be strictly enforced given that deliberate killing keeps being the main mortality cause.

A further meeting of experts held in Lathakia on 29-30 September 2002, aimed to define actions to contrast the seal populations decline, prepared a document presented to the Sixth NFP Meeting for SPA held in Marseilles on 17-20 June 2003 (UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.232/Inf.6). It comprised proposals of activities on behalf of the species regarding capacity building, awareness, conservation, and improvement of knowledge.

The document depicted four groups of threats for the species: negative interactions with fishing activities; degradation and loss of habitat; disturbance; and pollution. Conspicuously, 17 out of 21 threats depicted within those four groups are provoked by the lack of a proper implementation of regulations regarding the protection of the individuals, both from direct elimination and from degradation of their specific trenches of coastal habitats. The activities proposed within the document were accompanied by a cost estimation for their implementation, which would need financial support from the Parties or other sources in addition to the biennial allocation to RAC/SPA for the Action Plan. Nonetheless, this document is presently a basis for the implementation of actions (although necessarily modest ones) on behalf of the species by RAC/SPA, upon request of the 13th Contracting Parties Meeting celebrated at Catania in 11-14 November 2003.

Following an additional recommendation by the Contracting Parties at that gathering, RAC/SPA prepared a further document on the status of the species in the Mediterranean. In order to complement the information already available to the Parties from several previous RAC/SPA works, a population viability analysis was undertaken to ascertain the real status of the species. This analysis allows to predict the most feasible scenarios for a species under risk in relation to different pressures, in order to clarify the weight of each threat on its chance for survival after concrete periods of time. Such method allows managers to elucidate main priorities when the menaces are acting synchronously.

The monk seal population viability analysis was presented to the 7th NFP meeting for SPA at Seville (31 May -3 June 2005) in the document "Evaluation Report on the Status of the Monk Seal in the Mediterranean" (UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.268/Inf.3). The report was focused on the last sizeable Mediterranean populations, those of the Aegean and Ionian Seas, which are the populations with the highest chances to survive.

The analysis showed that the present monk seal status keeps the species at the risk of vanishing from the Mediterranean in a few decades, since even the

biggest remaining population, that of the Aegean Sea, is endangered. Synthetic conclusions of that information document were:

- Regarding the main immediate threats to survival, intentional killing is the main drive to extinction, while entanglement in nets alone would not suffice to provoke it. Whatever management measures are appointed to wildlife managers to follow, positive results are not expected as far as illegal killing is not strongly reduced through an specific strategy to improve related laws enforcement and prosecution of such actions.
- Measures to increase natural survival of wild pups would be useful in situations without intentional killing, but not practical to preclude extinction, if intentional killings is not also sufficiently investigated and restrained by appropriate authorities.
- Management measures related to fisheries using static nets should be attempted since the remaining population still may recover if kills stop. Actions on that direction should be initiated in collaboration with bodies playing a role on fisheries and conservation, such as the GFCM of FAO, and in cooperation with other Conventions concerned with this species survival, such as Bern and Bonn Conventions.

Following the presentation of document UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.268/Inf.3 at the 7th NFP meeting, a working group composed by SPA Focal Points met during that gathering to discuss the situation of the monk seal and the most urgent key measures, at Parties level, necessary to halt the decline of the species.

All the above mentioned documents were made available by RAC/SPA to the group, in order to facilitate any necessary consultation and autonomous take of position. Based on that documentation, the NFP working group agreed that the Mediterranean countries should officially commit themselves to implement immediate actions. The group prepared the “draft declaration on the monk seal risk of extinction in the Mediterranean” (UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.270/17), and proposed its presentation to the Contracting Parties for adoption.

RAC/SPA Reference Documents

Aguilar, A. 1999. Status des populations de phoque moine de Méditerranée Ed. UNEP-MAP RAC/SPA, Tunis, 60 pp.

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UNEP-MAP RAC/SPA. 1994. Present status and trend of the Mediterranean monk seal. Meeting of Experts on the Evaluation of the Implementation of the Action Plan for the Management of the Mediterranean Monk Seal, Rabat, Morocco, 7-9 October 1994. UNEP(OCA)/MED WG. 87/3.

Table 1: Mediterranean monk seal populations remaining in the World

Population	Most recent minimum N° of seals reported	Last scientific record of presence	Last reproduction data	Source or endorsing authority
West Sahara coast	+130	2005	2004	Aguilar pers. com. Gonzalez pers. com.
Canaries	Vanished	1992	1441	Monod 1948; I.R.S.N.B. & S.M.R.U. 1993
Madeira (Desertas)	23	2003	2002	Costa-Neves pers. com
Mediterranean Morocco	Vanished?	2004	1981	RAC/SPA 2004; Mo et al 2004
Chafarinas islands	Vanished?	2001	2000	González 1989; Cebrian pers. com.
Algeria	10	1993	1989	Lefevre et al. 1989, Boutiba 1993
La Galite	Vanished	1986	1983	Gonzalez 1989
Mainland Tunisia	Vanished	1986	1975	Gonzalez 1989; Ktari-Chakroun 1978
Libya	+2	2002	1968	Norris 1972, Boutiba 1993, Mo et al 2002
Egypt	Vanished	1981	No records	Norris 1972; Marchessaux 1989
Israel	Vanished	1968	around 1928	Bertram 1943; Marchessaux 1989
Lebanon	Vagrants	1997	No records	Marchessaux 1989, RAC/SPA 2003
Syria	Vagrants	2003	No records	RAC/SPA 2003
Cyprus	+ 2	2003	1994?	Hadjichristophorou & Dimitropoulos 1994; Ozturk 1994. Cebrian pers. com.
Turkey	100 (overlap with Greece)	2003	2001	Gucu et al 2004; Guclusoy et al 2004
Russia	?	No records	No records	Cebrian 1998
Ukraine	Vanished	No records	No records	Ozturk 1994
Romania	Vanished	1960	No records	Schnapp et al. 1962; Ozturk 1994
Bulgaria	Vanished	1975	1950-60	Schnapp et al. 1962; Avellá 1987; Ozturk 1994
Greece	250 (overlap with Turkey)	2005	2004	Cebrian 1998; Cebrian and Gonzalez, pers. com.
Albania	Vanished?	80's	1944	Lamani pers. com. ; Vaso pers. com.
Serbia & Montenegro	Vanished	No records	No records	Cebrian 1995
Bosnia	Vanished	No records	No records	Cebrian 1995
Croatia	Vanished	1993		Cebrian 1995
Slovenia	Vanished	No records	No records	Cebrian 1995
Mainland Italy	Vagrants	2003	1976	Di Turo 1984; Marini 1994; RAC/SPA 2003
Sicily - Pantelleria	Vagrants	1998	No records	González 1989; Marini 1994; RAC/SPA 2003
Sardinia	Vagrants	2001	1986	Marchessaux 1989; Marini 1994; Mo pers. com.
Malta	Vanished	1997	No records	Marchessaux 1989; Mo pers. com.
Mainland France	Vanished	1990	1930-35	Duguy y Cheylan 1978; Maigret 1990
Corse	Vanished	1982	1947	Troitzky 1953; Marchessaux 1989
Mainland Spain	Vanished	1984	1950	Avellá 1987; Marchessaux 1989
Balearics	Vanished	1977	1951	Avellá 1987
Mainland Portugal	Vanished	1817	1797	Avellá 1987

