



In Focus

CONSERVATION ACTIONS ON THE CABO BLANCO PENINSULA – A NEW APPROACH

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Ever since the first Spanish monk seal conservationists and researchers arrived on the "Coast of Seals" of the Cabo Blanco peninsula in 1992, applied actions have undergone several different stages and permutations of approach.

The 1992 expedition to this remote and politically disputed area of Mauritania / western Sahara took place 4 years after the French researcher, Didier Marchessaux, met a tragic and untimely death in a landmine explosion.

Up until 1994, the expeditions that followed had as their main objective the reassessment of written knowledge left by Marchessaux, Morales-Agacino and other researchers who intermittently worked along this coast. Intensive field work focused on identifying caves, beaches and other landmarks described in this bibliographic record. Breeding caves were relocated, as were other sites formerly occupied by seals – including once-important, yet geologically unstable, breeding caves that subsequently collapsed. A basic monitoring of the colony also commenced at this time (see the results in González et al. 1997).

From 1995 until 1998, a project financed primarily through the European Union LIFE programme concentrated on further detailed scientific research in the Cabo Blanco colony. Many of the current publications available on the subject are products of those years of intensive research.

Throughout this extended period of time, however, few if any conservation actions were applied in the area, which was heavily exploited by shellfish fishermen, who would descend from the cliff-tops to the beaches, caves, and anywhere else that goose barnacles might be harvested. Numerous artisanal pirogues also fished along the Coast of Seals, often as close as 40 meters to the entrance of the breeding caves.

A time for change

Following the mass mortality that struck the seal colony in 1997, claiming two thirds of the population, some of the researchers and conservationists involved concluded that it was time for a change in approach, reasoning that conservation action and the recovery of the population should become the primary objective at Cabo Blanco.

Following that rationale, in 1999 an International Recovery Plan for the species in the Atlantic began to take shape under the auspices of the Convention of Migratory Species (Bonn Convention), with appointed representatives of Mauritania, Morocco, Portugal and Spain leading the drafting process.

More recently, in November 2001, a PHVA workshop hosted by the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG) of IUCN and the Spanish Ministry of Environment brought experts of many different nations and disciplines together to develop and improve the draft Action Plan [see [International workshop report issued](#), this issue, and [International workshop wrestles with Atlantic issues](#), TMG 5 (1): May 2002].

Since then, the projects developed in Cabo Blanco by the [Fundación CBD-Habitat](#) have focused on the conservation of the colony, including actions contemplated in the Plan and recommendations drawn up by the experts of the PHVA. The project, whose first stage has now drawn to a close in Cabo Blanco, has achieved some notable results.

Officially commencing in 2000, the project consisted of two main, closely-related, branches. The first of these focused on actions directly relating to the conservation or monitoring of the seal population, while the second incorporated social development actions – aid, education and awareness – within those sectors of the local population having a connection with the species.

Because of this conjunction of fields – social development and nature conservation – the project was financed by specialised funding sources. The Spanish Agency of International Co-operation provided support for social development actions, while the Spanish Ministry of Environment and the NGOs Euronature and Fundación Biodiversidad financed conservation actions at the Cabo Blanco monk seal colony.

Social help for the poor

The social development component was considered essential to the success of the project. Formerly, seal researchers were seen by Mauritanian locals as strangers with weird views of the world – people who were anxious about the fate and welfare of animals, while impoverished locals hardly had the means to ensure their own survival.

In this context, convincing Mauritanians of the need to preserve an endangered animal species or involving them in the conservation process was virtually impossible.

With local artisanal fishermen having the most frequent interactions with monk seals in the area, we decided to investigate their particular social problems as a means of soliciting their help in the conservation of the species.



Safety-at-sea courses for artisanal fishermen



Conservation education comes to Mauritanian schools

Highest on the list of reported concerns was safety at sea – accidents which annually claimed several dozen lives – and also potentially serious health hazards arising from poor conservation and hygiene conditions under which the fish is sold in the city.

Accidents at sea, we discovered, were often caused by lack of knowledge. Many of these fishermen, in fact, have no seafaring traditions but migrated to the coast from interior regions, escaping from drought and attracted by the development of the fishing industry. A lack of means also prevented them from investing in safety equipment for their boats.



The new artisanal fish market in Nouadhibou

As a result of our study, over the past two years 360 fishermen have been trained in safety at sea, enabling them to predict and avoid dangerous situations, and also to react correctly in emergencies. We also provided them with safety equipment, such as lifejackets, flashing emergency lights, position lights for the pirogues, foul-weather gear, first aid kits, etc.

Also, in conjunction with the city Council of Nouadhibou, the first artisanal fish market has recently been built in the city, helping to solve hygiene and fish conservation problems that were adversely affecting the health of the local population.

At the same time, environmental education and awareness courses were organised in conjunction with the Mauritanian Institute for Fisheries and Oceanographic Research – INROP — (formerly known as CNROP), with artisanal fishermen, 70 school teachers and 2000 pupils of primary and secondary schools participating.

Coast of Seals protection area

All of these combined activities have resulted in a better understanding of the need to protect the monk seals in the region, and have encouraged local participation in the conservation process.

Local artisanal fishermen, for example, have now agreed not to fish in a designated area along the "Coast of Seals", which contains the two main breeding caves at its core.

This area, covering around 6 km of coast, has been marked with red flags to designate its boundaries. Since artisanal gillnet fishing in the area takes place from 0 to 500 meters from the coast, the signals placed to mark the area are clearly visible to the fishermen.

At the same time, on land, the area has also been marked to deter fishermen and shellfish collectors. An intensive patrolling of the area has been necessary to discourage their presence in locations critical for the seals – such as caves and open beaches – and to persuade them to fish in alternative areas.

During this process, the surveillance team has had to take action on numerous occasions to prevent their presence in seal breeding areas. Today, however, human intrusions by land have been virtually eliminated. Observation posts established for our guards allow monitoring of the area without the risk of causing disturbance to the seals below.

The realisation of this controlled terrestrial and marine zone represents an important result for the project and an important step towards the conservation and recovery of the Cabo Blanco seal population. Combined with reinforcement by the National Park of the Banc D'Arguin authorities of the Satellite Reserve of Cap Blanc, these efforts are leading to a much improved protection for monk seals in the area.

Since the beginning of this project, the number of adult or juvenile animals found dead (i.e. not including pups), has decreased from 4 animals respectively in 2000 and 2001, to 1 this year.

Seven of those carcasses were found prior to reaching an effective agreement with artisanal fishermen in September 2001, while only 2 were discovered subsequently.

All of the social development actions were implemented by the Fundación CBD-Habitat, in conjunction with the company Tragsa and the NGO Ipade.

Seal monitoring and research

While these initiatives were underway, many other conservation priorities were also being pursued in the colony – as reported in previous issues of TMG.

Monitoring of breeding caves has been undertaken on a daily basis since the inception of the project, allowing the identification of each season's newborn pups and their mothers. This has enabled us to resume work on constructing a reproductive history of breeding females, an effort that was brought to an abrupt halt following the mass mortality of 1997.

The continuous monitoring of the pups until their first moult at two months old has allowed us to determine the annual pup survival rate and to compare the results with external factors such as sea and weather conditions. In conjunction with the Spanish Ministry of Environment and the Spanish Institute of Meteorology, we are also developing a model which would allow us to correlate weather conditions at the coast with the models of high sea conditions generally used by meteorological institutions. This model, we hope, will prove useful in predicting storm conditions potentially lethal for newborn pups. Maintaining the link between nature conservation and social issues, such information will also enable us to issue weather alerts to artisanal fishermen.

Individual identification of males and non-reproductive females is also performed via cameras installed in the caves, and from photographs taken from the cliff-tops.

While it is a key priority, the monitoring of the coast is not confined to the meridional points of the marked protection area. Periodically, monitoring also takes us as far south as the tip of the Cabo Blanco peninsula, in order to find



The Coast of Seals protection zone, marked by red flags



Identification of monk seal individuals from the Cabo Blanco cliff-tops

monk seal carcasses for necropsy or to rescue pups that have been swept away from the breeding caves.

So far, one pup has been rescued in this way, and following rehabilitation by INROP, with the technical assistance of the SRRC of Pieterburen, it was released with a satellite transmitter set-up by Fundación CBD-Habitat. The small size of the transmitter allowed us to track the movements of the animal until the end of its battery life, 45 days after release [see [Rescue, release and post-release monitoring of Weam](#), TMG 5 (1): May 2002 and [Weam is one year old](#), this issue]. The animal, known as "Weam", which means 'concord' in the Arabic dialect, was also monitored visually, with local artisanal fishermen also contributing sightings information. As related in the last issue of TMG, Weam continues to be observed regularly, the animal often hauling-out on an open beach near the seal colony.

Fundación CBD-Habitat technicians have also spent time onboard fishing pirogues, gathering information on fishing grounds, fishing gear, and interactions with seals. Numerous interviews have also been conducted to gain further information on sightings of seals, particularly in locations where our technicians cannot reach.

The success of this project can, we believe, be attributed to the combination of diverse actions applied, involving diverse fields of expertise and funding sources. This interdependence has tended to magnify positive results throughout the project, but particularly in encouraging the involvement of the local community in the conservation process.

Reference

González, L.M., Aguilar, A., López-Jurado, L.F., Grau, E. 1997. Status and distribution of the Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* on the Cabo Blanco peninsula (Western Sahara-Mauritania) in 1993-1994. *Biological Conservation* 80: 225-233.

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