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## Obituary

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### Friend of the Monk Seal

### Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, 1933 – 2003

It is with great sadness that we report the passing of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, who for many years proved a good and faithful friend of the Mediterranean monk seal.

Prince Sadruddin served as UN High Commissioner for Refugees between 1965-1977, and would almost certainly have been appointed UN Secretary General in 1981 had it not been for a Soviet veto. He was appointed coordinator of UN humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan in 1988 and assumed similar responsibilities for Iraq and Kuwait after the Gulf War in 1990. From 1992 until his death he acted as chargé de mission to Kofi Annan.

Outside the UN, the Prince was equally at home campaigning for nuclear disarmament as he was fighting against the exploitation of dolphins in captivity, deforestation, or the cruelties of the fur trade. In 1977, he founded the Geneva-based [Bellerive Foundation](#), which came to reflect his own passionately-held holistic philosophy.

In 1990, Bellerive became alarmed by reports that a marine circus in the south of France, Antibes Marineland, was about to capture monk seals off the coast of Mauritania. There followed an intense international campaign to thwart the capture plan and, throughout it all, the Prince maintained an avid personal interest in unfolding events, frequently calling from his UN office to check on developments and to offer advice.

In March 1992, Prince Sadruddin made his first face-to-face acquaintance with the Mediterranean monk seal, attending the release of orphaned pup *Efstratia* on the Aegean island of Alonissos in the Northern Sporades Marine Park. Accompanied by his wife, Princess Catherine, the Greek Environment Minister and a throng of journalists, the visit helped draw worldwide attention to the plight of the species.

The Prince was visibly touched, both by the bewildered monk seal pup snuffling at his fingers in the Steni Vala rescue station, as by the genuine warmth and hospitality shown to him by the local people of Alonissos.

Of the shy, once trusting seal of the Mediterranean, he remarked that, in many ways it is “a totemic like symbol for the good side of the human species.”

Later on in Athens, the Prince brought his diplomatic skills to bear, championing the monk seal cause in meetings with ministers, the prime minister, and even the president of the republic.



Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan with Theodoros, the orphaned monk seal, Alonissos, June 1992.

“He was vocal on numerous subjects, ranging from the plight of monk seals on the Sporadean island of Alonissos to nuclear disarmament, and from the spectacle of a wretched panda trained to play a trumpet in a circus to the detrimental impact on the planet of mass deforestation.”

– The Times, 16 May 2003

In June the same year, he returned to Alonissos, where he was awarded Honorary Citizenship in a ceremony attended by the wife of the then Prime Minister, Constantine Mitsotakis.



Prince Sadruddin and Princess Catherine (second and third from left) attending the release of orphaned monk seal pup *Efstratia*

For the next few days, Prince Sadruddin held “town hall” meetings with local stakeholders, hiked over the archipelago’s uninhabited islands and made the personal acquaintance of that other famous ambassador of the monk seal species, Theodoros, the orphaned seal that had so endeared himself to the local community.

Later the same year, he donated a new 42-seat community bus to Alonissos in an effort to encourage the island to stake its future on the Marine Park rather than the mass tourism route so common to the Aegean.

At the same time, he spearheaded efforts to establish an Athens-based foundation for the monk seal, encouraging wealthy ship-owners and other industrialists to commit themselves to saving Europe’s most endangered marine

mammal. Although it proved an uphill battle, before winding up its activities the foundation had donated some quarter of a million dollars to monk seal conservation efforts in the Aegean.

In 1994, he had Bellerive join forces with the International Marine Mammal Association to defeat yet another attempt by Antibes Marineland to capture monk seals in Mauritania.

“The question is, *Can anything be done?* Over the years, I have discussed monk seal conservation with numerous people, from government ministers to businessmen and scientists, from conservation activists to school children. Ironically, it is often the young who have the clearest idea of what needs to be done. It is the young who are impatient for answers, intolerant of delay. Where others find themselves wallowing in bureaucratic quicksand, the young often see common sense solutions and cannot understand why establishment figures are reluctant to seize the initiative. Some might call this naïveté, but one wonders whether this is just the cynic’s way of justifying inaction.”

Sadruddin Aga Khan, [A Little Imagination](#), Guest Editorial, TMG 2(2): 1999.

As recently as 2002, Prince Sadruddin stepped in to save The Monachus Guardian from closure, personally urging other organisations to match his funding commitment [[Prince issues appeal](#), TMG 5 (1): May 2002]. Within weeks, WWF International had reacted positively to his appeal, allowing the Guardian to continue publishing for another year [[WWF backs The Monachus Guardian, TMG 5 \(2\)](#): November 2002].

Over time, Prince Sadruddin became increasingly frustrated by the glacial pace of government bureaucracies in tackling ecological and animal welfare abuse, and by the seemingly infinite capacity of officials to evade even the most compelling facts of a logical argument.

He could be equally incensed by conflicts between organisations that supposedly shared the same worthy goals – a conviction that originally inspired Bellerive’s faith, and nurtured its talents, in assembling broad coalitions to tackle pressing issues.

At the same time, the Prince often voiced concern that, in striving to meet the challenges of operating within a new world economic order, NGOs could themselves become corporate entities alienated from the very people they needed to reach and to convince.

Sadruddin Aga Khan will be a sorely missed source of inspiration to conservation, human rights and animal welfare – just some of the key areas that composed his holistic view of the world.

**Further reading:**

[A Little Imagination](#), by Sadruddin Aga Khan, Guest Editorial, The Monachus Guardian 2(2): 1999.

[Preface to The Rose-Tinted Menagerie](#), by Sadruddin Aga Khan. Heretic Books, London.

The [Bellerive Foundation](#), Geneva, Switzerland.

[Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan](#). Mediating between East and West, and bringing an environmental conscience to the affairs of the UN. The Times, May 16, 2003.