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SENSITIVE SEA AREAS AND THE MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL

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The designation of **Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas** in international waters was one of the main issues discussed at the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) recent 51st Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) meeting, which took place between 29 March – 2 April 2004 in London.

The 51st MEPC approved in principle the designation of three new PSSAs – in the Galapagos Archipelago, the Canary Islands Archipelago and the Baltic Sea area, with the exception of Russian waters. However, it was the latter that triggered extensive debate as to whether the designation of extensive sea areas is actually compatible with the PSSA concept.

A joint request was put forward by Russia, Liberia and Panama calling for an urgent review of existing IMO guidelines concerning the identification and designation of PSSAs. As clarified by a representative of the Russian Federation delegation, these three states do not oppose PSSAs in principle, but point out that the idea was originally developed to be applied to single ecosystems, not vast areas or entire seas.

That request was strongly supported by a paper jointly submitted by six leading industry bodies, namely Bimco, the International Chamber of Shipping, Intercargo, Intertanko, the International Parcel Tankers Association and the Oil Companies International Marine Forum. Far from rejecting the PSSA concept, the paper criticizes the “unchecked” proliferation of PSSAs, warning that standard will lose its special significance and become devalued unless the guidelines are reviewed to include a “rigorous” application process.

Guidelines for the Identification and Designation of Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas are contained in resolution A.927(22) and state that a PSSA is an area that needs special protection through action by the IMO because of its significance for recognized ecological, socio-economic, or scientific reasons and which may be vulnerable to damage by international shipping activities.

Once a PSSA has been designated following formal approval by the IMO, the coastal state(s) concerned are required to propose Associated Protective Measures (APMs) which, under the PSSA guidelines, should increase protection of the area using mechanisms such as vessel traffic separation schemes, areas to be avoided, compulsory pilotage and strict application of MARPOL discharge and equipment requirements for ships, such as oil tankers.

A PSSA can also be protected by ships' routing measures – such as an area to be avoided: an area within defined limits in which either navigation is particularly hazardous or it is exceptionally important to avoid casualties and which should be avoided by all ships, or by certain classes of ships.

Therefore, as such measures have the potential to regulate the operation of shipping in general, the industry submission called on the IMO to look beyond its remit and take account of both land-based and waterborne sources of marine pollution when approving the designation of new areas and adopting APMs.

There are currently six designated PSSAs: the Great Barrier Reef, Australia (designated a PSSA in 1990); the Sabana-Camagüey Archipelago in Cuba (1997); Malpelo Island, Colombia (2002);

around the Florida Keys, United States (2002); the Wadden Sea, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands (2002); and Paracas National Reserve, Peru (2003).

The substance of the 51st MEPC ruling means that current and future proposals for PSSAs will be assessed under existing guidelines until any review is sanctioned. However, the heated debate is likely to continue in the future and the European Commission has suggested that it intends to designate the Mediterranean as a PSSA at a later date.

Considering the highly endangered status of the Mediterranean monk seal and the vulnerability of remaining monk seal populations to a potentially catastrophic oil spill in areas such as the Northern Sporades archipelago, which provides refuge to the largest monk seal population in the Mediterranean, it will be interesting to learn the official position of the Greek government on such an issue, which preaches its commitment to support efforts for the survival of the species, but at international fora such as the IMO often confines its role to that of the protector of Greek shipping interests, as if environmental protection and prosperity of the shipping industry cannot co-exist.



The National Marine Park Alonissos-Northern Sporades – a potential candidate for PSSA status?

Wouldn't it be a far more proactive and positive stance on the part of the Greek government to support the PSSA concept by proposing the designation of areas such as the Northern Sporades archipelago and, in parallel, initiate discussions on the financial aspects – specifically, who will shoulder the cost of longer shipping routes – an issue that remains at the heart of this problem?

Many would argue that end users (i.e. consumers in affluent western societies of the so-called "developed countries"), if adequately informed about the potentially devastating impact of a large oil spill in the Northern Sporades area – an event that could conceivably mark the beginning of the end for the Mediterranean monk seal as a species – would be willing to contribute their fair share towards its survival by accepting a marginal increase in the retail prices for products, thus compensating somewhat for extra ship mileage.

Further info

[Sea Alarm to prepare for oil spill](#), The Monachus Guardian 4 (1): May 2001.

[Oil Spill At Çavus Island](#). A Clean-up Operation to Save Monk Seal Habitats at Gümüslük, SW Turkey. The Monachus Guardian 1 (1): May 1998.

[Sea Alarm Foundation](#). The Foundation Emergency Fund for Marine Mammals Sea Alarm ('Sea Alarm Foundation') was founded December 1999, in The Netherlands. Its objective is to offer assistance in the broadest sense to marine mammals and other marine wildlife that is in acute distress of a disaster.

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