



Guest Editorial

FIFTEEN YEARS ONBOARD “THE ODYSSEY”

by Panayiotis Dendrinou

In keeping with the tradition of Monachus Guardian guest editorials, I delved back into my memory to recall the moment that I first saw this legendary creature. It's already something like 30 years ago, and I remember a calm late afternoon on my home island, Syros, in the Cyclades. I was rowing a small fishing boat, helping a family friend (a passionate fisherman) set his long-line. I was his favourite companion during these fishing missions for two main reasons: I was good in rowing and at the same time retiring enough not to make derogatory remarks about his fishing skills (typical cockfights between passionate fishermen). Suddenly I caught a glimpse of a large animal surfacing a few meters away from the boat and then a few seconds later disappearing gently again into the deep. I was shocked, unable even to imagine what kind of sea monster this might be but I held my tongue, sure that the fisherman didn't notice anything since he was so preoccupied with his “paragadi” (long line in Greek). But a few moments later he turned to me and said: “Did you see the seal? Aaah... you have no idea how sneaky she is. Tomorrow morning we'll hardly get any fish”. Of course at that moment I couldn't even imagine that my life in the future would be so tied to these deserving animals.



Many years later in 1990, my companions in MOm (the Hellenic Society for the Study and Protection of the Monk Seal) and I were thinking about an appropriate name for the organization's research vessel (which we were able to obtain thanks to a generous donation from IFAW). We all agreed that “Odyssey” was the perfect choice since Homer was the first in recorded history to refer to these creatures in his legendary epic poem. Later on, after many years tackling the conservation problems of the species, I realized that this name also holds a deeper meaning, in that the long and difficult path towards protection of the species itself resembles an Odyssey. It's truly a long journey, marked by moments of disappointment, by lost battles and companions that have given up along the way but, on the other hand, also by small victories, achievements and events that offer hope and courage to persevere.

An event that every year gives hope and courage to us all in MOm is the life-full calls of pups and mothers, which echo from the sea caves during the autumn pupping season. But this year, something even more exceptional happened. I had the opportunity of confirming scattered reports that we had been receiving over the last few years about a remote island where monk seals were said to be basking under the sun on open beaches. I can't describe my enthusiasm as we surveyed the island with the Odyssey. Mothers and their pups were basking on the open beaches and swimming around just as in Homer's day. During this breeding season we have so far counted 33 pups during our survey work in the Aegean.



Basking and swimming seals (left to right: 1 pup in the water; 2 pups and 1 adult on the shore; 1 pup at the water's edge).

The photo of the basking Mediterranean monk seals you see here I dedicate to all those people who are committed to the conservation of these rare animals, along with my best wishes for the essential continuation of their efforts.

Panayiotis Dendrinis, Alonissos, November 2004.

Panayiotis (Panos) Dendrinis is a biologist, founding member and field research coordinator of MOM/Hellenic Society for the Study and Protection of the Monk Seal.

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