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Press Release

A sad last message from Artemis

On Thursday 14th of May, our organization received sad and disheartening news: orphaned monk seal pup 'Artemis' had been found dead at the port of Skiathos. Subsequent investigations, including the results of a necropsy performed by a veterinary pathologist from the Netherlands, indicate that she had drowned, most probably as a result of becoming entangled in fishing gear.

With a clean bill of health from her veterinarians, Artemis had been released just over a month ago, into the core zone of the National Marine Park of Alonnisos, Northern Sporades (NMPANS) — this following 4 months of treatment at MOM's Monk Seal Rehabilitation Centre, that had raised her from a vulnerable week-old pup to a vigorous young seal.

After her body was discovered at Skiathos, events unfolded as follows:

- MOM's response team recovered the carcass and, in collaboration with the local Port Police authorities, managed to transfer it to Athens that same evening.
- Prof. Dr. Thijs Kuiken, a veterinary pathologist specialising in marine mammals at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, travelled urgently to Greece to conduct a full necropsy at the zoology laboratory at the University of Athens. He was assisted by MOM's own biologists, who are also experienced in performing monk seal necropsies.
- The necropsy established that Artemis was in excellent nutritional condition and overall health, having a normal weight for her age. There was clear evidence that the seal had died as a result of drowning.

"The results of the necropsy," said Dr. Thijs Kuiken, "led to the clear conclusion that the animal died of acute pneumonic edema, caused by drowning. The fresh food remains identified in the stomach and the evidence of active digestion in the digestive tract substantiate further that death was sudden."

To further assess the condition of the animal, additional data were utilized, obtained through the attached satellite tag (GPS mobile telephony tag), that recorded Artemis' movements and behavior during her post-release

monitoring, a program conducted by MOm in collaboration with the Sea Mammal Research Unit of UK. Artemis, up until her death, exhibited a gradual and continuously increasing mobility and diving ability, first around her release site and then outside the NMPANS, covering distances of more than 100 nautical miles, and with dives exceeding 150 meters in depth.

The specific conditions in which the death occurred, as well as the exact cause of drowning, may yet be determined through further in-depth analysis, both of samples from the necropsy, and satellite tag data from the last few hours prior to the animal's death.

At this point, however, interpretation of the accumulated evidence suggests that Artemis may have drowned as a result of becoming entangled in fishing gear.

“Although the young seal quickly adjusted to its natural environment,” says Vangelis Paravas, Conservation and Policy Coordinator of MOm, “the harsh but unavoidable fact is that Artemis ultimately also had to face the reality of surviving in the wild, just as the rest of the remaining monk seals in the Mediterranean Sea.”

Data stemming from MOm's long-term research — notably from its current European Commission LIFE-MOFI project, that investigates seal-fisheries interactions throughout the country — have shown that the entanglement of monk seals in fishing gear, and especially in nets, constitutes one of the most significant threats for the Greek population of the species, the largest in the EU.

This threat, occurring commonly during spring, is the main cause of death in immature monk seals. In fact, 47% of the mortality recorded in immature animals is attributable to entanglements.

As part of the MOFI project and in consultation with artisanal professional fishermen and their representatives, MOm is formulating specific proposals to the Greek government to mitigate monk seal mortality and promote sustainable coastal fisheries.

“Despite difficult and disappointing times like today,” says Dr. Spyros Kotomatas, Director of MOm, “monk seal rescue, treatment and rehabilitation remains a key priority for MOm in the conservation of Europe's most endangered marine mammal.”

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