The Monachus Guardian
monachus / schauinslandi / tropicalis

Vol. 9 / No. 2 | Published by Friends of the Monk Seal | November 2006

Mauritania: Pup boom at Cabo Blanco

Cover Story: Controversy and lost opportunity in Antalya

Research: A Turkish visitor to Northern Cyprus?

Search

The Monachus Guardian
monachus / schauinslandi / tropicalis

International News

Vol. 9 (2): November 2006

Anatomy of a conference

An international conference on the Mediterranean monk seal took place in Kemer, near Antalya, Turkey on 17-19 September – unlike previous gatherings, focusing on the political, legal and financial issues that affect the management and recovery of the species.

Held under the UNEP/MAP banner, the conference took place under the wider umbrella of the inaugural Med Blue Week, an event called to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the Barcelona Convention, the international agreement that brought both the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) and the Mediterranean Monk Seal Action Plan into being. [More]

Fact Files

The Monachus Guardian has recently published a detailed knowledgebase on the Mediterranean monk seal, written and compiled by some of Europe's foremost authorities on the species, including experienced field researchers working in Greece, Madeira, Mauritania/Western Sahara and Turkey. The Monk Seal Fact Files, a searchable information source, covers the history, habitat, distribution and abundance, biology and behaviour of *Monachus monachus*, as well as sections devoted to threats and conservation efforts.

A comprehensive reference list provides links to additional online content and downloads, where available.

It is hoped that additional funds might also be secured to expand the use of photographic material and to add multimedia (sound/video) content to The Monk Seal Fact Files, further enhancing this publication as a resource for teachers, students, journalists and general interest readers. Translations are also being considered. Any leads on potential funding sources to aid these conservation education efforts would be gratefully received; please contact the Editor.

We encourage other organisations to consider placing a link to the Fact Files on their own websites as a public service, should they consider it appropriate.

Citation:

> **William M. Johnson, Alexandros A. Karamanlidis, Panagiotis Dendrinos, Pablo Fernández de Larrinoa, Manel Gazo, Luis Mariano González, Harun Güçlüsoy, Rosa Pires, Matthias Schnellmann**. 2006. Monk Seal Fact Files. Biology, Behaviour, Status and Conservation of the Mediterranean monk seal, *Monachus monachus*. The Monachus Guardian, www.monachus-guardian.org <http://www.monachus-guardian.org>.

Link: http://www.monachus-guardian.org/factfiles/medit01.htm

The Monachus Guardian in Spanish

Thanks to the financial support of the Government of the Balearic Islands, Spain, and the translation efforts of its consultant, Toni Font, the June issue of The Monachus Guardian was published in Spanish shortly after the English addition appeared.

This marked a “first” for the Guardian, and can only help to bring the plight of the monk seals and their threatened habitats to an even wider international audience.

The Spanish translation can be accessed at http://www.monachus-guardian.org/spanish, or through TMG’s home page via the linked flag. The translation of the November issue will appear shortly after the English edition.

Anyone wishing to discuss the possibilities of arranging or funding translations into other languages (for instance, Arabic, Greek, Turkish) is kindly requested to contact the Editor.

Earlier this year, The Monachus Guardian welcomed The Balearic Islands government as an official sponsor of the journal for 2006, its modest but important grant helping us to continue reporting news and opinion about monk seal and marine conservation issues from across the current and former range of the species.

EndQuote

Threats to Mediterranean monk seals exacerbated by political folly, says US Marine Mammal Commission

“The Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) has been referred to as Europe’s most endangered marine mammal… Significant threats to the species include habitat degradation and loss, fisheries interactions (entanglement in fisheries gear and, particularly, shooting by fishermen who perceive the monk seal to be a competitor), disease (e.g., morbillivirus), harmful algal blooms, and disturbance. Research and management of these threats is confounded by a lack of international cooperation and coordination.”

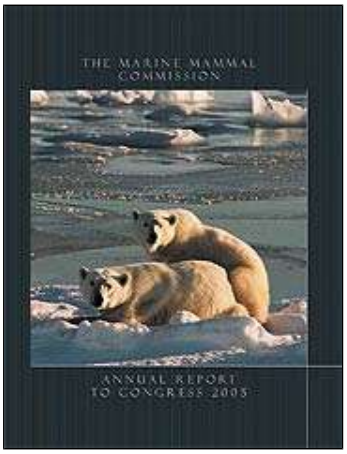
Source: Marine Mammal Commission. 2006. Mediterranean monk seal. Page 99 in Chapter V, Other Species of Special Concern, Annual Report to Congress, 2005. Marine Mammal Commission, Bethesda, Maryland: 1-204. [PDF 5MB]

The Monachus Guardian
monachus / schauinslandi / tropicalis

Hawaiian News

Vol. 9 (2): November 2006

Marine Mammal Commission report



The Marine Mammal Commission's Annual Report to Congress for 2005 was published during the summer. For those interested in current Hawaiian monk seal population trends, human and natural threats to the species, the status of the Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, and efforts to encourage *Monachus schauinslandi's* repopulation of the Main Hawaiian Islands, the MMC report is an indispensable guide.

The report is available for download directly from the MMC:

Marine Mammal Commission. 2006. Hawaiian monk seal. Pages 70-81 in Chapter V, Other Species of Special Concern, Annual Report to Congress, 2005. Marine Mammal Commission, Bethesda, Maryland: 1-204. [PDF 5MB]

Crittercam reveals foraging behaviour

A one-hour film on Hawaiian monk seals was due to premiere on PBS starting Wednesday, November 1, 2006 in most areas, writes Kyler Abernathy of the National Geographic Society's Remote Imaging team.

Those interested in seeing the National Geographic Special are advised to check their local PBS listings for broadcast dates.

This natural history film, explains Abernathy, documents efforts to understand monk seal foraging ecology in hope of finding remedies for the decline of the Hawaiian monk seal in recent decades. It shows how the use of innovative technology such as Crittercam, 'electric rocks' and research submarines have allowed scientists to discover critical aspects of foraging and habitat use that have in turn informed the process of establishing protections for the Hawaiian monk seal and their unique habitat, the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

To find out more about this film please visit the National Geographic press room.

Hawaiian Press Watch

On Faraway Shoals, Researchers Struggle to Save the Seals. 31 October 2006

The Hawaiian monk seal is having a bad year. In 2006, the seals set a record for the lowest number of pups born since monitoring began in 1983. On French Frigate Shoals, almost 600 miles northwest of Honolulu, where the species' largest subpopulation lives, almost a quarter of the pups died or disappeared, perhaps lost to predation by sharks.

The outlook for juveniles past the pup stage is not any better. Young seals throughout the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands archipelago are starving, and scientists have not been able to figure out why.

This is not the first difficult year for the seal, which has declined an estimated 60 percent since the late 1950s to a population of approximately 1,200.

Bud Antonelis, head of the monk seal protected species division of the National Marine Fisheries Service, said the species “is now in a crisis situation.”

“The population may fall below 1,000 in the next five years,” Dr. Antonelis said… (Joe Spring, New York Times)

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/31/science/31seal.html?ex=1163480400&en=e624119833d944b5&ei=5070&emc=eta1

Seal pups pack up for trip home: Twins fly back to Midway for transition back to the wild. 17 October, 2006

Rare twin Hawaiian monk seal pups that were rescued on Midway Atoll five months ago and brought to Oahu for fattening are heading back to Midway today. A Coast Guard C-130 Hercules aircraft was to have transported the juvenile seals on a five-hour flight to Midway this morning. The twin females, designated PO22 and PO26, weighed just 65 pounds and 79 pounds, respectively, when they were brought to Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center at Kewalo Basin on May 30. Yesterday, they weighed 113 pounds and 131 pounds, still below the 150-170 pounds deemed ideal for weaned Hawaiian monk seal pups… (Nelson Daranciang, Honolulu Star Bulletin)

http://starbulletin.com/2006/10/17/news/story15.html

Monk seal Penelope drowns in gillnet. 18 October 2006

A Hawaiian monk seal that was born earlier this year at Turtle Bay on Oahu was found drowned in a gillnet Monday. Conservation enforcement officers for the Department of Land and Natural Resources were called to a location near Rabbit Island, the islet east of Makapuu Point, said DLNR Director Peter Young.

"To say it is a disappointment is an extreme understatement," Young said. "This is why we want to further manage lay gillnets, because of the indiscriminate killing -- not only of fish, but endangered species like the monk seal."

The seal was positively identified as the same animal that was born in early June on the North Shore, Young said. The animal was nicknamed Penelope by volunteers who had assisted with keeping curious onlookers away from it while it was nursing from its mother, he said… (Diana Leone, Honolulu Star Bulletin)

http://starbulletin.com/2006/10/18/news/story10.html

Endangered monk seals star in National Geo special
A National Geographic special follows animals fitted with videocameras into their ocean habitat. 31 October 2006.

Critically endangered Hawaiian monk seals will star in their own National Geographic special tomorrow night on public television.

"Hawaiian Monk Seals: Surviving Paradise" is a chance for the charismatic marine mammals to take viewers with them into the ocean depths of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as they forage for food, evade predators and have some fun.

Much of the hour-long show will be footage gleaned from a cooperative project that outfitted 42 of the animals with Crittercams® – compact video cameras designed to be worn by wild animals… (Diana Leone, Honolulu Star Bulletin)

http://starbulletin.com/2006/10/31/news/story04.html

Race on to stem decline of seals
Scientists struggle to determine why animals are dying. 3 September 2006

Between the 1950s and early 1970s the monk seal population dropped unexpectedly by 50 percent. Now numbering somewhere around 1,200, the Hawaiian monk seal has failed to rebound despite efforts to protect its main habitat in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, the waters around which recently became a national monument…

The seals also have a developing but smaller outpost on the main Hawaiian Islands, where they are occasionally spotted by residents and tourists.

Among the seals' most prominent problems are skinny pups that have trouble surviving through their first years.

With the seals' numbers projected to potentially plummet below 1,000 in the next five years, scientists are in a race to figure out why the shy, up to nearly 600-pound animals are disappearing from the islands. (Honolulu Star Bulletin)

http://starbulletin.com/2006/09/03/news/story06.html

Navy, enviro groups settle sonar lawsuit
Ruling: 'Considerable scientific evidence' that it can harm marine mammals. 10 July 2006

LOS ANGELES - The Navy can use high-intensity sonar in some circumstances for Pacific warfare exercises under an agreement reached Friday with environmental groups, four days after a judge banned the sonar over concerns it could harm marine mammals.

The settlement prevents the Navy from using the sonar within 25 miles of the newly established Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument during its Rim of the Pacific 2006 exercises, and also imposes a variety of methods to watch for and report the presence of marine mammals… (MSNBC)

http://msnbc.msn.com/id/13689800/

Most back new U.S. marine monument. 7 August 2006

President Bush's creation of a vast marine monument out of the remote, biologically rich waters around the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands meets with the approval of most of the American public, according to a survey commissioned by the Ocean Conservancy.

Before answering the question of whether they approved of Bush's decision, the 2,014 people around the nation polled last month first were given a description of the new marine area, which encompasses 140,000 square miles of protected waters teeming with marine life.

Seventy percent said they supported, and only 6 percent said they opposed, the president's action… (Honolulu Star Bulletin)

http://starbulletin.com/2006/08/07/news/story06.html

Seal's alleged beheader says he did it for science. 14 June 2006

LIHUE - The Kauai man accused of beheading a dead Hawaiian monk seal told federal and state officials that he did it for "scientific interest and to preserve it," according to court documents.

Justin Freemon, 24, who was in Lihue District Court yesterday to request a jury trial, will appear in court again Monday to learn his trial date.

He would not comment but in court documents an enforcement officer from the National Marine Fisheries Service said Freemon admitted to the beheading. Freemon also led investigators to his campsite near Pilaa Beach where he dug up the head that was buried in a plastic bag, according to the documents.

He told investigators that he was waiting for the flesh to fall off so that he could study it, the documents said. He also told investigators that he thought the skull would be worth money in the future… (Honolulu Star Bulletin)

http://starbulletin.com/2006/06/14/news/briefs.html

Officials try to insulate a rare nursing scene. 10 June 2006

A Hawaiian monk seal who gave birth to a pup on Kauai last year is now mother to the first pup born on Oahu in eight years.

R5AY, an adult female Hawaiian monk seal that frequents Hauula, gave birth on a remote North Shore beach, probably on June 1, said David Schofield, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration fisheries marine mammal response coordinator. A passer-by discovered and reported the pup, he said.

Officials know the identity of the mother from a bleach mark they put on her shoulder last December... (Nelson Daranciang, Honolulu Star Bulletin)

http://starbulletin.com/2006/06/10/news/story04.html

Environmentalists Praise Bush's Action to Create the World's Largest Marine Protected Area: Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Sanctuary. 15 June 2006

Washington, DC – President George W. Bush will announce today his intention to establish the world's largest marine protected area – over 84 million acres - to safeguard a remote, biologically rich string of islands and submerged lands known as the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). These are the most intact tropical marine ecosystems under US jurisdiction. There have been endeavors to protect the area since the days of President Teddy Roosevelt, including the designation of the area as an ecosystem reserve by President Bill Clinton, Hawai'i Governor Linda Lingle's action last year to protect all state waters in the region from commercial activities and efforts by Hawai'i's Congressional delegation. The Bush-proposed NWHI national marine sanctuary is the lynchpin to giving the federal area more permanent and stronger protections. Environmental Defense, Marine Conservation Biology Institute, KAHEA: the Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance and the `Ilio`ulaokalani Coalition praise President Bush's bold actions. The groups will closely examine specific proposed measures to ensure that they are consistent with the visionary purpose of the sanctuary. It is essential that destructive practices are not allowed under the guise of "research".

"This an unprecedented win for endangered Hawaiian monk seals, green sea turtles, black-footed albatrosses, tiger sharks, the incredible reef corals in these waters, the people of Hawai'i and all Americans, now and in generations to come," said Marine Conservation Biology Institute President Dr. Elliott Norse. "It's the start of a new era of protecting places in the sea before they're degraded beyond recognition. In my opinion, this is the best thing President Bush has done for the environment." … (Press release [PDF 62KB], Environmental Defense, Marine Conservation Biology Institute, KAHEA: the Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance and the `Ilio`ulaokalani Coalition.)

EndQuote

Nasty Lawyers

So, here's a class they don't teach in law school: screwing over your opponent just in time for the holidays. They probably should. For anyone with even a lick of evil in their soul and a filament of creativity in their brain, the law offers a whole host of opportunities for wrecking the lives of others. [...]

Sure, we'd all like to pretend this stuff doesn't happen. Until they get a few drinks in us and we start to brag about all the vile and devious tricks we've pulled to wreck the other side's holidays. And for any lawyer reading this column who is shocked, shocked to learn that some attorneys deliberately file motions and pleadings in order to trash the Christmas season for others, well, just go back to saving the Mediterranean Monk Seal or whatever it is you do.

Source: A Grinchly Contest for the Title of Uncivilest. December 2005. ContractsProf Blog, a Member of the Law Professor Blogs Network.

The Monachus Guardian
monachus / schauinslandi / tropicalis

Mediterranean News

Vol. 9 (2): November 2006

Algeria / Greece / Italy / Madeira / Mauritania & Western Sahara / Spain / Turkey

Algeria

Summer birth in the west

Prof. Zitouni Boutiba of the University of Oran has contacted The Monachus Guardian to report the birth of a Mediterranean monk seal pup in Algeria this summer. The pup, 114 cm in length and weighing 14 kg, was discovered on the 15 of August 2006 on the western Algerian coast towards the Greenwich meridian. Local fishermen, writes Prof. Boutiba, have also observed two adults in the vicinity, possibly the pup's parents.

According to current estimates, only 10 monk seals inhabit Algerian coasts at present [Mediterranean Monk Seal Fact Files: Distribution and abundance].

Greece

"Hot spot" areas selected in seal/fisheries interaction project

The selection of "hot spot" areas for MOm's monk seal/fisheries interaction project, known by its acronym MOFI, has been completed. These areas constitute a representative sample of Greece for measuring the intensity of interaction between Mediterranean monk seals and fisheries, and are located at the **Northern Sporades islands, the Kimolos-Polyaigos island complex** and **the islands of Kythira-Elafonissos, Chios-Psarra-Inousses, Karpathos, Zakynthos and Kalymnos.**

The selection of these areas was based on analysis, using GIS technology, of data on Mediterranean monk seals and coastal fisheries and aquaculture in Greece. This data forms part of the "National Data Centre for the Mediterranean Monk Seal in Greece", which was designed by MOm's scientific department in consultation with external GIS specialists and scientists from the Fisheries Research Institute.

The biological-ecological component of the National Data Centre includes spatial data on monk seal shelters and spatial and temporal data on monk seal sightings from throughout Greece. The fisheries component of the Data Centre was derived from the Hellenic Fishing Fleet Register and the aquaculture locations of aquaculture installations throughout the country. In evaluating efforts carried out in the hot spot areas, the National Marine Park of Alonnisos, Northern Sporades (NMPANS) and the Kimolos-Polyaigos island complex, which both host important monk seal populations and fishing communities, will serve as control areas. – Calliope I. Lagonika and Alexandros Karamanlidis, Mom.

Fishery sampling continues on Alonnisos

Sampling continues on the island of Alonnisos in order to measure the extent of seal-fisheries interaction. From May until October 2006, in cooperation with local fishermen, data from 10 samplings were collected on fishing activity and damage to fishing gear by seals and other marine

species. Subsequently, the information was correlated with performance data collected from 80 landings of local fishing vessels operating in the National Marine Park of Alonnisos, Northern Sporades and was recorded in the National Data Centre for further analysis. The research is being carried out with the collaboration of the Fisheries Research Institute. – Calliope I. Lagonika, Mom.

First Aid to Seals

A clear, practical and comprehensive guide that covers the essentials of what to do if you encounter a monk seal that needs help has been published by MOm. The First Aid to Seals guide aims to involve the people of island and coastal communities in the survival of the No. 1 critically endangered marine mammal in Europe. The guide was designed by MOm's Seal Rescue Specialist and Veterinary Assistant and edited by its Communications Officer, in order to be easily understood by non-specialists. Photographs and illustrations are used to present the material in a clear and attractive way. Its water-resistant cover makes it practical in the field.

The booklet covers:

- Basic information on the Mediterranean monk seal, its biology, distribution, threats and legal protection status.
- Why readers should be involved in the rescue of a monk seal.
- The operation of the Rescue and Information Network in Greece.
- Instructions on how a layperson should respond to cases of monk seals needing rescue.

Locals of the 7 MOFI hot spot areas will also be given the opportunity of practical first aid training, through a series of seminars. The first rescuing techniques seminar will take place this winter on the island of Alonnisos, the heart of the National Marine Park of Alonnisos, Northern Sporades. – Calliope I. Lagonika, Mom.

MOm's Summer Volunteers' Programme 2006

A total of 21,121 visitors to MOm's Information Centres and kiosks were introduced to the Mediterranean monk seal this summer, thanks to the organisation's Summer Volunteers' Programme. MOm's volunteers on the islands of Alonnisos, Skopelos and Kimolos, key habitats of the species, proved once again that they are valuable assets in bringing this vital conservation message to the public.

MOm's Summer Volunteers' programme has been operating since 1990, involving more than 850 volunteers ranging from 18 to 70 years of age! This year, MOm received almost 200 applications to participate, of which, following careful evaluation, 64 individuals were chosen to serve within the organisation's volunteer staff for a fortnight each, receiving free accommodation. After a crash course on the biology and ecology of the monk seal as well as MOm's actions and projects, they are ready to undertake a variety of tasks, ranging from environmental education for children to informing the public about the status of the monk seal in Greece. For more information on the Summer Volunteers' programme, contact MOm at: info@mom.gr. – Calliope I. Lagonika, Mom.

Pupping season in Greece: 20 newborns and still counting!

With the monk seal reproductive period fast reaching its peak for the Greek populations, MOm's researchers report that 20 pups have already been born in various shelters in island Greece, a number that is expected to grow in the weeks to come.

The numbers are as follows:

> N**ational Marine Park of Alonnisos - Northern Sporades (NMPANS):** 8 newborn pups recorded in October-November.
>
> **Kimolos-Polyaigos island complex:** 11 newborn pups recorded in October.
>
> **Other areas:** 1 newborn pup recorded in the islet of Spetsopoula, in the western part of the Aegean Archipelago.

MOm's field research team will continue to monitor pupping sites in the NMPANS and the Kimolos-Polyaigos island complex and also plans to visit other important areas for monk seals. In parallel, the Rescue and Information Network (RINT) is also on full alert, gathering information on monk seal encounters and new-born pup sightings from observers all over coastal Greece. MOm is hopeful that by the end of the current reproductive period the tally will surpass the 26 pups recorded in 2005. – Vangelis Paravas, Mom.

Monk seal photo exhibition

A true Mediterranean beauty featured in MOm's photo exhibition "Fokogenia", held in Athens during July and August 2006. A total selection of 30 high quality *Monachus monachus* photos captured the public's and media's imagination, in the first-ever monk seal photo exhibition to be organised in Greece.

The aim of the exhibition, which was accompanied by public awareness activities, was to impress upon people the importance of protecting the Greek marine wildlife.

The exhibition photographs were taken by MOm's Head of Research, biologist and photographer, Panos Dendrinos. –Calliope I. Lagonika, Mom.

Preliminary results in on the feeding habits of the monk seal

Very few studies have examined the dietary preferences of the Mediterranean monk seal, *Monachus monachus*, and none have extensively researched those of the population in the eastern Mediterranean, until now. MOm, in association with the Zoology Department of the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, has undertaken a wide-ranging study into the food preferences of the monk seal, as part of the Monk seal and Fisheries Project (MOFI), the only EU LIFE-NATURE programme granted to Greece for the year 2005.

The preliminary results of the study were based on the analysis of 18 stomach samples and 14 scat samples collected from monk seals by MOm's research team on Greek shores during the past 15 years. The results indicate that the species primarily feeds upon the common octopus, *Octopus vulgaris,* followed by the squid, *Loligo vulgaris.* The results concur with the findings of previous studies in the eastern Mediterranean, showing that cephalopods seem to be the preferred prey of monk seals. A variety of fish species have also been identified as prey including: Congridae (conger eels), Torpedinidae (kinds of ray), Scorpaeniformes (mail-cheeked fish) and Mugilidae (mullets). Suspected prey species also include Atherinidae (silversides), Sparidae (sea breams) and Anguilliformes (eels).

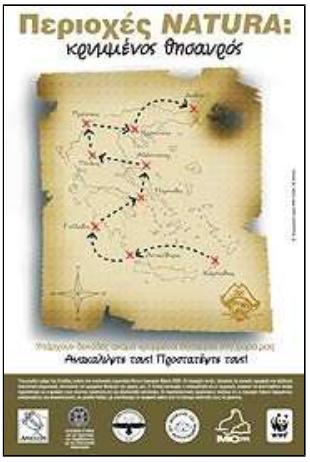
The difficulties involved in such a study are numerousand are attributable to the difficulty of identifying prey remains due to digestion in the stomach, the animal's state of health (before death), etc. Coupled with this is the fact that there is also only a limited bibliography on identifying certain prey species. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the study, which will be completed in 2008, will shed light on the little understood diet of the monk seal and prove useful in understanding seal-fisheries interactions. – Calliope I. Lagonika, Mom.

New management bodies in protected areas – new hope or further delays?

In June 2006, after about 2 years of delay that practically led to a halt in any effective management of the key protected areas in Greece, the Hellenic Ministry of Environment finally announced new Boards of Directors for the Management Bodies of most protected areas, including the two protected areas directly related to the conservation of the Mediterranean monk seal, the National Marine Park of Alonnisos- Northern Sporades (NMPANS) and the island of Karpathos.

In the Sporades Marine Park, MOm has again been appointed a voting member on the Board, and reports that the new Chairman, Prof. Ch. Neofytou, seems eager to start work. However, the chronic difficulty in drawing funds from the Ministry's limited budget for protected areas and the managerial chaos left by the former chairman, another academic personally selected by the previous Deputy Minister, allows only limited hope for substantial progress in the effective protection of the largest marine park of the country. Though the situation in Karpathos is not substantially different, MOm, appointed as a member of the Board for the first time, is pushing the new Management Body to take immediate steps for the official designation of the area as protected and to set up key conservation actions. – Spyros Kotomatas, Mom.

Greek NGOs launch joint campaign on behalf of the country's protected areas



In an unprecedented initiative, several Greek NGOs, led by MOm, the Hellenic Ornithological Society and WWF Hellas, launched a campaign in early summer on behalf of the country's NATURA 2000 sites.

Apart from showcasing the natural wealth of these areas, the media campaign's central aim is to present to the general and local public the key argument that nature conservation is potentially the only alternative for the economic development of these remote and underdeveloped areas of the country.

It isn't uncommon for some local communities and politicians to view nature conservation as an impediment to local development, which up to date has been mostly based on unplanned urban expansion and tourism growth. In parallel to this proactive initiative, Greek NGOs continue to pressure the Greek government to fulfil its obligations towards the effective management of the country's protected areas, and the EU – notably Mr. S. Dimas, the Greek Commissioner for the Environment – to take the necessary legal action against Greece for its increasing number of clear violations of EU nature conservation legislation. – Spyros Kotomatas, MOm.

Stranded newborn pup doesn't make it

After receiving an emergency call from the local port authorities of Oreo, Evia on 2/11/2006, MOm's Rescue Team located a male pup, two weeks of age, washed up on a local beach near an aquaculture installation. The wounded and badly dehydrated pup was given first aid and immediately rushed to Athens for further examination.

On Friday 3/11/2006, the pup underwent treatment for anemia by MOm's Rescue Team and a veterinarian from the University of Thessalonica. Despite every effort, however, the pup died a day later.

According to the results of the autopsy, the cause of death was anemia, caused by Hookworm infection. The autopsy was conducted by Professor of Comparative Pathology, Thijs Kuiken, of Erasmus University, Rotterdam, on Sunday 4/11/2006.

Seals may carry and transmit Hookworms via nursing, but are not affected by them. Still, in the case of *Monachus monachus* pups, Hookworms may prove to be fatal, as in the case of the stranded Evia pup.– Calliope I. Lagonika, MOm.

The Monachus Guardian
monachus / schauinslandi / tropicalis

Mediterranean News

Vol. 9 (2): November 2006

Italy

Monk seal sighting in Pantelleria strikes again

It was approximately 12 pm on Friday September 22, 2006 when Fortunato Di Malta, the dive master of TGI Diving, returned with another 8 recreational divers from a diving bout on the northeastern part of the island of Pantelleria. The sea was calm and they were cruising at a rather elevated speed in order to get back into port on time. Suddenly, when they were at approximately 200-400 meters distance from Punta Karace (on the central-eastern side of the island) they spotted an object, similar to a round head, which seemed to be moving on the water surface. “Hey, watch out! What is that diver doing there without an appropriate diving buoy?” asks Massimo Medri, one of the passengers aboard the dive boat. “No, I think it’s a turtle,” says someone else, as Di Malta reduces the Zodiac’s speed and begins steering towards the floating object. The round head that they observe is dark grey and it glistens in the sun – “that’s why we initially thought it was a diver with a dark grey wetsuit,” says Roberto Dalan, another boat passenger, but as they approach it they see it is the head of an animal, who swims with its head held well out of the water and who continues swimming along on its course despite the boat’s approach. “When we arrived at approximately 10 meters distance, it was clear that the animal was neither a human nor a marine turtle and that it had seen us. Its round head, always held out of the water, had a squashed snout and I could see some whiskers on the upper sides of the mouth. I think it also had small little dots all around the upper sides of the snout close to the mouth and its eyes were large, dark, with a very attentive gaze that was steadily held in our direction….” says Andrea Rosati, the third diver on board. The individual was observed for a few minutes, during which time it swam on the sea surface “with very fluid wavelike movements during which one could see the rest of its back floating just under the water’s surface and behind its head. At the end of the body I could see the edges of what I think were the flippers and I heard it making at least a breathing sound in the fraction of those few minutes of observation,” says Aldo Magatti, the fourth passenger on board. After a minute or so, the individual dips its head in the water and, in so doing, the dorsal part of its body glides for a few minutes under the water surface followed by the trailing edge of the flippers. “The shape of the flippers that I observed, since we were so close, were nothing at all like the flippers of any marine animal I have ever seen during my dives at sea,” says Massimo Medri and continues, “they were vaguely triangular in shape and it seemed to me like each was somewhat curled up, like they could widen up and then be retracted in width, something similar to the way wading ducks can open and close their feet….” The animal dives and emerges a few seconds later further away from the boat, swims on the sea surface for another minute or so then dives again and is seen no more.

Upon returning to the port, the dive master immediately notifies the head of the Coast Guard office who in turn notifies ICRAM offices so that the observers can subsequently be interviewed by ICRAM staff. Five of the eight divers present were interviewed separately and they described the animal as being an estimated 1-1.5 meters in length, of a uniform dark grey colour with lighter abdomen. The common distinguishing characteristics that were described by each are: round head held well out of the water during swimming, large ocular orbits, a compressed snout characterised by light coloured vibrissae, a thinner neck followed by a larger spindle-shaped body, anterior flippers and rear flippers positioned at the far end of the body. Given the reported characteristics it is possible to estimate that the observed individual was a juvenile monk seal.

This is not the first time that monk seal sightings are reported in Pantelleria. On January 7, 2005, Tino Alongi, the same Coast Guard Commander that reported the present sighting, had alerted ICRAM that two skin divers had come across what they claimed to be a seal emerging from an underwater cave situated along Pantelleria's southwestern cliffs, and whose entrance lies at a 3 meters depth. The Coast Guard officer later convened those divers at his office, thus allowing them to be telephonically interviewed by ICRAM staff, through a similar procedure. The divers had described the animal as being 1.5-2.0 long, dark with larger spotted areas on the back, and characterised by various of the distinguishing phocid characteristics. Another series of seal sightings dates back to June 1998 during which a single individual, of approximately 1-1.5 meters in length, was observed along the northwestern coast of the island by several islanders and fishers (see Sightings, The Monachus Guardian 1(2): December 1998]. – Giulia Mo, ICRAM.

Madeira

Seal finds stardom

On 6 May one of the reproducing females of the Desertas Islands, known to us as "Desertinha", was discovered on Madeira with a deep wound around the top of her hind flippers. Though the cause could not be confirmed, the shape and position of the wound suggests that it was inflicted deliberately. Reports in Madeira indicate that some seals have been intentionally drowned in this way, the rope being attached to a heavy stone and then tied around the animal's hind flippers.

Desertinha with evidence of a deep wound to her hind flippers.

Badly debilitated as a result of the incident, for some days Desertinha stayed at sea, close to a coastal recreation facility of Funchal, where several members of the public came to see her. The area was isolated and the SRRC of Pieterburen dispatched a technician to Madeira to assist in possible rescue efforts.

It was decided to treat the wound, that had become severely infected. Capture at sea therefore had to be attempted, though with the additional safeguard of abandoning the operation if she reacted badly.

The Portuguese Navy, the Whale Museum and the Sea Rescue Association all participated in the operation. However, when Desertinha sensed the boats approaching, she simply moved on. We lost her.

During these days, Desertinha became a television and newspaper star; very few people on the island can not have heard of her.

And it was that knowledge, particularly among scuba divers, fisherman and others that enabled us to track her. For the first two days, she remained in a sea cave. When we entered, both to confirm her presence and to give her fish containing antibiotics, she again fled the scene.

During the next 13 days, she moved all along the south coast of Madeira and on several occasions we could confirm her recuperation and also that she was feeding by her self, though her posterior area remained inactive.

Since then, she has been observed often at the Garajau Nature Reserve on the south coast. She has recovered the movement in her posterior area but has not yet, it seems, had the confidence to return to the Desertas.

Desertinha, on the mend.

During May and June Desertinha was a frequent topic of discussion among the Madeira people, achieving what we have been trying to do for years within our environmental campaigns: she generated a wave of public solidarity for monk seals and monk seal protection.
– Rosa Pires, Parque Natural da Madeira.

Rehabilitation and necropsies training

During one week in July, a Parque Natural da Madeira (PNMS) trainee and a veterinarian from the Regional Fisheries Department who has been collaborating with the PNMS underwent training on the rehabilitation of seals and necropsies at the Seal Rehabilitation and Rescue Centre (SRRC) in Pieterburen, the Netherlands. – Rosa Pires, Parque Natural da Madeira.

Two dead seals – one Monk, one Hooded

A dead monk seal was discovered floating near Ilhéu Chão in the Desertas Islands Nature Reserve on 14th August. It was identified as a male, with a standard length of 161 cm.

The subsequent necropsy was performed by a veterinarian from the SRRC and a pathologist from the Rotterdam University. Unfortunately, the animal's advanced state of decomposition did not allow a preliminary diagnosis. However, samples were taken for posterior bacteriological and virological analyses.

Earlier, on the 3rd of August, an injured hooded seal *Cystophora cristata* was discovered, the first known record of this species in the archipelago. Following a rehabilitation period of 3 days, the seal died, a subsequent necropsy suggesting that the cause had been aspiration pneumonia.
– Rosa Pires, Parque Natural da Madeira.

How to behave

Following an increasing occurrence of monk seals around the main island of Madeira, along with fishermen's complaints about seals damaging their fishing gear, environmental education became a priority for the PNM service during 2006.

City councils were invited to include in their Blue Flag Programme a talk on "*How to behave in a presence of a Monk Seal*" aimed at fishermen and others using the sea.

In Santa Cruz, where monk seals are more frequently sighted, a monk seal week was held between 22-27 August, during which talks and presentations were held for the general public, along with children's activities and a travelling exhibition.

Seal Week in Santa Cruz.

Talking net damage. The PNM's Rosa Pires and Marco Camacho, a PNMS ranger, with a Madeiran fishermen.

Meanwhile, contacts with fishermen were also established in order to demonstrate our concern and also to discuss possible solutions to the issue of seal damage to fishing gear.
– Rosa Pires, Parque Natural da Madeira.

Mauritania & Western Sahara

Notable increase of newborn pups at Cabo Blanco in 2006

Prior to the mass die-off that decimated the Cabo Blanco monk seal population in 1997, an average of 52 births took place in the breeding caves each year. Following that catastrophic event, when an estimated 200 of the 350 animals of the population died, the productivity of the colony decreased to 24 pups in 1998.

Since the launch of conservation efforts in the area in 2000, under the framework of the Action Plan for the Recovery of the Monk Seal in the Eastern Atlantic (CMS/UNEP), the population has shown hopeful signs of recovery [see Hopeful signs at Cabo Blanco, TMG 7 (1): June 2004].

Mother and pup at Cabo Blanco.

Following the establishment of a no-fishing zone in 2001 and the elimination of disturbances in the vicinity of the breeding caves, the number of animals (except pups) found dead on the beaches south of the colony has notably decreased, and the number of animals using the breeding caves and the number of adult males occupying territories near the reserve have increased.

During the years following the die-off, the productivity has slightly increased, from 24 pups born in 1998 to 29 in 2004 and 2005. However, this year (2006) the number of births has notably increased, with 46 pups having been born so far this season. Since monitoring in the breeding caves is similar to other years, this increase cannot be attributed to changes in the level of human effort. This year, identified females with no reproductive history have been observed with a pup, possibly their first one. Although the reproductive season has not yet ended, and data need to be analysed and filming records reviewed, the increase in productivity seems to be the result of the incorporation of new females into the reproductive fraction of the population.

The increase in productivity at the colony was an anticipated event, and one that will undoubtedly contribute to a faster recovery of the Cabo Blanco monk seal population. – Miguel Angel Cedenilla and Pablo Fernández de Larrinoa, CBD-Habitat Foundation.

The Monachus Guardian
monachus / schauinslandi / tropicalis

Mediterranean News

Vol. 9 (2): November 2006

Spain

Balearic Islands Fishermen's Cooperatives to work with local government to encourage the monk seal's return

Recently, the Fauna and Flora Advisory Board of the Balearic Islands, a consultative body that assesses and promotes official plans and projects related to protected species, unanimously approved a document outlining local government intentions to contribute to monk seal conservation by working towards the species' eventual recolonisation of the Islands' coasts.

The Federation of Fishermen's Cooperatives, an active member of the Board, also voted in favour of the initiative.

With the idea of establishing a practical and effective cooperation, the Federation and the Conselleria de Medi Ambient (the local government Environment Council) are preparing a series of meetings with the Cooperatives, with a view towards achieving active participation of both retired fishermen who once observed the seals along our coasts and with the respective Cooperative leaders, to compile the best available information. This will then be added to earlier research work, thereby helping us to analyze with fishermen the possibilities and conditions in which they can cooperate in the successful and eventual return of the seals, when the status of the species makes that possible. — Joan Mayol, Head of the Service of Species Protection, Balearic Islands Government, Spain.

Splash

"Esquitx" is the Catalan word for "Splash" (http://www.esquitx.cat/), and is the name of a quarterly magazine for teenagers, publishing contributions from renowned local writers in the form of stories, narrations, puzzles and contests. In a recent number, Miquel Rayó, a writer, environmental education expert and school teacher who visited the Desertas Islands (Madeira) last November, published a short tale with the emotive story of a group of school kids protecting a monk seal from the threats of some fishermen, who finally accept living in peaceful coexistence with her. The writer's hope is for a real cultural change in Balearic Islands society, with local people welcoming a return of the monk seal to their coasts.

Illustrations: Pere Joan, Splash

The editors of “Esquitx”, the writer Miquel Rayó, and Pere Joan, the illustrator, are proud to offer the text and illustrations (available at higher resolution at the link below) royalty free (citing the source) as a contribution to the monk seal community through The Monachus Guardian, to be used if wished in environmental programmes throughout the species’ range.
– Toni Font, Pandion.

To make use of these educational materials, please download the following:

Rayó, Miguel. 2006. El retorn del vellmarí. Dibuixos de Pere Joan. Esquitx: 16-17. [PDF 304KB].
Spanish translation [PDF 17KB]. English translation [PDF 16KB].

High resolution Illustrations: Illustration 1 [31KB], Illustration 2 [188KB]

Please send an email to Toni Font at Pandion Environment Consultants to notify of intended use.

Turkey

Campaign to replace patrol boat in Foça SPA

“Çevre” patrolling in the Foça SPA.

The Foça marine protected area has been managed and monitored since 1992. One of the first initiatives by the Ministry of Environment in 1992 was the deployment of the speed boat “Çevre” for patrolling the SPA and vicinity. The importance of an efficiently running patrol boat has been recognised by all the stakeholders, including the Ministry of Environment, the fishermen’s cooperative, the local government, Foça Municipality and, of course, SAD-AFAG. Illegal fishing in the MPA has been brought substantially under control and infringements have decreased considerably. However, the “Çevre” was used effectively until 2004, by which time the boat had practically fulfilled its lifespan; it could no longer be used as required during the last two years.

Considering it necessary to take action, SAD-AFAG recently issued a letter with attached justification reports and appealed to the Authority for Special Protected Areas (ASPA) and the Ministry of Environment & Forests (MoEF) for the old patrol boat to be replaced. The reports emphasized the fact that the Foça Pilot Project had been selected as one of the most successful environmental protection projects in Turkey, both at the Johannesburg Environment Summit in 2002 and by the GEF II Project implemented by the MoEF in Turkey in 2006.

With the help of further lobbying and advocacy, the request was judged positively by the ASPA – the competent authority governing the Foça protected area – which invited SAD-AFAG to prepare jointly an application to convince the relevant authorities to include the investment in the next year’s budget. The application emphasized the importance of the marine protected area, especially to monk seals; the relationship between large-scale and artisanal fisheries, and the marine ecosystem; the benefits obtained from the patrolling so far, and the need for a patrol boat for sustainable natural resource management. We hope to receive approval of the investment in the relevant budget lines at the end of the year, which will certainly boost the sustainable environmental management in Foça and its vicinity.
– Cem O. Kiraç and Harun Güçlüsoy, SAD-AFAG.

AFAG's patrol boat advances protection for Cilician coasts

AFAG's patrol boat DK01 along Cilician coasts.

SAD-AFAG's patrol boat "Deniz Koruma DK01", purchased under an EU-funded SMAP project, was deployed in Aydincik in Cilicia in 2002 [see New patrolling system in Aydincik, TMG 7(2): November 2004]. In accordance with a protocol reached between the Aydincik local governor and SAD-AFAG, the responsibility for its operation belongs to the Aydincik fisheries cooperative, while its operational and maintenance expenses are covered by the governorship. An artisanal fisherman was appointed jointly by the governor and SAD-AFAG to run the boat. During 2006, the patrol boat continued its operation, mainly discouraging illegal activities while stopping other infringements in progress in the Aydincik vicinity. In several cases, illegal trawlers, purse-seiners and dynamite fishing infringements were observed and reported to the Coast Guard and the Regional Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture. Maintenance and repair work was completed midway through the year, and artisanal fisherman Mehmet Sari continued operational patrols on a random basis both by day and night.

The activities of the patrol boat DK01 are also appreciated by local and foreign tourists visiting the area, who sometimes donate petrol as an additional support to the patrol system. Although the patrol boat fills the gap partially in Aydincik and vicinity, SAD-AFAG aims to enlarge the coverage area within the Cilician basin. However, with additional funding required to meet the increase in the annual operating budget, potential funding institutions or international NGOs and sponsors are invited to support this important initiative, which will serve the protection of the marine ecosystem in the area as a whole, including monk seals. – Cem O. Kiraç and Harun Güçlüsoy, SAD-AFAG.

Education and awareness activities up to speed

AFAG continued its public awareness and environmental education activities in Ankara and Izmir provinces in 2006. Bilkent Primary School (with more than 300 pupils, plus teachers), Necdet Seçkinöz Primary School (120 + teachers), Doku Kültür Kindergarten & Preschool (50 + teachers), Bilkent University (30 + teachers), METU Subaqua Society (50 members) in Ankara and SEV High School (500 + teachers) in Izmir were visited. By means of presentations and printed materials on monk seals and marine environment protection, the public awareness and environmental education activities reached over a thousand students and their teachers.

SEV primary school, Izmir.

Bilkent primary school, Ankara.

SAD-AFAG also contributed material to a photography website, Foto Kritik (www.fotokritik.com), which has more than 27,000 members all over Turkey, providing both monk seal photos and basic information about the species, habitats and threats. Many members and readers also interacted and reacted positively, voicing support for monk seal conservation in Turkey and the world (e.g. http://www.fotokritik.com/167167). – Münevver Çakir, SAD-AFAG.

Monk seal deaths at year's end

SAD-AFAG's Kaş representative, Gökhan Türe, reported a dead juvenile monk seal to SAD-AFAG headquarters on 15 October 2006. While sea-kayaking with friends in the Kekova region near Kas, Türe discovered the dead seal in the sea near the rocky coasts. Though still complete, the body was in a state of advanced decomposition, indicating that death might have occurred 4-5 days previously. There was no indication that the seal had been shot. Drowning due to entanglement in fishing nets is considered a possibility by AFAG, though no clear evidence was detected. Based on the field identification, the juvenile was judged to be less than one year old.

More recently, another monk seal fatality was reported to SAD-AFAG on 22 November 2006 from Çesme, Izmir. SAD-AFAG's Harun Güçlüsoy travelled to Çesme the following day and found the dead body on the shore in the Ilica district. The animal was a young female, less than 5 years of age, that had probably died 10 or more days earlier. A hole on one side of the seal suggested a possible shooting, although no exit wound was visible. A detailed internal examination, however, failed to detect any bullet, therefore making it impossible to confirm a cause of death by shooting. Some samples were also taken from the decomposed body for further investigation.

With many newspapers wrongly concluding that the seal had been cruelly and deliberately shot, SAD-AFAG deemed it necessary to distribute a press release on 23 November pointing out that there was no evidence to suggest that the animal had been shot, and that it was inadvisable to rush to judgment and to mislead the public before obtaining a detailed necropsy.
– Cem O. Kiraç and Harun Güçlüsoy, SAD-AFAG.

Monk Seal Conference held in Antalya, Turkey

An international monk seal conference was held in 17-19 September 2006 under UNEP's Blue Week activity. The conference was organized by UNEP-MAP and RAC/SPA, with the collaboration and support of the Bern Convention, Bonn Convention, Turkish Ministry of Environment, IFAW, RAC/INFO and SAD-AFAG in Kemer, Antalya [see Anatomy of a Conference and Conference controversy, this issue].

SAD-AFAG was represented by Cem O. Kiraç, Coordinator, and Harun Güçlüsoy, Chief Scientist, as well as Turgay Isiklar, AFAG's Kemer Representative. Kiraç and Güçlüsoy made a presentation entitled "Experience and Perspectives in Monk Seal Conservation in Turkey", which highlighted achievements and concrete results obtained as a result of research, conservation (including legislation) and public awareness/environmental education activities implemented by SAD-AFAG. Similarly, speakers from other Mediterranean and Atlantic countries, as well as international organizations like RAC/SPA, RAC/INFO, IFAW and the Bonn & Barcelona Conventions, presented the experiences and concrete achievements of monk seal research and conservation as well as the legislative issues related to the conservation of the species. This provided a great opportunity for all participants to become acquainted with updated research and conservation activities, as well as the status of the species throughout its distribution range. – Münevver Çakir, SAD-AFAG.

The Monachus Guardian
monachus / schauinslandi / tropicalis

Cover Story

Vol. 9 (2): November 2006

Anatomy of a conference

William M Johnson

Photo: Toni Font

An international conference on the Mediterranean monk seal took place in Kemer, near Antalya, Turkey on 17-19 September, – unlike previous gatherings, focusing on the political, legal and financial issues that affect the management and recovery of the species.

Held under the UNEP/MAP banner, the conference took place under the wider umbrella of the inaugural Med Blue Week, an event called to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the Barcelona Convention, the international agreement that brought both the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) and the Mediterranean Monk Seal Action Plan into being.

Tunis-based RAC/SPA, the agency nominally responsible for advancing MAP's Mediterranean Monk Seal Action Plan, took the lead role in organising the conference. Co-organisers included the Bonn, Bern and Barcelona Conventions, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), and Turkish monk seal NGO, SAD-AFAG.

The Three Pillars

MAP has been facing increasingly harsh criticism of late, with critics pointing out that it has failed to achieve even one of its priority targets during the last 30 years – including its stated intention in 1985 to ensure protection of the monk seal within a decade [see Mediterranean governments vow protection for the Mediterranean monk seal, TMG 9 (1): June 2006].

Perhaps in view of that criticism – and in recognition of a recent declaration by a Barcelona Convention meeting in Slovenia that the fate of the Plan is inexorably intertwined with the fate of the monk seal – the organisers decided that the conference should target directly what some consider the most serious obstacles to conservation 'Action'. Broadly, these fell into three main categories: Funding, Coordination and Information – what one observer has called "the three pillars of Mediterranean monk seal conservation" at the international level.

An agenda, obtained in draft form by TMG in July, provided further insights into these conference priorities.

While Day 1 was to be devoted to regional experiences, including presentations from Greece, Turkey, and the Atlantic area – where a Regional Action Plan under the auspices of the Bonn Convention has been solidifying among the range states (Mauritania, Morocco, Spain, Portugal-Madeira) – Day 2 was reserved for the institutional, legal and financial aspects of Mediterranean monk seal conservation.

Sessions included presentations or workshops on:

- The possibilities of linking the developing Regional Action Plan for the Atlantic with the Action Plan in the Mediterranean (and hence forging collaboration between the Barcelona and Bonn Conventions).
- The creation of a coordination and follow-up mechanism, such as an international steering committee.
- The possible establishment of an international monk seal fund.
- An international information programme on monk seals, spearheaded by MAP's new information agency, INFO/RAC-MAP.

Though the issues set for discussion were potentially far-reaching, it was not until 31 August – barely two and a half weeks before the conference's official opening – that prospective participants received a programme and agenda.

Even as those materials were at last being circulated, some governments and NGOs also began to express disquiet about the absence of pre-conference briefing materials – documents able to provide background analysis and overviews of the complex issues earmarked for discussion. Proving most vocal in such criticism were the Greek Ministry of Environment and MOm, Greece's foremost monk seal conservation NGO.

Objection

Responding to such concerns, RAC/SPA released an IFAW briefing paper on 7 September, outlining possible plans to establish an international fund or trust in support of monk seal conservation (see Further information, below).

Additional documents were also distributed 5 days later, among them, a revised agenda, a list of prospective participants, and a species status review. Briefing materials on other key conference issues, however, remained elusive, provoking additional objections from Greece.

In rejecting those criticisms, RAC/SPA's director, Abderrahmen Gannoun, reasoned that the "information and communication plan to support monk seal conservation" would be presented at the meeting by its sister agency in Rome, INFO/RAC-MAP. Where the other two potentially controversial agenda issues were concerned, he went on – the Coordination and Steering Committee issue and the Barcelona-Bonn Convention common work programme – working groups would be established on Day 2 of the conference to allow discussion.

Dr. Gannoun also went on to express confidence that the experts and institutions invited, qualified in various specific fields, would be present at the conference to guide participants through complex and unfamiliar agenda items.

Such reassurances, however, failed to allay the concerns of the Greek government, which, just three days before the conference, announced that it would not be attending [Greece declines to attend Antalya conference, TMG News Update].

In a similar move, MOm also announced that it, too, had decided not to participate.

While emphasising the organisation's support for effective international cooperation that might further the conservation of the monk seal and its habitat, Dr. Spyros Kotomatas, MOm's Chief Scientific Officer, stated that: "to properly and effectively address these issues, all participants must openly have access [to] the necessary information and have adequate time to prepare their contribution to the discussions in an effective and constructive way. This becomes even more necessary in view of the extremely short time available for discussing each of [these] topics."

In response to MOm's criticism over a perceived lack of pre-conference consultation, RAC/SPA's Director defended the agency's handling of arrangements, stating that "the content of the conference agenda and the different arrangements have been prepared by an organising committee comprising, among others, representatives from three multilateral conventions (Bonn, Bern and Barcelona) the host country and the International Fund for Animal Welfare."

With Greece hosting some three quarters of the surviving monk seal population in the Mediterranean, however, the withdrawal of both the government and the country's principal NGO did not appear to augur well for conference success.

Summer logistics

The perceived lack of consultation in the conference run-up period, the lack of discussion papers, and the distribution of an agenda just 17 days before the conference was, to some, more attributable to practical organisational difficulties than a deliberate intent to keep the monk seal community in the dark.

The Conference agenda, for example, was still undergoing substantial revision in the first two weeks of September, and some also pointed to the challenges of organising virtually any public event at short notice during the Mediterranean high summer, least of all a conference meant to attract several hundred people from across the world.

However, while the heat of summer almost certainly exacted its toll upon the logistics of the conference, its core issues – and those that gave sceptics the greatest cause for alarm – including the international steering committee, the fund, and the information campaign – had already been identified as key conference components by the organisers in February 2006, during one of the earliest planning meetings in Tunis.

Such lengthy preparation, says one source, makes it that much harder to understand how it was that the monk seal conservation community was only first notified of the conference on the 4th of July.

Some also point out that the intervening months leading up to the conference might have provided an ideal opportunity for a wide-ranging consultation process to be established on the objectives of the conference, involving those organisations and individuals who are central to the study and protection of the species.

"Debate and consultation," says MOm's Spyros Kotomatas, "would have allowed those organisations which are most practically involved in monk seal protection, education and information exchange to collectively develop and refine the conference agenda together with the organisers, and to draft adequate supporting documents. This, in turn, would have given the conference the best chance of success in terms of practical results. Recent history in the conservation of the species has shown time and time again the need for transparency and consultation."

Conference floor

While acknowledging the value of such international gatherings as a crucial means of sharing practical conservation experiences from across the range of the species, some participants also voiced irritation that they or their organisations had been marginalised in the run-up to the conference.

"I was expecting to share the lessons learnt from the different regions, and modify the strategies and action plans according to what is recommended by the real experts working in the field," said the participant. But now, he continued, "if the government focal points agree, a steering committee will be formed, most probably composed of those who have only ever read about the monk seal in text books, yet who will decide if our efforts in the field are right or wrong. They will also judge which projects merit funding and which do not. For me, it was a disappointment to realize there is such a huge gap between people working in the field and those in the international organisations and conventions."

Some participants saw other reasons for concern, suggesting that long-established interests in monk seal conservation were opposed to fundamental change that might dilute their influence or trespass on their own turf. Potential members of the as-yet-hypothetical Steering Committee sparked particularly divisive debate, with some insisting that core members must include officials of the Conventions, others that it should incorporate international NGOs and recognized local experience on monk seals, and still others that it should be entirely independent, thereby allowing rational and impartial assessment of projects and their results.

Among those expressing the latter view, Prof. Alex Aguilar at the Department of Animal Biology at the University of Barcelona insisted that a clear separation between the Steering Committee members and those with vested interests in the projects themselves might be crucial for the survival of the species.

"For over 30 years," Aguilar told TMG, "neither the Action Plan nor the conservation actions so far implemented have served to reverse the declining trend of the species. Unless the direction of the process is changed, I am terribly pessimistic about the future of the species. In this context, and very importantly, if the steering committee is eventually composed of 'internal' members, as it looks would happen, I don't foresee any improvement. The conflict of interests is unavoidable if the setting of priorities and the evaluation of the success of the actions is made by the same people who execute such actions. Science – and conservation is based on science – only advances with peer, external review."

Others, however, argue that some projects already undergo stringent independent assessment procedures, as is required, for example, by some EU-funded programmes. They add that it is the expansion of "best practice" methodologies in monk seal conservation that is urgently required – along with practical, grassroots action – rather than another layer of bureaucracy.

Though official conference proceedings were not available as this article was being prepared, preliminary information provided by INFO/RAC-MAP and the reports of participants indicate the following conference results and recommendations:

- The three Conventions of relevance to the monk seal – Barcelona, Bonn and Bern – will be asked to agree on a single action plan governing the conservation of the species.
- Assuming agreement by the Conventions concerned, an international Steering Committee would be formed.
- The Steering Committee would establish an exploratory committee to investigate the creation of an international funding mechanism.

All of these results are, however, unofficial and non-binding unless and until they are approved by the signatory governments of the Barcelona Convention. With the current level of government and NGO opposition they are facing, it is by no means certain any of them will see the light of day.

In tacit recognition of the anxieties and disagreements within the conference hall, Turkish co-organiser SAD-AFAG let it be known that the "financing mechanism and steering committee subjects have not been concluded efficiently; however we hope that these preliminary discussions may be a good starting basis for the near future." The organisation went on to say that, "we believe that the survival of this endangered species and its endangered habitats [can] only be protected for [the] long-term through cooperation among the states, conservationists and scientists, established on goodwill and trust."

Looking to the future

With many crucial and potentially far-reaching issues still in play on the political front, it is likely to become increasingly difficult for monk seal conservation's key players to remain on the sidelines without taking a stand or elucidating a policy on these matters.

Facets of monk seal conservation

As far as The Monachus Guardian is concerned, this journal and website has been committed to free and open debate within the monk seal conservation community, and to wide-ranging consultation in the development of international policy, since its inception in 1998.

Ironically, in its latest report to the US Congress, the Marine Mammal Commission states that management of the threats confronting the Mediterranean monk seal "is confounded by a lack of international cooperation and coordination."

Though we cannot help but agree with that assessment, we also see distinct possibilities of remedying that situation through a cooperative international process that is rooted in dialogue, consultation and, above all, transparency.

Taking the first step on that road must be the responsibility of the organisations most involved in the conservation of the monk seal and its habitat, organisations such as MOm, SAD-AFAG, the Parque Natural da Madeira, CBD-Habitat, the Levant Nature Conservation Society, IFAW and others.

Further information

IFAW. 2006. Funding Mediterranean Monk Seal Conservation. Quick scan of possibilities and challenges. Prepared by Bart Romijn, Warner Strategy and Fundraising. Commissioned by IFAW (International Fund for Animal Welfare), July 2006: 1-22. [PDF 168KB]

Marine Mammal Commission. 2006. Mediterranean monk seal. Page 99 in Chapter V, Other Species of Special Concern, Annual Report to Congress, 2005. Marine Mammal Commission, Bethesda, Maryland: 1-204. [PDF 5MB]

RAC/SPA. 2006. Blue Week. Agenda [revised]. Conference on Monk Seal Conservation, 17/19 September 2006, Majesty Mirage Park - Kemer, Antalya, Turkey: 1-11. [PDF 950KB]

RAC/SPA. 2006. Blue Week. The Monk seal in the Mediterranean Sea : General situation. Document prepared by Daniel Cebrian Menchero, RAC/SPA: 1-8. [PDF 1.3MB]

RAC/SPA. 2006. Blue Week. Programme and agenda. Conference on Monk Seal Conservation, 17/19 September 2006, Majesty Mirage Park - Kemer, Antalya, Turkey. [PDF 633KB]

RAC/SPA. 2006. Conference on Monk Seal Conservation. Second announcement. Med Blue Week. Antalya, 17/19 September 2006, Majesty Mirage Park - Kemer, Antalya – Turkey. [PDF 310KB]

RAC/SPA. 2005. Portoroz Declaration. 14th Ordinary Meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean and its Protocols, Portoroz (Slovenia), 8-11 November 2005. UNEP(DEPI)/MED IG.16/13, Annex V: 1-5. [PDF 273KB]

RAC/SPA. 2005. Progress report of the activities of RAC/SPA. Seventh Meeting of National Focal Points for SPAs, Seville, 31 May - 3 June 2005. UNEP/MAP, UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.268/4: 1-37. [PDF 449KB]

RAC/SPA. 2005. Evaluation of the Mediterranean monk seal status. Meeting of MAP Focal Points, Athens (Greece), 21-24 September 2005. UNEP/MAP, UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.270/Inf.22: 1-7. [PDF 127KB]

RAC/SPA. 2005. Information report on the status of the monk seal in the Mediterranean. Prepared for the Regional Activity Centre for Specially Protected Areas (RAC/SPA) by Dr. Daniel Cebrian. Seventh Meeting of National Focal Points for SPAs, Seville, 31 May - 3 June 2005. UNEP/MAP, UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.268/Inf.3: 1-45. [PDF 208KB]

RAC/SPA. 2005. Declaration on the monk seal risk of extinction in the Mediterranean. Meeting of MAP Focal Points, Athens (Greece), 21-24 September 2005. UNEP/MAP, UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.270/17: 1-3. [PDF 77KB]

RAC/SPA. 2003. The conservation of the Mediterranean monk seal: proposal of priority activities to be carried out in the Mediterranean sea. Sixth meeting of the National Focal Points for Specially Protected Areas, Marseilles, 17-20 June 2003: 1-45. [PDF 143KB]

RAC/SPA. 2003. Progress report of the activities of RAC/SPA. Report on the activities carried out by RAC/SPA since the fifth meeting of National Focal Points for Specially Protected Areas. Sixth meeting of the National Focal Points for Specially Protected Areas, Marseilles, 17-20 June 2003: 1-29. [PDF 124KB]

UNEP/MAP. 1987. Action plan for the management of the Mediterranean monk seal *(Monachus monachus)*. United Nations Environment Programme, Mediterranean Action Plan (UNEP/MAP). Regional Activity Centre for Specially Protected Areas, Tunis, Tunis & Athens. [PDF 306KB]

TMG. 2003. Mystery at RAC/SPA Time for pup-catching, says its anonymous expert(s). The Monachus Guardian 6 (2): December 2003.

Triantafillou, K. 2006. Mediterranean governments vow protection for the Mediterranean monk seal – Success or failure of efforts to be a "defining moment" for the future of the Mediterranean Action Plan. The Monachus Guardian 9 (1): June 2006.

The Monachus Guardian
monachus / schauinslandi / tropicalis

Research

Vol. 9 (2): November 2006

Seals of Northern Cyprus

Ali Cemal Gücü, Meltem Ok, Serdar Sakinan, Billur Çelebi, Ekin Akoglu

Middle East Technical University Institute of Marine Sciences
and
LEVANT Nature Conservation Society

The Middle East Technical University Institute of Marine Sciences, in collaboration with the LEVANT Nature Conservation Society, has accomplished the first two stages of the Mediterranean Monk Seal Survey in Northern Cyprus.

The project, which seeks a better understanding of links between monk seal colonies in Anatolia and Northern Cyprus, is funded through a grant from the Turkish Scientific and Technical Research Council.

Between July 5 and August 5, a team of 9 people – 5 scientists, 2 volunteers and 2 crew – surveyed the entire coast of Northern Cyprus in search of caves that may be used by seals. A total of 40 caves were found during the survey.

Members of the research team on mission.

In contrast to the coast of the nearest mainland, the topography of the island is not steep enough to form caves with high ceilings. The existence of numerous caves with collapsed ceilings indicates that the geology, combined with high waves in the winter months, seems to play a significant role in a lack of suitable caves.

Another important factor that may hinder cave use was the extreme accumulation of debris, mainly composed of plastic waste, in the caves. Also, several caves having a long and wide beach at their far end and limited air circulation, were filled with *Posidonia oceanica* remains, that were decaying and releasing potentially irritating sulphurous gases. Leaf shed in sea grass is a natural phenomenon; however such a high level of leaf deposition in a cave has never been observed on the Turkish coast, 40 miles away.

Nevertheless, out of 40 caves discovered, 7 were found appropriate for monitoring and 8 infrared monitors were installed.

During the first survey, 3 seals were sighted by the team. The first was sighted on the 6th day near the border between the north and the south. However, no picture could be taken due to rough sea conditions and the cautious behaviour of the animal. On the 22nd day, on a very calm morning, when one of the Zodiacs of the team was approaching a series of caves in an area locally called “ancient harbour” (Yeni Erenköy), a form very familiar to the team appeared on the surface. The boat immediately left the area, leaving a team member in the water to collect silently as much information as possible. During almost an hour of hide and seek through the sea grass meadows, the seal posed for a couple of pictures quite sufficient to confirm its identity: an adult male bearing a very conspicuously large scar covering the left half of his posterior. This was a well-known individual frequently sighted on the Turkish coast. The last sighting of “Bombaci” was when he was mating in December 2005.

The topography of the island is not steep enough to form caves with high ceilings.

8 infrared monitors were installed in 7 caves.

The team returned to Yesilirmak, where the first seal was sighted, to install the infrared monitors. Almost at the same spot, a seal was sighted again from a distance. The animal displayed the same shy behaviour and disappeared just before the team could reach the triggers of their cameras.

Hence the first part of the survey ended with 3 seal sightings, 40 discovered caves and 8 monitors installed in the most suitable caves.

The team visited the island once again in October 2006. After 2 days lost to clearing customs, the caves determined in the first survey were checked for whelping evidence and the data accumulated in the monitors were retrieved. Though no pup could be found, the results were fruitful, with the monitors able to capture 4 different seals. The first one was Bombaci sighted in the first survey. He was last recorded by the monitors on September 9th and the cave had been abandoned since then.

There were no records of the seal in another cave in the same area, and it may not be pure speculation if the inactivity in the cave is linked to the newly started marina construction just a hundred meters away.

One of the two caves on Yesilirmak was used by a female, having a few mating scars on her belly. The entrance of the neighbouring cave was blocked by a barrier of pebbles deposited by the waves. The monitor installed there was not able to capture a seal, but only a mouse and a couple of fruit bats mating.

Three seals were photographed in an underwater cave near the cape of Zafer, one of them being another young female having totally different dorsal markings than the one found in Yesilirmak.

The most exciting moments of the survey are when the data in the monitors, left in the caves to record for 2 months, are retrieved and downloaded to a computer. The capture of a seal image is marvellous compensation for all the efforts spent at sea. The last seal photographed in the survey, was even more than that. A youngster, not older than a year, provided possible evidence of breeding on the island.

The youngster, caught on camera.

The next and the last survey on the island is planned for December 2006. As we have experienced in the nearest colony to Cyprus, December is the end of the whelping season. Therefore the team still hopes to find a newborn pup on the island. The final conclusion will come after that final survey; however it is clear that Cyprus Island has a small breeding colony composed of at least 4 individuals.

The Monachus Guardian
monachus / schauinslandi / tropicalis

Research

Vol. 9 (2): November 2006

To what extent can the Cilician monk seal colony recover under existing regulations?

Meltem Ok and Ali Cemal Gücü

Middle East Technical University Institute of Marine Sciences
P.O. Box 28 Erdemli Mersin, Turkey
meltemok@ims.metu.edu.tr
gucu@ims.metu.edu.tr

The northeastern Mediterranean coasts of Turkey host the most abundant Mediterranean monk seal colony in the region, which has also tended to further expand in recent years. The status of this colony has been monitored since 1994 by the Middle East Technical University, Institute of Marine Sciences. During past and present studies, various data which are related to size, demographic structure, and vital parameters of the colony have been obtained and evaluated. The analysis of the data reveals positive responses, such as increased breeding success, expansion of habitats and re-population of abandoned habitats. On the other hand, parallel to the increased size in the colony, mortality has also increased, blurring the future of the colony.

After 12 years of study and 6 years of conservation efforts, we have decided to evaluate the past and present status of the Cilician colony as a means of assessing its future. The questions that needed to be answered were listed as:

1. What are the positive and negative implications of conservation measures applied in the area on the colony's demography?
2. What are the potential risks awaiting the colony in the future?
3. Is there a need to change or revise the existing conservation strategy?

To answer these questions, demographic changes in the colony were evaluated. Firstly, the census carried out in 1994 was used as the starting point. The demographic structure estimated in 1994 was updated with the number of dead seals and pups found in every proceeding calendar year (Table 1). Secondly, the data was averaged over the period from onset of the study to the date (1999) when the MPA was designated (pre-conservation phase). The rest of the study period was processed as the post-conservation phase.

Sex	Name/Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
F	Tekin	17.38*	18.38*	19.38*	20.38*	21.38	22.38	23.38	24.38	25.38	26.38	27.39	28.39
M	Yula †	9.38	†										
F	Kokona	8.38*	9.38	10.38	11.38	12.38	13.38	14.38	15.38	16.38	17.38	18.39	19.39
F	Kir †	8.38	†										
F	Dede †	8.38	†										
F	Meryem	7.38*	8.38*	9.38	10.38	11.38	12.38	13.38	14.38	15.38	16.38	17.39	18.39
M	Kamash	7.38*	8.38*	9.38*	10.38	11.38	12.38	13.38	14.38	15.38	16.38	17.39	18.39
M	Bombacı	7.38*	8.38	9.38	10.38	11.38	12.38	13.38	14.38	15.38	16.38	17.39	18.39
M	Japon †	7.38	†										
M	Cecan †	7.38	†										
F	Yasli	6.38*	7.38*	8.38	9.38	10.38	11.38	12.38	13.38	14.38	15.38	16.39	17.39
M	Yagiz	5.38*	6.38*	7.38	8.38	9.38	10.38	11.38	12.38	13.38	14.38	15.39	16.39
F	Bozzy †	5.38*	6.38*	7.38	8.38	†							
F	Anac	4.38*	5.38*	6.38*	7.38*	8.38	9.38	10.38	11.38	12.38	13.38	14.39	15.39
M	Yakisikli	3.38*	4.38*	5.38*	6.38*	7.38	8.38	9.38	10.38	11.38	12.38	13.39	14.39
F	Melek1	3.38*	4.38*	5.38*	6.38	7.38	8.38	9.38	10.38	11.38	12.38	13.39	14.39
F	Meltem	2.38*	3.38*	4.38*	5.38*	6.38*	7.38	8.38	9.38	10.38	11.38	12.39	13.39
F	Charlie †	0.66	†										
F	Ceren		0.44	1.45	2.45	3.45	4.45	5.45	6.45	7.45	8.45	9.45	10.45
F	Ümit †			0.38	†								
M	Arap			0.15	1.15	2.15	3.15	4.15	5.15	6.15	7.15	8.15	9.15
M	Ferit Jr.			0.08	1.08	2.08	3.08	4.08	5.08	6.08	7.08	8.09	9.09
F	Charlie				0.25	1.25	2.25	3.25	4.25	5.25	6.25	7.25	8.25
M	Askim				0.16	1.16	2.16	3.16	4.16	5.16	6.16	7.16	8.16
F	Ney					0.38	1.38	2.39	3.39	4.39	5.39	6.39	7.39
M	Saklikuzu					0.22	1.22	2.23	3.23	4.23	5.23	6.23	7.23
F	Sedef						0.21	1.21	2.21	3.21	4.21	5.21	6.21
F	Sanda						0.19	1.19	2.19	3.19	4.19	5.19	6.19
M	Yalcin							0.14	1.14	2.14	3.14	4.14	5.14
M	Uykucu								0.34	1.34	2.34	3.34	4.34
F	Gelincik								0.34	1.34	2.34	3.34	4.34
M	Tarcin									0.24	1.24	2.24	3.24
F	Zeynep †										0.46	†	
F	Lal †										0.24	1.24	†
M	Afag †											0.26	†
F	Kay											0.26	1.26
M	Luigi											0.09	1.09
F	Rane											0.08	1.08
M	Levant												0.19
M	Tahta												0.13
F	Lamas												0.02
# of Adults		11	8	9	11	11	11	11	12	14	16	18	20
# of Pups		1	1	3	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	4	3
# of Immatures		6	4	4	4	5	7	9	9	9	8	7	7
Total # of Individuals		18	13	16	17	18	20	21	23	24	26	29	30

Table 1. Identified seals in the Cilician colony with their estimated minimum ages (minimum ages were estimated according to Gucu et al. 2004).

It was found that there is a statistically significant difference between the basic population parameter, namely survival ($P<0.01$) estimated for two time periods; before and after conservation. A significant difference was also found in the number of pups born in the Cilicia colony between pre-conservation and post-conservation periods (Table 2).

Parameter	Population parameters	
	Before conservation (1994-1999)	After conservation (2000-2005)
Averageannualsurvivalrate(S)	0.854	0.963
Standard deviation of S	0.111	0.019
Average annual fecundity (F)	0.183	0.220
Standard deviation of F	0.037	0.021

Table 2. Calculated population parameters.

Thirdly, Ramas Ecolab (Akcakaya et al. 1999) was used to conduct age structured Population Viability Analysis of the Mediterranean monk seal colony.

Normally, a pup undergoes various growth phases. In each phase, it faces different threats altering the survival rate. On the other hand, durations of each phase are variable. For applicability to the PVA model we assumed that each of the first 6 years represents a growth phase with a different survival rate. Therefore we used 7 age classes to build a Leslie Matrix, the 7th representing 6+ age.

The main model parameters are survival and fecundity rates. Since the sample size is small, survival rate was estimated over the pooled data incorporating all age classes. Average annual fecundity was calculated as number of pups per parents (female and male). Both demographic and environmental stochasticity were estimated from the total variance of survival and fecundity and incorporated into the model.

Our approach to obtain answers from the model was as follows:

1. We calculated model parameters (survival and fecundity) for the pre-conservation period (1994-1999), seeded the model with these inputs and ran it for 11 years. The output of the model is a prediction reflecting what would be the demographic structure of the colony in the year 2005 if no conservation was applied (Fig. 1).
2. We compared model-predicted demography with the actual numbers obtained during the 2005 census to determine the impact of conservation measures. We observed highly significant difference (chi-square: $P<0.01$) between observed and estimated values. This clearly indicated that conservation efforts improved the survival chances of the colony. With the pre-conservation parameters the probability of reaching today's level (30 ind.) was less than 1%. Also, future projections indicated that the risk of falling bellow 1 individual at least once by 2005 was estimated as 46% and extinction risk of the Cilician monk seal colony within the next 50 years was almost inevitable with the population parameters estimated for the pre-conservation period.

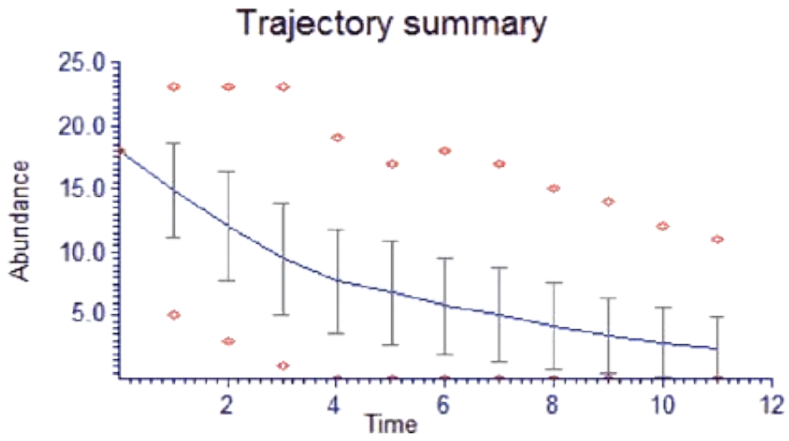


Figure 1. 11 years trajectory – what if no conservation measures had been enforced?

3. To verify the model, population parameters were estimated for the post-conservation phase and the model run for the 1994-2005 period again (Fig. 2). The output was compared with the actual demography. In this case, we found no difference between observed and estimated demography, which verifies the model. With the current parameters, the risk of falling bellow 1 individual is estimated to be as low as 4% by 2005.

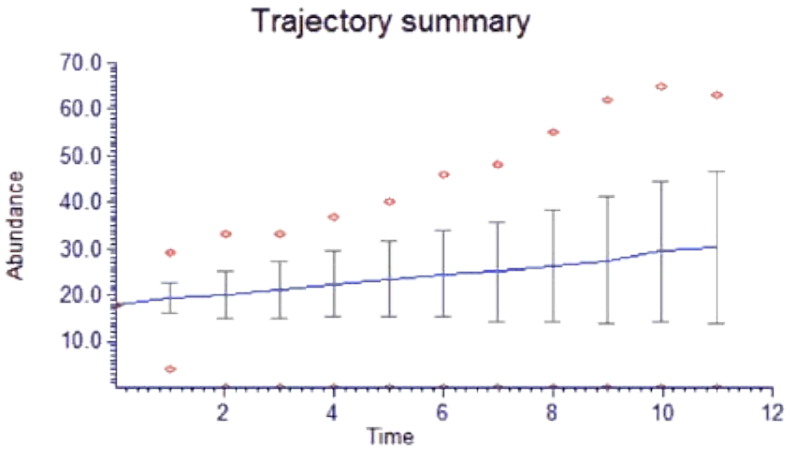


Figure 2. 11 years trajectory with the current population parameters.

4. We ran the model for the next 20 years with the same parameters estimated for the post-conservation period (Fig. 3). The output was used to evaluate the future of the colony under existing environmental and demographic stochasticity. In this case, the probability of doubling the colony size is 30% within the coming 20 years. The risk of falling below 1 individual at least once in the next 20 years (risk of extinction) is 6%.

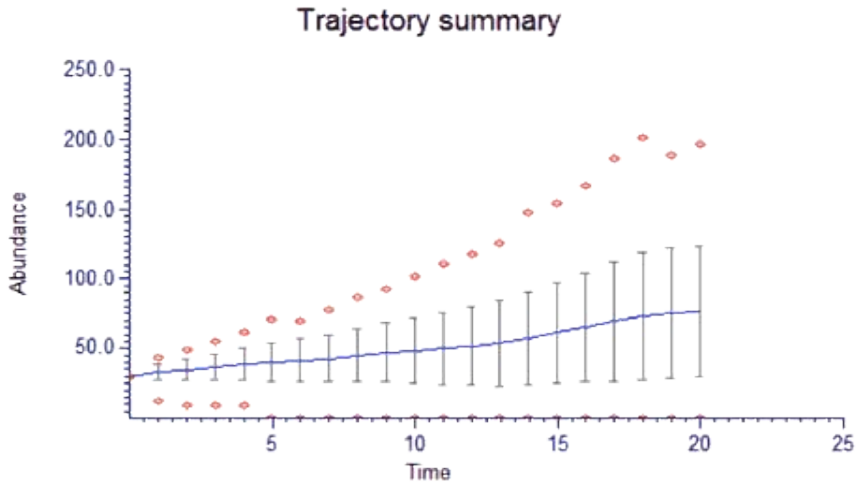


Figure 3. Future of the colony - 20 year projection with the current population parameters.

5. Finally, we tested various conservation scenarios to improve the probability of survival of the colony (Fig. 4). The calculations clearly indicate that mortality is very high at age 1 and 2. The mortality at these ages associate with limited food availability. The weaned pups, switching from suckling to hunting are not as familiar with the fishing net as their elders; and are not yet strong enough to break free when entangled. In search of food, they are attracted by the fish trapped in the nets. We ran the model once again, retaining the parameters used in step iv), but changed the mortality rate for the 1 year old youngster. When the mortality on stage 2 and 3 is doubled, the risk of falling below 18 individuals at least once in the next 20 years is 91%. It is very probable that the current abundance may decrease. The risk of falling below 1 individual at least once in the next 20 years is again as high as 23%.

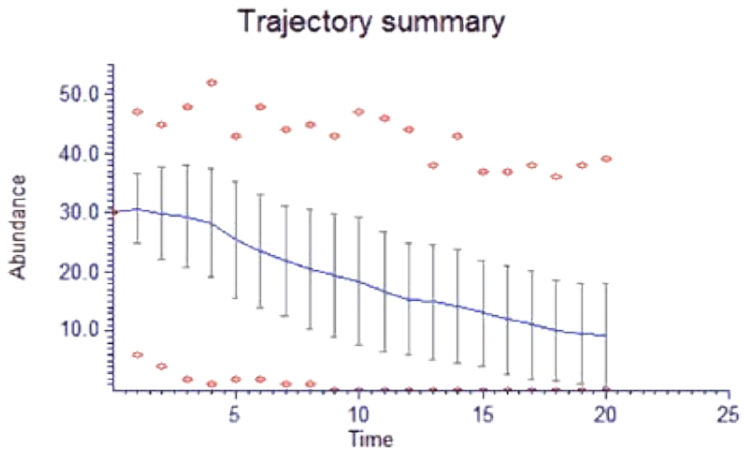


Figure 4. Scenario: If mortality at the early stages maintains its current increasing trend.

We concluded that existing conservation strategies certainly have a positive effect on the colony's survival. However, there is still considerable risk overshadowing the future of the colony. The model results urge us to find new methods of reducing the mortality rate at early life stages of the seals.

We are grateful to Dr. Rasit Akçakaya for his valuable comments.

References

Akçakaya, H. R., M.A. Burgman and L.R. Ginzburg. 1999. Applied Population Ecology: principles and computer exercises using RAMAS© EcoLab 2.0. Second edition. Sinauer Associates, Sunderland, Massachusetts. 285 pp.

Gücü, A.C., G. Gücü and H. Örek. 2004. Habitat use and preliminary demographic evaluation of the critically endangered Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) in the Cilician Basin (Eastern Mediterranean). Biological Conservation 116 (2004) 417-431.

The Monachus Guardian
monachus / schauinslandi / tropicalis

Letters to the Editor

Vol. 9 (2): November 2006

Probable false alarm at Gibraltar

A monk seal has been seen for the first time in Gibraltar waters. The animal was first reported on the 28th July by a Spanish birdwatcher who saw what he thought was a seal submerging off the cliffs just north of Europa Point. The seal did not reappear and the sighting remained unconfirmed. A week later, on the 3rd August, the Dolphin tour boat 'Dolphin Adventure' sighted the seal just off the North Mole between the bunkering ship and the Spanish Mole. All on board had good views of the animal and comparison to reference books indicated the seal's identity as a Mediterranean monk seal. The seal was seen once again on 6th August.

This is the first confirmed sighting of the Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* in Gibraltar waters, although there was another report about 20 years ago by a diver.

The nearest populations to Gibraltar are possibly in isolated points on the Atlantic coast of Morocco.

— *Albert Yome*, Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society (GONHS), 9 August 2006.

On the 11th August, however, additional information came to light which cast doubt on the validity of the identification, and John Cortes, General Secretary of GONHS wrote to us, saying:

Identifying species from other peoples' reports, as you know, can have its difficulties and there had been recent reports of a hooded seal in waters off Granada, which has made us a little more cautious, so that we are awaiting the photographs from Dolphin Adventure before confirming the identity. We will do an assessment, but would appreciate your assistance in confirming this.

✓ **Editor's reply:**

Though higher-resolution photographs have yet to be obtained from the photographers concerned, biologists we consulted voiced certainty that the animal pictured is not a monk seal. However, a genuine monk seal sighting at Gibraltar

remains a possibility, if slight.There have been recent confirmed sightings of adults and a pup on the western Algerian coast towards the border with Morocco [see Algeria, this issue]. However, long-time monk seal conservationist in Spain, Xisco Avella, who undertook some 15 years' of public awareness activities along the Mediterranean coast of Morocco, believes the species to have been virtually wiped out, with habitat under serious threat from coast road construction [see Mediterranean News, Morocco, TMG 7 (2): November 2004].

Conference controversy

The monk seal conference held in Antalya in September 2006 was somewhat different than previous international monk seal gatherings in that it covered such important agenda items as the establishment of a steering committee and a funding mechanism. As far as I know, these agenda items were handled for the very first time on such a large scale in an international meeting. I am sure all the participants made observations from different perspectives and drew some conclusions regarding these two specific issues, for which, unfortunately, no unanimous conclusion could be reached. I have realized, after listening to Bart Romijn of Warner Strategy, that surprisingly, *Monachus monachus*, although one of the rarest of endangered animals, nevertheless receives the least interest and financial support in the world.

The second realization drawn from that presentation was that all the research and conservation bodies around the world have been spending most of their energy and time searching for and obtaining funding, thereby decreasing their efficiency in real conservation efforts. This subject was also discussed widely during breaks and meal times among different participants, who have certainly come to the same conclusion. Therefore, as SAD-AFAG, we expected at least positive comments or approaches to the initial simple question posed by B. Romijn, Chairperson of Working Group B, during the session on the second day: "do we need funds for monk seal conservation efforts?" Surprisingly, the Greek Cypriot delegation replied "No!" – claiming that there are several funding resources available internationally and these are enough(!) for existing conservation activities; governments should instead focus on legislative issues.

Although this view was not widely accepted during the conference, the apparent dissenting view of the Greek Cypriot representative continued during the plenary as well. A stranger reaction was the silence of some participants, including Turkish scientists, who did not even reply to or comment on this issue. Now we should ask this question frankly… Don't conservationists and researchers need funding? Yes, indeed. Otherwise, the silence implies to me that there are hesitations or uncertainties on the matter. However, such hesitations were not aired by the silent participants. I believe any questions or doubts of this kind should have been brought openly to the attention of the conference. If we do not discuss how to remove barriers to monk seal conservation in such international monk seal conferences, where else are we supposed to debate these problematic issues? In email messages or MSN chat rooms, or behind closed curtains? SAD-AFAG considered this conference and its agenda items a good opportunity and supported such a funding mechanism and steering committee initiative on the basic condition that clear rules and procedures should be established and all operations arising from these mechanisms be transparent, rather than blocking discussion at the very beginning, or remaining silent during the conference.

There is another threat factor for monk seals and other endangered species; meaningless rivalry among conservationists, scientists and bureaucrats… We hope the results of this meeting will be a starting point to overcome such barriers.

– *Cem Orkun Kiraç*, Coordinator, SAD-AFAG.

Seal harassed

Last Saturday my friends and I were hiking around Kaena point on the west most point of Oahu and we came across (what we assume is a female) monk seal in the shallow waters on the north side of the point. She was beautiful to watch, but there were people scuba/spear-fishing and all sorts of tourists that were within 3-4 feet of this creature. Needless to say she "barked" at everyone and swam back out into the ocean to try and find another place to give birth to her young. The problem with Oahu is Kaena point is one of the least molested places on the island. I am not sure where she might go. I am not sure who to contact about this, but I heard a rumour that there is some organization in Hawaii that will put up barricades to keep humans out of the nesting area.

– *Christopher Bennett*, 16 June 2006.

✓ **Erin Moreland, Main Hawaiian Islands Monk Seal Sightings Coordinator, replies:**

I received your monk seal sighting from Kaena Point and wanted to thank both you and TMG for reporting it. I'm sorry the seal you saw was harassed by visitors back out to sea. It is a frustrating thing to witness. We are in the process of creating a volunteer group of responders who can set up ropes and signs around seals hauled up on popular beaches. Volunteers are also trained to collect basic biological data to help us keep track of the population. Kaena Point is difficult though, due to the time it takes to get out there and the rocks can make it impossible to set up a perimeter – depending on where the seal is located. A woman studying the albatross has helped us a number of times by setting up a perimeter around seals hauled up on the beach.

As far as the data goes, it would be great if you could provide some more information regarding your sighting. We generally record the following:

- Time of sighting/length of observation
- How many people were around the seal and on the beach (rough estimate)
- Disturbances by people (vocalizing, going back into the water - both, from your email)
- Any other animals in the area (dogs, etc)
- Closest distance the animal came to the seal and any disturbances or interactions
- Identifying characteristics on the seal (scars, tags, etc)

If you noticed any markings on the seal, we may be able to identify the individual. Some seals have temporary markings on their shoulders.

Seals marked on Oahu start with the letter "N" followed by a number.

Also, some seals have tags in their hind flippers. These would be too difficult to read without binoculars, but presence and colour of the tags add a piece to the puzzle. If there are no applied marks or tags we use natural markings and scars to identify the seal. If you have any photos of the seal I can usually pick out some useful marks to help identify the individual.

Female seals have four teats around a belly button (umbilicus). Male seals have internal organs. You can see a second mark behind the umbilicus (the penile aperture) and a faint line that runs to the anus (the penile grove). It can be challenging to determine the sex of a seal depending on the situation. We do have a few pregnant seals around the island right now, and we definitely pay special attention to where they are and when we're expecting them to pup.

– *Erin Moreland,* Joint Institute for Marine and Atmospheric Research, NOAA Protected Species Division, Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, Honolulu.

✓ **Editor's note:**

Thea Johanos-Kam of the NOAA also adds that "We encourage people to report all monk seal sightings and/or harassments by calling (888) 256-9840 (the NOAA Stranding Hotline) or (808) 983-5713 (the Monk Seal Sighting Line). On Oahu, volunteers or NOAA staff members will then set up barricades around seals on public beaches or otherwise respond to the situation as necessary."

The editor reserves the right to edit letters for the sake of clarity and space

The Monachus Guardian
monachus / schauinslandi / tropicalis

Recent Publications

Vol. 9 (2): November 2006

In Print

- **Antonelis, G.A., J.D. Baker, T.C. Johanos, R.C. Braun and A.L. Harting**. 2006. Hawaiian monk seal (Monachus schauinslandi): Status and conservation issues. Atoll Research Bulletin 543: 75-101.
- **Badosa, E., T. Pastor, M. Gazo and A. Aguilar**. 2006. Moult in the Mediterranean monk seal from Cap Blanc, western Sahara. African Zoology 41(2): 183-192.
- **Baker, J.D., A.L. Harting and T.C. Johanos**. 2006. Use of discovery curves to assess abundance of Hawaiian monk seals. Marine Mammal Science 22 (4): 847-861.
- **Longenecker, K., R.A. Dollar and M.K. Cahoon**. 2006. Increasing taxonomic resolution in dietary analysis of the Hawaiian monk seal. Atoll Research Bulletin 543: 103-113.
- **Marine Mammal Commission**. 2006. Hawaiian monk seal. Pages 70-81 in Chapter V, Other Species of Special Concern, Annual Report to Congress, 2005. Marine Mammal Commission, Bethesda, Maryland: 1-204. [PDF 5 MB]
- **Parrish, F.A. and K. Abernathy**. 2006. Movements of monk seals relative to ecological depth zones in the lower Northwestern Hawaiian islands. Atoll Research Bulletin 543: 115-130.
- **Reif, J.S., M.M. Kliks, A.A. Aguirre, D.L. Borjesson, L. Kashinsky, R.C. Braun and G.A. Antonelis**. 2006. Gastrointestinal helminths in the Hawaiian monk seal (*Monachus schauinslandi*): Associations with body size, hematology, and serum chemistry. Aquatic Mammals 32(2):157-167.
- **Stewart, B.S., G.A. Antonelis, J.D. Baker and P.K. Yochem**. 2006. Foraging biogeography of Hawaiian monk seals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Atoll Research Bulletin 543: 131-145.

Web publications, presentations and reports

- **Androukaki, E., S. Adamantopoulou, A. Chatzispyrou, P. Dendrinos, A. Komnenou, E. Tounta and S. Kotomatas**. 2006. (Abstract). Treatment of Mediterranean monk seals in Greece: mitigating the seal - fisheries conflict. 34th Annual Symposium of the European Association for Aquatic Mammals, 17-20/3/2006. [PDF 16KB]
- **Dendrinos, P., A.A. Karamanlidis, S. Kotomatas, E. Androukaki, E. Tounta and B. McConnell**. 2006. (Abstract). Diving development and behavior of a rehabilitated Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*). 10th International Congress on the Zoogeography and Ecology of the Eastern Mediterranean region. 26-30 June 2006, Patras, Greece: 126. [PDF 17 KB]
- **Dendrinos, P., E. Tounta, A.A. Karamanlidis, A. Legakis and S. Kotomatas**. 2006. (Abstract). Feasibility study on the use of a remote monitoring system in the study of the Mediterranean monk seal. 10th International Congress on the Zoogeography and Ecology of the Eastern Mediterranean region. 26-30 June 2006, Patras, Greece: 24. [PDF 31 KB]
- **Johnson, William M., Alexandros A. Karamanlidis, Panagiotis Dendrinos, Pablo Fernández de Larrinoa, Manel Gazo, Luis Mariano González, Harun Güçlüsoy, Rosa Pires and Matthias Schnellmann**. 2006. Monk Seal Fact Files. Biology, Behaviour, Status and Conservation of the Mediterranean monk seal, *Monachus monachus*. The Monachus Guardian, www.monachus-guardian.org.

- **Tounta, E., A.A. Karamanlidis, S. Kotomatas and P. Dendrinos**. 2006. (Abstract). Mediterranean monk seal and fishery interactions in the National Marine Park of Alonnisos, Northern Sporades. 10th International Congress on the Zoogeography and Ecology of the Eastern Mediterranean region. 26-30 June 2006, Patras, Greece: 214. [PDF 10KB]

TMG thanks Alexandros Karamanlidis and Harun Güçlüsoy for their help in compiling this listing

Publishing Info

Vol. 9 (2): November 2006

The Monachus Guardian
ISSN: 1480-9370

Editor: William M. Johnson
Production Editor: Matthias Schnellmann

Published by: Friends of the Monk Seal

c/o M. Schnellmann
Wernerstr. 26
CH-3006 Bern
Switzerland

All e-mail communications, including letters to the Editor, should be sent to:
editor@monachus-guardian.org

The views expressed in *The Monachus Guardian*
do not necessarily reflect those of its publishers or financial supporters.