



THE MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL IN SARDINIA

A review of evidence and historical data

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Our knowledge of the presence and frequency of the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) along Sardinian coasts was frequently restricted to the writings of the famous Sardinian speleologist Father Antonio Furreddu.

At first, in the years between 1960 and 1980, he made chance encounters with the seal during his excursions with the Pio XI Speleological Group, in the *Grotta*^[1] *del Bue Marino* (at Dorgali), and subsequently, in the *Grotta del Fico* (at Baunei). The latter became a focal point for his studies on the species.

During the last 30 years, interest in the monk seal's presence in Sardinian waters has generally been orientated towards the *Golfo di Orosei*^[2], especially the area around *Cala Gonone* (Dorgali). The occurrence of this rare pinniped around Sardinia, however, at least in the past, was considerably more widespread.



Cape Monte Santu (Baunei).

Various bibliographic sources and eyewitnesses reports analysed for this article indicate how common the species once was along Sardinian coasts, and the role it played in local culture.

Bue Marino^[3] (*Bòe/Fòe/Vòe/Òe/Bòi marìnu*) is the monk seal's common name in Sardinia; in some places it is also called *Vacca Marina*^[4] (*Vàcca/’Acca marina* or *Vàha de mòdde*) and *Vitello Marino*^[5] (*Bitèllu/Vitèddu marìnu* or *Viggiu/Biggiu/Iggiu marìnu*); more rarely, it was named *Vecchio Marino*^[6] (*Vècchiu/Ècciu marìnu*), and finally even *Fòca*^[7] (Puddu & Viarengo 1993, Casu et al. 1984).

The typical summer ending lightning, in absence of rain and thunder, was ascribed to the seal; in Gallura (north-west Sardinian plain) people used to say: “It is the sea calf, son of the sea cow, that is playing.”^[8]

Some authors believe that this legend may refer to the flashing eyes of the seal as it raises its head from the sea (Mori 1966, Cucciari 1985, Puddu & Viarengo 1993).

This tale is encountered not only along the coasts but throughout the island, including inland areas; in some variations the monk seal does not even feature at all.^[9] Given the sparse knowledge of marine species among country folk, many people were not even aware of the real meaning of *Bue Marino*, and some assumed it to refer to a real ox.

Some legends reflect beliefs common to other Mediterranean areas.^[10] Old people from Tortoli (on the central southeastern Sardinian coast, close to Arbatax) recall monk seals raiding the seaside vineyards for grapes. Another claims to have seen them while rummaging through the garbage left on the Arbatax *Scogli Rossi*.^[11] Another local proudly claims he has ridden through the sea on the monk seal's back (Caravano 1993).

In former times, the seals were often hunted on the island.

Describing the traditional fishing around Alghero (northwest coast) in his expansive reference work on Sardinia, Goffredo Casalis (1833) wrote: "It is easy to fish enormous fishes, and primarily seals, that live in great numbers in the caves of the Capo Caccia^[12] peninsula."^[13]

On fishing in the waters of Capo Carbonara he reported: "Cagliari's fishermen used to sail every day in this area taking a lot of (fish) species, and seals."^[14]

In more general terms, he remarked: "On the island coasts, where there are rocks and caves, live these seals, seldom being hunted."^[15]

In his book on animals facing extinction in Italy Fulco Pratesi (1978) quotes the naturalist Bonomi, who in 1892 described live seals being captured for menageries and zoos. A net supported by a hawser would be lowered by two men across the entrance of the cave. Inside the cave, sleeping seals would be frightened awake by the boat crew making all manner of noise, including gunfire. Tearing into the water to escape, they would inexorably be caught by the net.

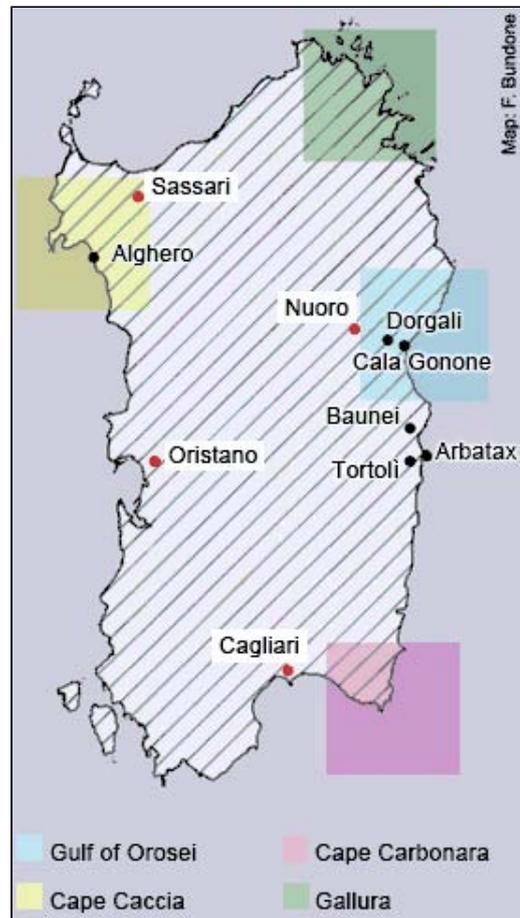
Even the Touring Club Italiano describes seal hunting in its 1918 Guide to the island, reporting that the activity is undertaken by boat along the beaches and particularly inside the caves where the animals rest (Pratesi 1978).

Seals were hunted for skin, fat and, less frequently, meat (Puddu & Viarengo 1993, Altara 1995).

Baunei mountain's (east-south-east) shepherds visited the coast to kill the seals in order to obtain skin to make *Cusinzos*^[16], *gambales*^[17] and other articles of clothing – as old people of the area still confirm, referring to the last decade of the 19th and the first of the 20th century (Furreddu 1973, Anon. 1989, Altara 1995, WWF Italia 1995).

Hunting was accomplished with rifles, harpoons and clubs (Puddu & Viarengo 1993).

In Francesco Cetti (1777), we read: "The hunter takes his time before shooting; the sea calf is one of the most useful to hunt in Sardinia because of the oil and the skin; obtaining food from his flesh, medicines from his blood, thread and string from his intestines, utensils and weapons from his bones are activities left to the Davis Straits inhabitant; Sardinians appreciate just the fat for oil, and the skin mainly. From a sea calf sometimes it is possible to obtain skin four times more than that of an ox, and its quality can be as good as that of a good ox. The skin can be bought from the



Seals killed along the Sardinian coast would sometimes end up as stuffed specimens in museums, like this pup on display in Florence.

artisans, who work leather belts, at 8, 9 and finally 10 scudi[18]: belts are made for vanity and for health. A *quintorza*[19] of sea calf above the collar is a belt that inspires pride within the people who wear it.”[20]

Fat was widely used for producing oil and for tanning other skins such as goat and calf, and to make the *Sa socca*[21] plait workable (Puddu & Viarengo 1993, WWF Italia 1995).

In some places, the flesh was even eaten (Altara 1995, WWF Italia 1995).

In many Sardinian villages in past centuries, it was believed that the derivatives obtained from the skin of the seal possessed therapeutic properties, especially against rheumatic illnesses (De Lucca 1967, Furreddu 1972, Furreddu 1973, Anon. 1989). A belt of seal skin was considered a good remedy for renal illness, rheumatism and stomach ache. It was also believed to induce labour in women, and for this specific purpose belts fashioned from the skin of seal foetuses, taken from the abdomen of the killed females, were regarded as particularly effective (Puddu & Viarengo 1993, Altara 1995).

As Francesco Cetti notes in his 1777 work on the quadrupeds of Sardinia: “A belt of this leather is believed to bring comfort to the kidneys: similarly, girded to women it facilitates birth; for this purpose are preferred the leather of the calf found in the seal abdomen.”[22]

Organs and other bodily derivatives were reputed to help in the treatment of many illness (Altara 1995).

Hair, intestines and other organs were all prepared and dispensed as remedies; they were also noted for their value in easing a difficult birth (De Lucca 1967, Furreddu 1972, Furreddu 1973, Anon. 1989).

This brief analysis of the historical record suggests that monk seals were once an integral part of the Sardinian fauna, sufficiently common indeed that objects of everyday use were obtained from them; as a result, the animals were a familiar feature of local culture.

By erroneously focusing attention exclusively on the Gulf of Orosei, interested parties have inadvertently discouraged the monk seal conservation question from being viewed in the totality it deserves.

Historically, seals lived in large numbers along Sardinian coasts, but like many other species in other parts of the world, they quickly disappeared with the modern age. A more holistic approach might lead to a better understanding of the seal’s historical distribution around Sardinia, and also provide some important answers for its possible future natural recolonisation and protection.

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Footnotes

- [1] Cave.
- [2] Gulf of Orosei.
- [3] Sea ox.
- [4] Sea cow.
- [5] Sea calf.
- [6] Sea Old.
- [7] Seal.
- [8] *“È lu ‘iggiu marinu, fiddolu di la ‘acca marina, ch’è gjuchendi.”*
- [9] From my grandparent’s stories.
- [10] See also Guçlusoy H., W.M. Johnson, A. Karamanlidis, A. 2002. [Mediterranean monk seal behaviour – can we discard anecdotal accounts?](#) The Monachus Guardian 5 (2): 2002.
- [11] Red rocks.
- [12] Cape Caccia.
- [13] *“Prendonsi pure degli altri pesci enormi, e principalmente delle foche, che in gran numero abitano nelle caverne della penisola di Capo Caccia.”*
- [14] *“I pescatori cagliaritani mareggiano tutti i giorni in questi paraggi, e prendon in molta copia le specie...e delle foche.”*
- [15] *“Nelle coste dell’isola, dove sono scogli e spelonche, frequentano queste foche, e spesso se ne fa caccia.”*
- [16] *Cosinzos* or *Cusinzos*, typical shoes of Sardinian shepherds.
- [17] Leggings.

[18] Scudo: a gold or silver coin formerly used in Italy.

[19] Chintorza or Cintòrja: belt of the Sardinian traditional male dress.

[20] *“Il cacciatore prende quel tempo per fare il suo colpo; e la presa d'un vitel marino è l'una delle più utili cacce in Sardegna per cagione dell'olio, e della pelle; Il far cibo della sua carne, medicamento del suo sangue, filo e spago delle sue budella, utensili ed arme delle sue ossa sono industrie rilasciate dagli abitatori dello Stretto di Davis; da' sardi non si apprezzano se non il lardo per farne olio, e la pelle principalmente. Quattro volte più che dalla pelle d'un bue si giunge talora a ricavare da una pelle di vitel marino, la quale nella sua grandezza arriva pure talora ad uguagliare il cuojo di un buon bue. A otto, a dieci, infin a dodici scudi si compra essa pelle dagli artefici, che lavorano cinture di cuojo: e cinture se ne fanno e per vanità e per giovamento. Per l'uno e per l'altro uso si concia in modo, che vi rimane attaccato il pelo. Una quintorza di vitel marino sopra il colletto è una cintura che ispira alterigia a chi la porta.”*

[21] Socca or Soca: a rope obtained from strips of ox skin of varying lengths up to 5-6 m, flat, 2 cm wide, for traditional use (such as horse reins, and other classical uses for rope).

[22] *“Una cintura di tal cuojo è pur creduta utile a confortare le reni: e medesimamente si cinge alle donne per facilitare i parti; al qual uopo, però si antipongono i cuoj dei vitelli trovati tuttavia nel ventre della foca.”*