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Mediterranean Monk seal (*Monachus monachus*): Up-date of the status and conservation progress

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The present report has been prepared in order to inform the CMS Scientific Council at their 12th Meeting (Glasgow, March 2004) about the status and activities progress that has been carrying out with the Mediterranean Monk Seal, a species under the resolutions of concerted actions for species of Annex I, since their 11th Meeting. The Report covers the period from March 2002 to March 2004.

Considered as “Critically Endangered” by the IUCN the Mediterranean Monk Seal is one of the rarest and most threatened species in the world. The monk seal populations in the Mediterranean Sea have been target of several projects and initiatives that are co-ordinated via the Action Plan for the Mediterranean of the *Barcelona Convention*, while the Atlantic population became the target of a similar effort within the framework of the CMS.

In general terms, the population estimate continue stable around 500 individuals; although local extinction has been occurred in the Mediterranean area (Croatia and the Black sea). Meanwhile in the Atlantic area continues the recovery in the Desertas islands, and the drowning of seals in the Cabo Blanco colony has been halted, due, in both cases, to the implementation of strong conservation efforts.

The main information about the status of the species and the progress in their conservation efforts in relation to the last report (CMS/SC11th), is exposed following:

1. Current status and trends

1.1. Population estimates

The information available about the population estimates, not based in census, is summarized in the next Table (sources: Johnson, 2003 and own data).

Area	regional subtotal	area total
Black Sea		0 – 0
Bulgaria	0	
Georgia	0	
Romania	0	
Russia	0	
Turkey	0	
Ukraine	0	

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Area	regional subtotal	area total
Eastern Mediterranean		260 – 315
Albania	0	
Croatia	0	
Cyprus	5	
Egypt	0	
Greece	200-250	
Israel	0	
Lebanon	0	
Libya	5-10	
Servia & Montenegro	0	
Slovenia	0	
Syria	0	
Turkey	50	
Western Mediterranean		16-32
Algeria	10–20	
France & Corsica	0	
Italy & Sardinia	0	
Malta	0	
Morocco	5-10	
Spain	1-2	
Tunisia	0	
Atlantic		175-182
Azores (Portugal)	0	
Canary Islands (Spain)	0	
Madeira (Portugal)	24	
Morocco	0	
Sahara coast (Morocco)	1-5	
Sahara coast (Mauritania)	150	
Mauritania	3	
Cape Verde Islands	0	
Gambia	0	
Senegal	0	
TOTAL		451 - 529

Major changes compared with previous estimation (2001) are:

- The definitive extinction in the Black Sea.
- Possible extinction in Croatia (not confirmation of recent sightings).
- Italy and Sardinia remain with no habitat occupied, despite recent sightings.
- As a result of intensive research, Turkey is expected to increase its population estimates for the species.

1.2. Productivity

Production of newborns in the reproductive season of 2003-2004 only occurs in four areas with stable populations: Greece, Turkey, Desertas and Sahara coast (Mauritania), and reached a minimum of 42 pups:

Greece: According to MOm has recorded 16 monk seal births during the 2003-2004 breeding season in three main study areas: 4 in the core zone of the National Marine Park of Alonissos-Northern Sporades, 8 in the Kimolos-Polyaigos area and 4 in the area of N. Karpathos-Saria (MOm in Johnson, 2003).

Turkey: Information in the Cilician Basin identified 9 new pups in 2001, that figure increased the size of the colony to 24 individuals (Gucu, 2004).

Madeira: A single monk seal pup has been recorded on the Natural Park of Desertas Islands. Observations saw the pup using an open beach in the company of several other adults. Its behaviour may suggest that the population is losing the fear of persecution as a result of stringent protection measures in force in the area. On the main island of Madeira, meanwhile, sightings of seals continue and at least one seal is regularly using its coasts to haul out (Pires, 2004).

Sahara coast: 25 births have been recorded so far during the last pupping season. The pup mortality rate has been 0.33. This is unusually low. It is produced as consequence of the storms and high swells coinciding with a time when most pups in the breeding caves are just a few days old. During the three previous years, the pup mortality rate has been 0.60, 0.48 and 0.44 respectively. This year, when the storms season began, most of the pups were old enough to have a better chance of survival in the caves. Despite annual variations like these, pup mortality remains high in the overall situation of the Cabo Blanco colony (CBD-Habitat, 2004).

2. Threats

Mediterranean area

The RAC/SPA, the implementation body of the Mediterranean Action Plan for the Monk Seal, stressed that the actions undertaken in the Mediterranean for the conservation of the monk seal are still not sufficient to prevent the species from vanishing, and its decline is continuing. The main urgent short-term priority to be addressed to prevent the extinction of the species is to halt the seal killings and the disturbance in caves by every legal means. This is a basic measure that is still not enforced, although wilful killing is the main cause of monk seal deaths.

Atlantic area

In August 2003, a bulk carrier *Malika Tãnger* drifting until it finally ran aground at the beach of the Satellite Reserve of Cap Blanc, a protected area where live at least 2 monk seals. The bulk carrier of significant size that was empty at the time of the accident, its own fuel load posing the only danger of hydrocarbon pollution in the protected area. The aim of this Reserve was the protection of the monk seals that hauled out on its beaches. Seals were abundant in this location in the past, although since the mass mortality that struck the Cabo Blanco colony in 1997, only two animals have continued using the area. Despite this small number, the Reserve remains a key location for progressive re-colonization in the near future. This accident shows the vulnerability of the nearby monk seal colony to the intense maritime traffic that occurs around the area. Moreover, maritime traffic involving transport of hydrocarbons will increase in the area in the near future when Mauritania begins the exploitation of its recently discovered marine oilfields. Measures that should be considered with urgency include banning single-hull oil tankers from near shore navigation, the classification of this coast as a sensitive marine area, and the development of emergency response plans – including providing countries with the means to implement those plans.

3. Progresses

A **Workshop on Seal Rehabilitation** convened in Liege, Belgium, on 7 April 2002, organised by the [Hellenic Society for the Study & Protection of the Monk Seal](#) (MOm) and the Université Catholique de Louvain. Rescue

and rehabilitation is generally considered as an important component of conservation strategy in this species. Rescue and reintroduction programmes of Mediterranean monk seal papers were presented and the round table discussion exposed different points of view about the reintroduction of rehabilitated animals into the wild, including criteria, risks, advantages and post-release monitoring. It was agreed a standard protocol and the idea of a minimum set of standards for procedures in rehabilitation centres (Androukaki and Larondelle, 2003).

Action plan for the management of the Mediterranean monk seal in the Mediterranean (UNEP/MAP): new priority actions recommended

The 13th meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention held in Catania, Sicily on 11-14 November 2003, assess the progress of the Action plan for the management of the Mediterranean monk seal UNEP/MAP/1987. These would then be used to advise and guide government officials of the Barcelona Convention. The coordinating body RAC/SPA, pinpoint new priority actions for the species and addressed the next Recommendations to the Contracting Parties:

In order to check the elaborated proposal (RAC/SPA), the experts showed the implementation of the following emergency actions to counter the present high mortality and habitat degradation:

A) Increase of survival

1. To create a **border area to both sides of breeding cave locations** where the use of trammel nets should be prohibited. The zones would comprise trenches 5 nautical miles wide to both sides of the caves, extending seawards either 5 nautical miles or to the 50 m depth contour, whichever is reached first.
2. To perform a technical program to assess the feasibility of implementing nation-wide systems of **trammel net insurance** for seal damages. Under this scheme, insurance payment should be “conditio sine qua non” to get the annual fishing license.
3. To perform feasibility project aimed to **allow trammel net fishermen** to have yearly licences to take tourists with them on their fishing trips, making a profit of it. The licenses should be issued only in the coasts where healthy marine mammals presence is yearly proved, as an encouragement measure for the loss of income provoked by interactions, and it would be valid for the year after.
4. To **halt killings by every legal mean**. The measure should envisage the urgent creation of specific effective legislation, regulations and urgent enforcement actions to achieve that purpose. It would be advisable to include the mobilisation of an “ad hoc” prosecution authority within the frame of existing National Legislations; as for example some countries have efficiently implemented to address illegal financial issues or threatened species traffic. Such authority should initiate a prosecution process, to research every seal killing recorded in the country, immediately after the fact is noticed.
5. To **increase survival up to reproductive status** through the temporary transfer of both weaned pups and every captive raised one from areas were killings continue into fully safe semi captivity locations.

B) Neutralisation of habitat harassment

1. A minimum **no-approach belt of 500 m** should be implemented around seal caves for tourist and private vessels, but transit rights should be granted to fishing boats.
2. Future **habitat monitoring** should be concentrated on efficiently carrying out such processes, which are essentially land-based, easy to follow up at local level (Municipalities and local government schemes) and do not normally need costly sea patrolling.

Recovery Plan for the Atlantic monk seal populations: actions performed or in progress

A CMS draft Recovery Action Plan for this species was prepared by representatives from Atlantic countries in which the species occurs, Mauritania, Morocco, Portugal and Spain. Since the establishment of their first draft, some activities have been performed under its frame in the signatory countries. The most significant advance was their sign by the Administrative authorities of Portugal and Spain in 2002 and of Morocco and Mauritania in 2003.

In 2003-2004, some actions have been consolidated and new action fields have began to be executed. The summary of these executed actions by countries are the following:

Portugal

Performed or in progress actions:

- Study of habitat availability for monk seals in the main Madeira island.
- Public awareness campaigns in Madeira biggest island to inform local population of the progressive colonisation of the main island by monk seals.
- Monk seal monitoring and logging of sightings in Madeira.
- Monk seal population monitoring in Desertas islands.

Foreseen activities:

- Standardisation of methodologies in genetic analysis of monk seals samples with the Cap Blanc population.

Morocco

Performed actions:

- Adoption of the Recovery Plan by the "Haute Commission Mixte Maroco-Mauritanienne en matière de pêche", during the 3th meeting (Rabat, 18 February 2003).
- Implementation in 1993 prorogued in 1999 of a fisheries reserve in the monk seal area (20°54'40''N - 21°23'00''N), from land to 12 miles (Arrêté n° 1430-99, du 13 jourmada II 1420). In the reserve was forbid all the fishing activity (coastal, pelagic and bottom) and it is regular survey by the Marine Royale patrol.
- Since June 2003, prohibition of trawlers in the 12 miles offshore between Lagouira and Cap Bojdour and prohibition of the artisanal fishing activities from Lamhiriz (22°10'00''N) to the south (Idrissi, 2003).

Foreseen activities:

- Exploration of coastal habitat in southern Morocco and feasibility study of the establishment of a biological station in D' Khila (Cap Corveiro).

Spain

Performed or in progress actions:

- Funding of monk seal conservation projects in Mauritania from Spanish Ministry of Environment and International Cooperation Agency.
- Funding and execution of monk seal conservation and social development projects by Spanish NGO in Mauritania.
- Financial and technical support to Mauritanian local and national authorities to improve and reinforce its own capabilities, means and equipments related to nature conservation, mainly in monk seal conservation.
- Coordination of the Monk Seal Recovery Plan in the Atlantic.

Foreseen activities:

- Continuing the financial support to the Plan.

Mauritania

Performed or in progress actions:

- Reinforcement of the surveillance and control measures in the Cap Blanc Satellite Reserve and in the National Park of Banc D'Arguin.
- Improvement of the monk seal rehabilitation facilities in the Institute de Recherches Oceanographiques et des Peches de Nouadhibu (IMROP).
- Legal prohibition of the use of monofilament fishing gears in Mauritanian waters.
- Inclusion of Mauritanian marine protected areas in the Regional Conservation Program for the Coastal and Marine Zones of West Africa PRCM (Program supported by IUCN, WWF, FIBA and Wetlands International).
- Public awareness campaigns to fishermen and school teachers.
- Monitoring and control of the Cap Blanc monk seal colony.
- Social development actions focused on sectors related with monk seal, as fishermen.

Example of successful projects in Mauritania

a) Decrease of infractions and zero mortality. Since the start of regular marine surveillance in the Seals Reserve of Cabo Blanco in 2002, setting of fishing nets in the area of the breeding caves has decreased significantly, and even disappeared during summer. The region's lobster fishery is exploited throughout the year, although a marked peak of its activity is seen between May and September – the season of highest abundance of green lobster, when many pirogues from other harbours come to the Cabo Blanco peninsula to fish. As to be expected, during this time, infractions increase in the Seals Reserve, usually due to the arriving fishermen's lack of awareness about its existence. Reacting to these pressures, marine surveillance becomes intensive during this period, and focuses on informing fishermen of the protection measures in force, and preventing them from setting nets in the reserve. During May and June, infractions peaked due to the constant arrival of many new fishing vessels, but the regular presence of the guards in the area resulted in infractions virtually disappearing at the end of June, with the incidence of set nets also approaching zero during the following months of August, September, October and November. Since the start of the surveillance the mortality of monk seals in the Reserve, attributable to drowning in fishing gear, was reduce to 4-6 seals/year, between 1998-2001, to 0, between 2002-2004 (CBD-Habitat, 2004).

b) Social development: a helping hand to the local fishing community. The captains of fishing pirogues of Nouadhibu and the surrounding of Cabo Blanco Reserve, have been trained in repair and maintenance of outboard engines. Training in the field of safety at sea has proved as very useful for the fishing community in Mauritania – which experiences an unbelievably high number of fatal accidents every year– and has contributed positively to the excellent relations between conservationists and fishermen and the change of attitude to the monk seal. Besides, training courses about sustainable fishing methods have been developed, in which 150 fishermen from nearby fishing harbours learnt about fishing attitudes, practices and actions to undertake in order to avoid the overexploitation of fishing grounds that they are already suffering (CBD-Habitat, 2004).

Foreseen activities:

- Development of a monk seal public awareness campaign in the Cap Blanc Satellite Reserve.
- Continuation of social development actions focused on sectors related with monk seal, as fishermen.
- Standardisation of methodologies in genetic analysis of monk seals samples with Madeira population.

References

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