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MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL (*MONACHUS MONACHUS*): UPDATE OF THE STATUS AND CONSERVATION PROGRESS IN THE ATLANTIC POPULATIONS

*(Report prepared for the 13th meeting of the CMS Scientific Council (Nairobi)
by Luis Mariano González & Pablo Fernández de Larrinoa)*

The Mediterranean Monk Seal is a species listed on Appendix I and designated for concerted actions. The present report has been prepared in order to inform the Council at their 13th meeting (Nairobi, November 2005) about the status and progress of activities that have been carried out for the Mediterranean Monk Seal, especially in the Atlantic area. The Report covers the period from March 2004 to October 2005.

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 the object of several projects and initiatives that are co-ordinated via the Action Plan for the Mediterranean of the *Barcelona Convention*, while the population in the Atlantic became the target of a similar effort within the framework of the CMS.

Eradicated from most of its former range, the Mediterranean monk seal is now mainly confined to two surviving populations, one occupying the Atlantic coast of northwest Africa, and the other the north-eastern Mediterranean. In general terms, the population estimate continues stable around 400-500 individuals. Recent local extinction has occurred in the Mediterranean area (Croatia and the Black sea); in the Atlantic area the recovery of the Desertas Islands and in the Cabo Blanco colony continues, in both cases due 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/ScC12th) is as follows:

Current status and trends

The information available about the population estimates is summarized in the following table. However, these figures should be treated with caution, since they are not based on census (sources: Johnson, 2005 and own data).

Mediterranean Monk Seal Population Estimates

Area	Regional Subtotal	Area Total
Black Sea		0 – 0
Bulgaria	0	
Georgia	0	
Romania	0	
Russia	0	
Turkey	0	
Ukraine	0	
Eastern Mediterranean		250 – 300
Albania	0	
Croatia	0	
Cyprus	5	
Egypt	0	
Greece	200 – 250	
Israel	0	
Lebanon	0	
Libya	?	
Serbia and Montenegro	0	
Slovenia	0	
Syria	?	
Turkey	50	
Western Mediterranean		11 –15
Algeria	10	
France & Corsica	0	
Italy* & Sardinia	?	
Malta	0	
Morocco	1-5	
Spain	?	
Tunisia	0	
Atlantic		180
Azores (Portugal)	0	
Canary Islands (Spain)	0	
Cape Verde Islands	0	
Gambia	0	
Madeira (Portugal)	28	
Mauritania	2	
Morocco-Mauritania)	150	
Senegal	0	
TOTAL		441 – 495

* A monk seal birth was reported in December 2004 in Sicily – possibly the first recorded birth on the island in 30 years.

W. Johnson. 2005. International news. The Monachus Guardian. Vol. 8 (1), May 2005.

Action Plan for the Atlantic Monk Seal Populations: Actions performed or in progress

In 2004-2005, some actions have been consolidated and actions have been extended to new fields. These executed actions are summarised as follows:

Third Meeting of the Action Plan Working Group

Representatives from Atlantic countries in which the species occurs, Mauritania, Morocco, Portugal and Spain, prepared the Action Plan for this species. The Administrative authorities of Portugal and Spain signed it in 2002 and of Morocco and Mauritania in 2003. The Plan contains combined operations agreed as necessary for the conservation for the species. The IUCN Conservation Breeding Specialist Group revised the plan in 2002. The most important feature of the mentioned Action Plan it is that proposes the creation and effective maintenance of a Network of Protected Marine Areas, located strategically throughout the region, which could guarantee the connection of the populations and ensure enough available habitat to allow their recovery and geographical expansion.

From 12-15 October 2004, the third meeting of the Working Group coordinating the Monk Seal Recovery Plan in the Eastern Atlantic was held in the city of Dakhla (Morocco). The Secretary General of Marine Fisheries of Morocco and the Director General of the Research Institute of Marine Resources opened the proceedings. The meeting allowed the Working Group to determine whether to pursue the recommendations established at the PHVA workshop held in Valsain, Spain in 2002. The Deputy Executive Secretary of the CMS, Mr. Lahcen El Kabiri, attended the meeting, which was convened and organized by the Ministry of Environment of Spain and the Institute of Research of Marine Resources of Morocco. The CBD-Habitat Foundation participated in the coordination of the meeting as well as in the preparation of all working documents used during the sessions. Apart from the members of the Working Group (coming from Portugal, Morocco, Spain and Mauritania), the meeting was also attended by many participants and guests from the local and regional civil and military authorities, as well as by representatives of various NGOs and Moroccan agencies (Ministry of Water and Forests, National Office of Fisheries, etc.). The representatives of the range states approved the technical document of the Action Plan and elaborated a document named the "Dakhla Declaration", which also calls for international assistance in funding the Action Plan and for support for Morocco's initiative to create a marine protected area for monk seal conservation and to apply a management plan for a future national park in the area.

Madeira

Three births occurred in the beginning of November 2004, and two of these pups survived. The breeding females and the pups are inhabiting Tabaqueiro beach, where another new breeding female might also be located. No information is available yet about the 2005 breeding season. In 2004 the construction of a new biological station commenced on the Desertas Islands. This measure, supported by the regional government, aims at improving living conditions for park rangers, whilst also providing an information centre for visitors.

Actions performed or in progress:

- Monk seal monitoring and logging of sightings in Madeira.
- Monk seal population monitoring in Desertas Islands.
- Improvement of the surveillance and monitoring facilities at Desertas Islands with the construction of a new biological station.

Morocco & Mauritania

The fishing protection area in the Seals' Coast

The surveillance and monitoring facilities of the Coast of the Seals Reserve, especially in 'Las Cuevecillas' area, have been upgraded to allow a better surveillance of the no-fishing area and a better monitoring of the Cabo Blanco Monk Seal colony breeding caves.

Exploration of coastal habitat in southern Morocco (Guerguerat-D' Khila-Cap Corveiro)

During the month of May 2005, a sea-expedition in the ship "Song of the Whale-IFAW", organized under the frame of the Action Plan for the Atlantic Monk Seal Populations (CMS), and developed by *CBD-Habitat Foundation*, *Institute National de Recherche Halieutique (INRH)*, *International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)*, and the Moroccan local NGO *Nature Initiative*, explored the coastal habitat north of the Cabo Blanco monk seal colony up to Cabo Barbas, in the search of groups of seals and habitat available for them. Some seals were observed in Tarf el Guerguertat, some kilometres north of the breeding colony, and several recent sightings by fishermen in D'Khila area were recorded in the north, as well as several areas of habitat suitable for the seals were located. Also, potential threats for the seals in this area were identified and conservation recommendations provided to the authorities.

Productivity of Cabo Blanco colony

From March 2004 to December 2004, 28 pups were born. This 2005 breeding season, although not yet finished, has resulted in 27 new pups born until now. The breeding seasons of 2004 and 2005 have begun sooner than usually observed, with September instead of October and November as the month with the highest number of births. This change in the peak of births has significant consequences for the survival rates of the pups, since October is usually the beginning of the storm season. In previous breeding seasons, most pups would be in the breeding caves, being only a few days old, at the time of the storms and high swell. Therefore, pup mortality rate usually ranged between 45-60%. These last two years, pup mortality rate is around 30%, although, as mentioned before, the 2005 breeding season is not yet finished and numbers may change.

Photo-identification catalogue

With the photo-identification catalogue still being developed, up till now 105 adults and juvenile seals have been individually identified, 33 of them during the last photo-identification session which took place in this summer 2005.

Threats

In the last years an important increase of the human development of the coastal populations is taking place (Nouadhibou in Mauritania and Lamhiriz in Morocco) and new settlements are being constructed along the coast. This will provoke an increase in human pressure on the coastal area and habitats used by the seals or on potential habitats for re-colonizing by monk seals in the future.

Spain

Actions performed or in progress:

- Funding of Monk Seal Conservation Projects in Mauritania by Spanish Ministry of Environment and International Cooperation Agency (AECI).
- Funding and execution of Monk Seal Conservation and Social Development Projects by Spanish NGO CBD-Habitat Foundation in Mauritania and Morocco.

- Financial and technical support to Mauritanian local and national authorities to improve and reinforce the country's capabilities, means and equipment 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 Action Plan activities and projects
- Funding of the upgrade of the surveillance facilities of the Cabo Blanco Satellite Reserve (PNBA), Mauritania, as well as the construction of a visitors centre in this protected area.

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