

First Record of a Monk Seal Pup Born on an Open Beach in Centuries



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Bonn, 8 October 2009 - An event of great symbolic and conservation importance took place in the Cabo Blanco Mediterranean Monk Seal colony, the largest aggregation of this species that still survives in the world. A pup was born on an open beach.

The newborn pup was discovered by the reserve's monk seal patrol of the CBD-Habitat Foundation. It was located at the foot of a cliff and was reported to be in good shape. It is the first record of such an event since the XV century.

Until the XV century, monk seals used to give birth to their pups on small island beaches or at the feet of cliffs on the continent, which they considered to be sites best suited for their reproduction. However, monk seals had to change their breeding habits as a result of persecution from humans, which almost led to their extinction. Those animals that survived, sheltered in deep caves on the coast. Nevertheless, the caves did not provide sufficient protection for newborn pups. Their mortality rate was high as a result of shocks they suffer from heavy waves inside the caves. As a result, experts have proposed actions for years to promote the seals' return to breed on the beaches. With that in mind, last week's birth of a pup demonstrates that the species is able to regain its once lost habitat.

CMS has been active in monk seal conservation for several years now. In particular, under the auspices of CMS and the leadership of the Government of Spain, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) concerning Conservation Measures for the Eastern Atlantic Populations of the Mediterranean Monk Seal was signed between Mauritania, Morocco, Portugal, and Spain on 18 October 2007. According to the MoU, the signatories need to take actions to prevent the disappearance of the remaining monk seal populations in the Eastern Atlantic and need to cooperate closely to improve the conservation status of the species and its habitats.

The birth of the monk seal pup last week was a result of action taken by the Range States in accordance with the Action Plan for the recovery of this species. The Plan is part of the MoU and promotes the establishment of a network of Special Areas of Conservation for the Monk Seal (SACMS), and regional coordination of actions between the Range States. The Action Plan was developed by the Atlantic Monk Seal

Working Group with financial and leading support from Spain's Ministry of Environment. It was endorsed by the 8th Meeting of the CMS Conference of the Parties (Nairobi, 2005).

In the context of the Plan and the MoU, a monitoring project of the monk seal colony in Cabo Blanco funded by Spain is being implemented by the Spanish Foundation CBD-Habitat, in collaboration with Moroccan (INRH, E&F) and Mauritanian (INRH, PNBA) authorities, local NGOs and Trage-sega. The project carries out surveillance of the monk seals breeding caves in the 'Seals Coast' marine-terrestrial reserve, control and monitoring of the colony, as well as initiatives of cooperation with Mauritania in environmental education, training in sustainable fishing and fishing safety, with the participation of the Spanish fishing fleet operating in those waters. When the project started in 2000, only one hundred monk seals remained in the population. However, thanks to the conservation efforts made in recent years, the situation has improved significantly, and the population has doubled.

The Mediterranean monk seal is one of the 10 most endangered marine mammals worldwide. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), there are fewer than 500 monk seals, living in isolated enclaves of the Mediterranean Sea and eastern Atlantic. On the Atlantic, two populations exist, one on the Desertas Islands (Madeira) and the other one on the Cabo Blanco peninsula. The latter is the most important and the only one left in the world, which forms a colony. IUCN has classified the species as "critically endangered". The monk seal has been a main focus of CMS conservation efforts concerning marine mammals. The species is included in Appendices I and II of the Convention. Member States are thus obliged to conserve monk seals' habitats, refrain from and ban monk seal hunting and capture and other disturbance, and develop international cooperation Agreements towards the conservation of the species.