



CONVENTION ON MIGRATORY SPECIES

Distr: General

UNEP/CMS/ScC17/Inf.22
4 November 2011

Original: English

17th MEETING OF THE
SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL
Bergen, 17-18 November 2011
Agenda Item 17.1

Mediterranean Monk Seal (*Monachus monachus*): Update on Status and Conservation Progress of the Atlantic Population 2010-2011

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1. Considered as “Critically Endangered” by the IUCN, the Mediterranean Monk Seal is one of the rarest and most threatened mammal species in the world. The monk seal populations in the Mediterranean Sea have been the target of several projects and initiatives co-ordinated via the Action Plan for the Mediterranean, as part of the Barcelona Convention. The population in the Atlantic became the target of similar efforts within the framework of CMS MOU concerning Conservation Measures for the Eastern Atlantic Populations of the Mediterranean Monk Seal and associated Action Plan for the Recovery of the Monk Seal in the Eastern Atlantic. The main information about the current status of the species and the progress in their conservation efforts is outlined below.

Population status

2. Only two isolated Mediterranean monk seal populations survive today in the Atlantic range of the species:

a) **Madeira (Portugal)**

Currently the monk seal population is estimated at 30-40 individuals. It is distributed not only around Desertas Island but also around Madeira Island, where seals returned after having previously disappeared. As the monk seal population progressively recovers and seals expand their distribution range on Madeira Main Island, the interactions between seals and fisheries are becoming a growing cause for concern for the species recovery.

In the 1980's, entanglement in fishing gear was the first factor responsible for the progressive population decline and the main threat identified for the survival of the species, which led to the creation of the Desertas Natural Reserve in 1990. In order to assess the present risk of seal-fisheries interaction, a study was conducted in 2010 among Madeira fishermen. According to the study, currently the risk of monk seal entanglement in fishing gear does not seem to represent a threat and most fishermen

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do not have a negative attitude towards seals in that they do not blame them for fish stock depletion or damage to fishing gear.

b) **Cabo Blanco peninsula (Morocco-Mauritania)**

The monk seal population at Cabo Blanco peninsula continues to have a recovering demographic trend. In 2010 the number of sub-adults and adults individually identified was 180 (70 adult males, 72 reproductive females and 38 sub-adults). If the estimated juvenile population (not identified due to absence of enough natural marks) are added, the total population at Cabo Blanco is currently estimated at around 210 animals. Fifty-five females gave birth during 2010 which gives a reproductive rate for this population of 0.76.

The protection in 2001 of the Cabo Blanco breeding caves and their surroundings (which eliminated disturbances from land along with the deployment of fishing gear in a 6 km radius) as well as the progressive intensification since 2004 of marine surveillance in the Moroccan no-fishing area (established from 21°23'00"N to 20°54'40"N and to 12 miles offshore), seem to have had positive effects on the recovery of the monk seal population. These initiatives reduce the main threats from human-induced causes in the region, such as disturbance to breeding and hauling-out places and fisheries interaction. Marine and terrestrial Protected Areas then provide the main tool to protect and promote the recovery of this population.

Progressive re-colonization of open beaches by seals for use as hauling-out and breeding habitats has been affected during 2011 by the low levels of sand, which are a consequence of the frequency of high swell and storms during the last two winters. Due to this, open beaches protected by cliffs have seen their surface dramatically reduced or have directly disappeared with no breeding females observed in 2011 on open beaches. Nevertheless, sand sedimentation is a natural cyclic process, so the re-colonization process is expected to continue once beaches re-accumulate sand and increase in surface.

The Action Plan for the Atlantic monk seal populations

3. In 2010 and 2011, some conservation actions were consolidated in the framework of the “Action Plan for the Atlantic Monk Seal in the Eastern Atlantic” and new action fields have begun to be executed. The summary of these executed actions (by country) are provided below:

a) **Portugal (Madeira)**

In 1988 the Parque Natural da Madeira Service implemented a long-term and continuous programme to conserve the monk seal in the Madeira archipelago, which follows three main objectives:

- The effective protection of the species and its habitat;
- The monitoring of the population using non-intrusive techniques;
- Environmental education and social support.

Since monk seals returned to Madeira Main Island there is the potential for conflict with humans. In regard to this, habitat protection remains the outstanding priority for the conservation of the species. The maritime authorities are being involved in the policy tasks and more strict legislative measures are being prepared. Fisheries interactions with seals have also been investigated and dialogue with fishermen is

being maintained. Public awareness has been intensified as the people of Madeira will play a key role in the future re-establishment of a resident monk seal colony at Madeira Main Island.

b) **Spain**

Spanish administrations are mainly responsible for performing the coordination and funding the execution of the Action Plan. According to this, the main actions are:

- Coordination and implementation of the Monk Seal Recovery Plan in the Atlantic by the Ministerio de Medio Ambiente, y Medio Rural y Marino - Spain;
- Support for monk seal conservation projects and reinforcement of marine protected areas in the African Atlantic range of the species through the Spain-UNEP Partnership for Protected Areas (LifeWeb); and
- Support to monk seal conservation and social development projects in Mauritania and Morocco.

c) **Morocco**

Conservation actions on the Moroccan Atlantic coast have increased since 2011 including:

- Continuous surveillance of the Cabo Blanco no-fishing area by the Moroccan Royal Navy;
- Establishment of surveillance patrols in Special Conservation Areas for Monk Seals (SACMS) north of the Cabo Blanco peninsula (Guerguerat - Vialobos - Corbeiro) to identify and mitigate disturbances and threats and propose further protection measures;
- Coastal habitat surveys in order to identify monk seal habitat availability and to establish future protection priorities; and
- Installation of photo-trap cameras in suitable habitats of the SACMS to determinate the presence of monk seals and the use of caves and beaches.

d) **Mauritania**

Many conservation actions are in the process of being implemented through major funders (MAVA Foundation and UNEP/LifeWeb) including:

- Monk seal breeding caves at the Cabo Blanco peninsula and its surroundings are permanently protected to avoid human disturbance and to minimize risk of entanglement in fishing gear;
- Population monitoring to evaluate efficacy of protection measures and determine population trends;
- Tagging of adult males and females with Fastloc GPS to determine critical habitats in the area in order to evaluate established protection measures and develop new ones;
- Installation of photo-trap cameras in caves and open beaches of the Cabo Blanco peninsula to determinate monk seal presence and habitat use;
- Reinforcement of marine and terrestrial surveillance of the Satellite Reserve of Cabo Blanco; and
- Reinforcement of information and education activities in the Satellite Reserve of Cabo Blanco.

