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

(Report prepared by Pablo Fernández de Larrinoa)

The Mediterranean Monk Seal is a species under the resolutions of concerted actions for species of Annex I, since their 11th Meeting. The present report has been prepared in order to inform the CMS Scientific Council at their 14th meeting (Rome, November 2008) about the status of Mediterranean Monk Seal and the progress in the conservation and research activities carried out mainly in the Atlantic area. The Report covers the period from November 2005 to September 2008.

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 target 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, the Action Plan for the Recovery of the Monk Seal in the Atlantic.

The main information about the status of the species and the progress in their conservation efforts is exposed following:

Population status

- **Madeira (Portugal)**

The population seems to continue its recovery and re-colonization of Madeira Main Island. The number of births detected in Desertas islands has decreased to 1 this last year 2009, but observations of seals in Madeira main island including juveniles continues to increase, so reproduction may be probably taking place also in the main island.

A worrying fact is the appearance of 1 adult reproductive female carcass in Madeira waters with some signs of being persecuted by fishermen. Although Madeira inhabitants are highly concerned about monk seals survival in their archipelago, as seal population increases and re-colonize Madeira Island, negative attitudes from very specific sectors in the island as fishermen may arise.

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

The population continues its demographic recovery. The surviving population was estimated by Forcada et al. in 1998 to be of 103 animals (77-148, 95%IC). During the period 2004-2007, the subadult and adult fractions of the population were estimated to be of 151 individuals (145-166, 95 % IC)(CBD-Habitat, own data). Adding the juvenile individuals estimated in basis of maximum number of juveniles observed in the breeding caves, the total monk seal colony in 2004-2007 is estimated to be around 170-180 individuals. Although a population estimate has not been performed during 2009 on a mark-recaptured basis, the number of seals individually photo-identified keeps increasing, being the population estimated in around 200 individuals.

The number of annual births on the colony has doubled during last years. The mean annual births during the period 1998-2005 were of 26 newborn pups. On the period 2006-2009 the mean annual births is of 48 pups.

The positive and exponential trend in the re-colonization of open beaches as a hauling out habitat by the seals that is taking place in the last 4 years has been reinforced during 2009 with the first monk seal birth in an open beach for many decades.

The Action Plan for the Atlantic monk seal populations

In 2009, some actions have been consolidated in the framework of the **Action Plan for the Atlantic monk seal populations** and new action fields have began to be executed. The summary of these executed actions are the following:

Fifth meeting of the Action Plan Working Group

The V Meeting of the Working Group for the Action Plan for Mediterranean Monk Seal in the Eastern Atlantic was held in Iwik, National Park of Banc D'Arguin (Mauritania) on 18-20 November 2009, organized by the National Park of Banc D'Arguin, Fundación CBD-Habitat and the Spanish Ministry of Environment. The meeting was attended by members of the Working Group from Mauritania, Portugal and Spain as well as one representative from the Bonn Convention and one observer from the Regional Programme of Coastal and Marine Conservation in Western Africa (PRCM).

Part of the meeting was focused on governing issues of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by the four range countries. It was decided that the Secretary of the MoU will be at charge of the Bonn convention Secretariat, and the Ministry of Environment of Spain will be the Deputy Secretariat.

On the other part, the working group defined some action priorities for the monk seal conservation which were successfully agreed by all. These priorities include among others:

- The support for the renewal of the No-fishing area established by Morocco on the Cabo Blanco peninsula, which expired in November 2009.
- To support the creation of a protected area in the Aguerguer-Safia region (Morocco).

- To reinforce the marine and terrestrial surveillance of the Cabo Blanco Satellite Reserve (Mauritania).
- To continue with the non-invasive GPS tagging program of adult males, and beginning with females.

Actions performed or in progress in the different range countries:

PORTUGAL (Madeira)

- Monk seal monitoring and logging of sightings in Madeira.
- Monk seal population monitoring in Desertas islands. Placement of phototrap cameras for photoidentification and habitat use determination.
- Agreements with diving centres for ethic behaviour in areas used by seals and divers.
- Information campaigns to inform Madeira citizens about how they must behave in the presence of a monk seal and the importance of informing their monk seal sightings.
- Emergency plans for oil spills related to monk seals breeding caves.

SPAIN

- Funding of monk seal conservation projects and marine protected areas reinforcement in Mauritania from Spanish Ministry of Environment and Spanish International Cooperation Agency for Development (AECID).
- Funding and execution of monk seal conservation and social development projects by Spanish NGO CBD-Habitat Foundation in Mauritania and Morocco.
- Coordination and implementation of the Monk Seal Recovery Plan in the Atlantic.

MOROCCO

- The No-fishing area established in the Cap Blanc peninsula from the coastline to 12 miles offshore which protects the Saharan monk seal population has been renewed at the beginning of 2010 for a period of ten more years.
- Surveillance of the No-fishing area by the Moroccan Royal Navy.
- A proposal to declare the area from La Guera to D'Khila a Monk Seal Special Conservation Area, according to the Action Plan has been presented by the National Institute of Fisheries Resources (INRH) for approval. This area comprises the currently established No-Fishing area above mentioned and extends further north to almost Cap Barbas.

MAURITANIA

- Training of fishermen in responsible and sustainable fisheries through the creation of a specific CV in the National School of fisheries of Mauritania (ENEMP).
- Successful implementation of a programme for tagging monk seals with GPS receptors with non invasive methodologies, performed by the Spanish NGO CBD-Habitat. Several adult males have been tagged until today with good results and provision of tagging of adult females has been approved by the Action's Plan working group.
- Projects proposal submitted and approved for the reinforcement of marine and terrestrial surveillance of the Cabo Blanco Satellite Reserve, and its environmental information facilities and activities.