



Monk seal clings on in secret Cyprus coves

By Martin Hellicar

THE endangered Mediterranean monk seal -- once considered extinct in Cyprus waters -- is still hanging on, breeding in two remote rocky coves on the island.

The location of the breeding sites is a closely guarded secret, but their existence was revealed recently by the Greek society for the study and protection of the monk seal. The society conducted a field study around the Cyprus coast last year with the aim of determining the status of the endangered seal (*Monachus monachus*) locally. The survey was carried out in association with the Fisheries Department under the auspices of the UN Environment Programme.

Local green group the Ecological Movement yesterday said the study's findings confirmed what they had always maintained -- that the monk seal was still around and desperately needed protection.

They claimed the Fisheries Department always knew *M. monachus* was not extinct in Cyprus, but had adopted a policy of denying the continued existence of the threatened seal in the mistaken belief that this would better ensure its survival. This tactic had backfired because it meant monk seal breeding sites had not been afforded protection, the greens said.

They cited the Asprokremnos coast on the Akamas as an example, saying monk seals had bred in caves there till they were driven away by explosions. The blasts were carried out, illegally, to make space for the massive hotel complex built in the area by the family firm of former Foreign Minister Alecos Michaelides, the Ecological Movement stated.

"Due to the explosions carried out during construction of the hotel, in violation of conditions laid out in the building licence, a sea cave where the monk seal took refuge was destroyed," the greens stated. Michaelides' firm secured relaxations from the Cabinet to allow the hotel to be built larger than local planning zone requirements permitted.

The monk seal is considered an endangered species throughout its

Mediterranean range.

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