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The last years a number of articles has been distributed, in which criticism on rehabilitation of monk seals is expressed. But in not a single article I found an answer to the question of how it should be done. The only remedy that is proposed appears to be: let nature take its course. It is self-evident that the monk seal's situation is very alarming and immediate help is needed to save this wonderful animal from extinction. We cannot simply leave animals that can be helped to die. Therefore I have come to this meeting to present today our solution, by placing the entire rehabilitation programme in a much wider perspective and by doing so providing an answer to the question of how it should be done.

In every country where we have helped in the rehabilitation of monk seals and carried out scientific research, we started work on the invitation of the country itself. We have never taken the initiative. There has always been a government department or local organization - often an NGO - that has called us in because of the years of experience we have built up in seal rehabilitation and the scientific basis of our work.

We have supported organizations in various countries (Greece, Turkey and later Mauritania) with our own financial resources for years. We have furthermore always made sure, by passing on our knowledge and experience in the area of seal rehabilitation, that the employees of the local organisations could continue working independently after we left.

In fact, we have been cooperative with these people in all aspects of the five basic criteria for saving an endangered animal species. Criteria which we have been using in the Netherlands for the seals in the Wadden Sea since 1972 and which have continually proved their practical worth all over the world:

1. Seal rehabilitation
2. Public awareness
3. Scientific research
4. Conservation of the natural habitat
5. Attention for the quality of life of the people who live in the natural habitat of the monk seal

Seal rehabilitation

Seal rehabilitation can only function successfully if people work extremely carefully and according to properly detailed protocols. This is the only way to be able to prevent "the fiascos", as they are referred to in several articles. The SRRC has developed a wide range of protocols for use in every conceivable situation. These protocols are compiled and kept up to date by a team of international scientific and medical specialists and are based on the decades of experience we have in seal rehabilitation. Each time we have helped in other countries, we have always made all our protocols available to all local organizations.

Public awareness

Public awareness is the most important factor in saving a colony of monk seals. It is impossible to work with monk seals without involving the local inhabitants. Only when people have been made aware of the existence of monk seals by publicizing their plight will they become involved and be prepared to help. In addition, exerting political pressure is only possible and worthwhile if you have the local inhabitants behind you. Public awareness cannot be generated without seal rehabilitation, because this is the only way of giving local inhabitants the possibility and opportunity of finding out more about monk seals. And without public awareness you cannot save a colony of monk seals. Seal rehabilitation therefore goes much further than the importance of one individual seal. That individual is a symbol and is as such important for the status of the whole colony in the area concerned.

Scientific research

It should be obvious that scientific research is vitally important for an endangered species such as the monk seal. It is my firm opinion that research should be as broad as possible and that it should encompass all relevant disciplines. This means involving experts in the area of population biology, toxicology, immunology, virology and animal welfare.

Conservation of the natural habitat

Conservation of their natural habitat is the most important factor for the monk seals themselves. This can be achieved by making clear to people and political pressure groups that there are endangered monk seals in a particular area and by pointing out the importance of conservation. In this type of situation, seal rehabilitation can play a vital role; public awareness is a prerequisite for making things happen. In Greece, it was for example possible to give a certain area the status of nature reserve. It appeared that the government was susceptible to the argument that it was better to release the monk seals held in captivity at that time in a nature reserve. This led to the establishment of the National Park more quickly.

Attention for quality of life of people who live in the natural habitat of the monk seal

You cannot simply close your eyes to the problems of local inhabitants when you are working with the monk seals in the area where they live. For this reason, we have always made an effort to undertake social and medical action when the local people have needed it. An example of this is Mauritania, where we made a financial donation to an NGO, which gave it the opportunity to make an inventory of the difficulties faced by the local fishermen of Nouadhibou. It appeared that there were problems in the area of healthcare for children and jobs for women. We then used this information as a basis to draw up a plan of action and to contact various other organizations. The result is that a fish-processing factory where dozens of fishermen's wives work is now in operation under the supervision of an NGO. In Nouadhibou, a new hospital has also been built; the staff includes a young Mauritanian paediatrician, who trained in the Netherlands as a specialist in tropical diseases. The result of this is that there are no better ambassadors for the monk seal than these people. Greece is another example. Here the Aga Khan donated a school bus to an island, so that children can go to school more safely and on another island an oil tank was built to store fuel for fishing boats. In this case, the sympathy felt by the local fishermen for "their" monk seals also grew.

We have of course also learnt a great deal from working together with all the countries that have requested our help. The most important point is - who is responsible for the total rescue operation for a particular colony of monk seals and therefore who actually assumes responsibility for rescue and rehabilitation of the animals and the control of the population? Our conclusion is unequivocal: the people living in the same area must carry out the work for the monk seal. The employees of the organizations in the countries themselves must take responsibility for their own animals.

It has become clear to us in recent years that the present way in which rescue operations are organized has not and still does not function properly. It is fantastic that Brussels and the UNEP have made substantial funds available for rescuing the monk seal population. It would however be a good idea to check how much money has actually gone to the organizations that actually work with and for monk seals in practice. In this context, I concur completely with the suggestion in several articles, that a cost-benefit analysis should be carried out. I would however like to propose that this not be limited to the actual seal rehabilitation on the spot, but covers the total amount of work carried out for monk seals by all parties concerned.

The transfer of knowledge is in our opinion one of the most important foundations of international cooperation. The fact that in certain cases little or no transfer of knowledge takes place shows poor organisation. This should never be allowed to happen again.

It would be a good idea if the groups in the various countries, who work with monk seal colonies in practice, were to cooperate with each other as much as possible. In this way, they would be given the opportunity to work out their own strategy and to set up international joint operations. Furthermore, they would then have the possibility of being able to decide independently about the areas in which they need external experts, who these experts should be and how joint operations should be conducted.

A new auditing system must be developed for the allocation of financial resources, in which it is necessary in my opinion to avoid any possible conflict of interests. Various constructions can be thought of, which could be worked out into proposals.

It is important that the countries involved actually assume their own responsibility and especially that they are given the opportunity to do this with the backing of international organizations. This would help build a structure in which external experts would certainly be involved, but only to add their knowledge to the expertise already present in the countries involved.

The transfer of knowledge has always been the foundation of the international activities of the SRRC. We do not want to impose anything on anyone; we only want to share our knowledge and experience. More than twenty-six years of seal rehabilitation in the Netherlands and helping many sorts of seals in dozens of other countries have made the SRRC a knowledge centre. All our expertise is recorded in extensive protocols. Scientific and medical advisory committees support our work. We can rely on the cooperation of dozens of specialists, many of who work in different areas of medicine. We have a great deal of expertise in virology. Our mortality rate is only 3-4% of the average of 100 animals that we have in our rehabilitation centre each year.

In our experience over the last ten years, knowledge transfer and cooperation with foreign institutions in for example Greece, Turkey, Madeira and Mauritania can produce excellent results and this is in the interest of the monk seal. For this reason, we shall always be available in the future for direct cooperation or for operating in the background in an advisory capacity.

I would like to close with the following recommendations:

1. Every monk seal project should be the responsibility of scientists and other local people from the country involved.
2. An international knowledge centre should be set up, which people from different areas with monk seals can approach for advice when they need it.
3. All monk seal work should be combined into projects that contain (minimally) the following elements: seal rehabilitation, public awareness, scientific research, the setting up of nature reserves and attention for the quality of life of the inhabitants of the area involved.
4. Subsidies should only be given to projects with a total package of measures as listed under 3.
5. Subsidies should only be paid out to the groups that actually work in the countries involved. These can be NGOs or government bodies.
6. These five points I made, plus the results of the cost-benefit analysis should be combined as a set of 'Golden Rules', against which all future activities and plans in the work for monk seals could be screened before decisions on subsidies are made.

It goes without saying that we, the Dutch SRRC, are fully ready and willing to do the rehabilitation work, and we are prepared to be screened against those Golden Rules.

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