



## COMMON POLICY STATEMENT

### ON A POSSIBLE TRANSLOCATION/REINTRODUCTION PLAN FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL

*October 2009*

The Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) is one of the most endangered mammals on Earth, with only a few hundred individuals still remaining. Its historical range is today severely reduced, the species having been extirpated from large portions of its former habitat.

In view of the above, we, the members of the “i-monk Alliance” applaud the decision of any party to support and/or contribute towards new or existing initiatives that advance the conservation and recovery process of the Mediterranean monk seal. In terms of this process, we firmly believe that actions, such as habitat protection, through the establishment of a functional network of marine protected areas and public outreach and education should constitute the foremost conservation priorities. Especially in respect to the protection of suitable habitat for this endangered species, we believe in evidence suggesting that monk seals tend to – naturally – spread back to areas of their historical range whenever pup production increases in existing colonies, and when such areas fulfil the conditions for the species to thrive.

Furthermore, we believe that reintroduction of monk seals might under certain circumstances be a justified measure, to be considered with an open mind. Despite several problematic cases, examples of success exist with other charismatic fauna, including mammals and birds. However, translocation of Mediterranean monk seals has never been previously attempted, and holds considerable potential risks both to wild populations and to the translocated individuals themselves.

We recommend that a careful assessment of such a measure is imperative to determine in the first place whether it is (a) necessary and (b) feasible.

a) Necessity stems from the conviction that stable monk seal recovery throughout its former geographic range will not occur without the implementation of a reintroduction programme. Such a necessity has not been convincingly demonstrated as yet.

b) In respect to feasibility, in our view there are some important conditions that must be met for such an initiative to be carried forward:

- *Identification and assessment of the status of the “donor” colony:* the initiative should not in any way negatively affect the colony’s conservation status and future viability.
- *Identification and assessment of the conditions at the “recipient” location:* this must be in an area historically containing monk seal habitat; current conditions must be optimal to host a breeding colony (i.e. from the standpoint of habitat and food availability, as well as the local socio-economic framework); conditions that historically led to monk seal extirpation from the area must have been permanently removed. Societal change needed for receiving reintroduced seals may take a considerable time to achieve and secure.

In addition, we believe that the following considerations are also very important:

- First, a translocation programme requires extreme care in terms of its design, implementation and follow-up (monitoring, etc.). It may involve captivity and/or semi-captivity phases that would in themselves not only require a complex and highly-specialised programme to ensure the well-being of the animals, but also the possibility to assess the post-release effects of such measures.



- Second, the Mediterranean monk seal is such a critically endangered species, with significant — and growing — international concern about its status, that an initiative of this kind cannot hope to succeed without transparency and open debate within the wider scientific and conservation community. Translocation is an invasive procedure that may pose significant threats to the population as well as to the individuals involved in it. Any proposal that involves the capture and translocation of healthy individuals to new habitat areas should be subject to wide consultation and approval by the scientific and conservation community prior to funding and implementation. In addition to scientific matters, the consultation process should also address ethical and animal welfare concerns.

Positive action, in our view, might include two parallel steps:

1. Strengthening efforts to conserve monk seal colonies where they currently exist, so that in the future they may acquire the status of “donor” colonies. Such efforts may include supporting international collaboration initiatives, public awareness efforts, educational programmes and media outreach initiatives in favour of monk seal conservation.
2. Identifying historical habitat that might be suitable for recolonisation, and improving their conservation status and socio-economic conditions, so that they meet the stipulated criteria for a recipient site. This would also meet a stipulated requirement of the UNEP MAP “Action Plan for the management of the Mediterranean monk seal” (adopted by the Barcelona Convention), point 15: “A network of marine reserves should be created across the Mediterranean, covering both existing and potential monk seal habitats, so spaced that they can be gradually repopulated as other protective measures take effect and the population recovers”, as well as the Action 10 for Habitat Protection of the Action Plan for the Monk seal in the Eastern Atlantic (Convention on Migratory Species), which envisages the creation of a network of marine protected areas in the Atlantic distribution of the species.

We, the members of the i-monk Alliance, would be unable to endorse any attempt to translocate critically endangered Mediterranean monk seals in which the aforementioned minimum requirements and conditions are not met.

The members of the i-monk Alliance (International Monk Seal Conservation Alliance, [www.i-monk.org](http://www.i-monk.org))



Underwater Research Society  
Mediterranean Seal Research Group