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Vol. 8 (2): December 2005

International News

The last issue?

The future of The Monachus Guardian is unfortunately in doubt following our failure – at least, so far – to attract necessary funding to continue publishing the journal.

Realising the significant role it has played in monk seal conservation over the years, and the growing readership it enjoys, we are determined to keep the web site operating and – time permitting – to publish news from the monk seal world on at least a biannual basis.

In that spirit, we are able to bring you the latest issue of The Monachus Guardian, albeit in a much-reduced format. Regular readers will note the absence of key departments of the journal – Guest Editorial, Cover Story, In Focus, Perspectives, and Monachus Science. We hope that these sections will be restored should adequate funding be obtained in the months ahead.

In the meantime, we are obliged to focus our limited editorial, research and publication efforts only on the most urgent news affecting the monk seal and its habitat. We also continue to publish the Letters to the Editor section, a listing of Recent Publications, and contributions of PDF papers, reports etc. to the [Monk Seal Library](#).

Any leads on possible funding avenues that might keep The Monachus Guardian alive and kicking would, of course, be gratefully received. A document detailing sponsorship opportunities and benefits is available to potential supporters – please contact us for further information at editor@monachus-guardian.org.

Due in no small part to the network of correspondents who have submitted news, opinion, articles and scientific papers over the years, The Monachus Guardian has built up a real readership base of at least 30,000 people – among them, students, teachers, researchers and journalists. Realising the significance of this collective achievement, we are doing whatever we can to continue publishing, and we take this opportunity of thanking all of you who have voiced support for the project. – William M. Johnson.

Donate!

The Monachus Guardian is the only dedicated source of news and information on the world's endangered monk seals, their shrinking habitat, and the forces threatening their survival.

With a **voluntary subscription** or a simple **donation**, you can help us and our partner organisations in the field bring monk seals and their conservation to a growing international audience – decision makers, scientists, schools and universities, journalists and many others.



By acting as a forum for international debate and information exchange between geographically divided groups, www.monachus-guardian.org fulfils long-established recommendations of conservation action plans for the species.

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UN meetings in Athens and Slovenia hear of the monk seal's imminent extinction

Nominally the coordinator of Mediterranean monk seal conservation internationally under the auspices of the Mediterranean Action Plan of the Barcelona Convention, UNEP's Regional Activity Centre for Specially Protected Areas ([RAC/SPA](#)), tabled renewed calls for urgent action by governments on behalf of *Monachus monachus* in recent meetings in Athens, Greece and Portoroz, Slovenia.

A preparatory National Focal Points meeting in Athens on 21-24 September 2005 considered a draft declaration and a set of recommendations on the monk seal to be submitted for approval to the Contracting Parties of the Barcelona Convention at the Portoroz meeting on 8-11 November 2005.

In documents prepared by RAC/SPA, the UN body responsible for implementation of the Action Plan for the Management of the Mediterranean Monk Seal, laments that "this species will shortly become extinct in the Mediterranean unless urgent and strong measures are taken to protect it."

It called upon the Contracting Parties to adopt a draft Declaration on the conservation of the monk seal, and to consider action on a range of issues critical to the species' survival, including deliberate killing by fishermen and habitat destruction. There was no direct reference to previous controversial and scientifically unreviewed proposals by RAC/SPA to resort to capture and translocation experiments [see [Mystery at RAC/SPA](#), TMG 6 (2): December 2003].

The document curiously calls upon the parties to make the "best possible use of the positive experiences in Alonissos (Greece) and Foça (Turkey) to extend protection and conservation actions to all the other known Mediterranean areas", apparently oblivious to the management, guarding and funding failures in both areas of late [see ["When at last are you going to deal with the environment, Mr. Minister?"](#) TMG 8 (1): May 2005; [Snared and Drowned](#), TMG 4(1): May 2001].

In its 2005 progress report, RAC/SPA also implies its funding, too, is insufficient to meet the needs of the conservation programmes required of it. It goes on to say: "...the Parties to the Barcelona Convention included among their priority targets to be achieved by 1995 the protection of the Mediterranean monk seal (Genoa, 9-13 September 1985). The Mediterranean monk seal population has declined rapidly and drastically in the almost 20 years since then. Further international cooperation is needed to address the issue."

During the 4-day meeting at Portoroz, experts and environment ministers from 21 Mediterranean countries officially adopted the monk seal declaration and supported a range of urgent actions to prevent the species' extinction. Experience now suggests that nothing will happen.

Further information

RAC/SPA. 2005. Progress report of the activities of RAC/SPA. Seventh Meeting of National Focal Points for SPAs, Seville, 31 May - 3 June 2005. UNEP/MAP, UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.268/4: 1-37. [[PDF](#) 449 KB]

RAC/SPA. 2005. Information report on the status of the monk seal in the Mediterranean. Seventh Meeting of National Focal Points for SPAs, Seville, 31 May - 3 June 2005. UNEP/MAP, UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.268/Inf.3: 1-45. [[PDF](#) 1019 KB]

RAC/SPA. 2005. Evaluation of the Mediterranean monk seal status. Meeting of MAP Focal Points, Athens (Greece), 21-24 September 2005. UNEP/MAP, UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.270/Inf.22: 1-7. [[PDF](#) 127 KB]

RAC/SPA. 2005. Declaration on the monk seal risk of extinction in the Mediterranean. Meeting of MAP Focal Points, Athens (Greece), 21-24 September 2005. UNEP/MAP, UNEP(DEC)/MED WG.270/17: 1-3. [[PDF](#) 77KB]

UNEP/MAP. 1987. Action plan for the management of the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*). United Nations Environment Programme, Mediterranean Action Plan (UNEP/MAP). Regional Activity Centre for Specially Protected Areas, Tunis, Tunis & Athens. [[PDF](#) 18KB]

EndQuote

Global Warming Threat to Monk Seals

“Of even more significance than the impacts of global warming on forestry will be the impacts on the world’s animal populations. A report that’s being presented to the UK Presidency of the European Union this week in Aviemore, Scotland by the UK Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs finds that: four out of five migratory birds listed by the UN face problems ranging from lower water tables to increased droughts, spreading deserts and shifting food supplies in their crucial “fueling stations” as they migrate; one-third of turtle nesting sites in the Caribbean – home to diminishing numbers of green, hawksbill and loggerhead turtles – would be swamped by a sea level rise of 50cm (20ins); shallow waters used by the endangered Mediterranean monk seal, dolphins, dugongs and manatees will slowly disappear; whales, salmon, cod, penguins and kittiwakes are being affected by shifts in distribution and abundance of krill and plankton, which has declined in places to a hundredth or thousandth of former numbers because of warmer sea-surface temperatures; and fewer chiffchaffs, blackbirds, robins and song thrushes are migrating from the UK due to warmer winters while egg-laying is also getting two to three weeks earlier than 30 years ago, showing a change in the birds’ biological clocks.”

Source: Neuman, Michael T. 2005. [Earth Headed for Global Warming Catastrophe](#). Coastal Post, November 8, 2005.



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Hawaiian News

Marine refuge in NWHI's shallow waters is a big win; deep water next

In late September, Hawaii's Governor Linda Lingle signed sweeping rules that protect the shallow state waters surrounding islands and atolls in the vast Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) archipelago. This far-flung archipelago is home to some of the most pristine coral reefs on earth and is the location of the main breeding grounds for the highly endangered Hawaiian monk seal.

The new 640,000-acre state refuge, which extends three miles offshore, bans commercial and recreational fishing from all state waters of the 1,200 mile long NWHI archipelago and sharply restricts other activities while providing explicit recognition for Native Hawaiian traditional cultural and subsistence practices. "These rules set in motion the most significant marine conservation initiative in the history of Hawaii by creating the state's largest marine refuge," said Governor Lingle.

Diverse groups made this victory possible: In a speech announcing the new protections, the governor thanked [Environmental Defense](#), [Kahea](#) and other organizations for their advocacy and leadership with the broad network of Native Hawaiian leaders, fishers and scientists who pushed for strong protections. She described the pivotal meeting with fishers and Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners that Environmental Defense had arranged for her in 2001, introducing her to importance of establishing strong protections for the NWHI. Over the past five years, state and federal officials have received more than 100,000 written testimonials in support of the strong conservation measures for the islands. In addition, Environmental Defense collected signatures from over 400 of the world's leading coral reef scientists in support of strong protections for the NWHI.

Next, extend protection to deeper water: "Governor Lingle's signing of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Refuge protections is one of the most visionary acts of environmental protection ever undertaken by a state government," said Stephanie Fried, an Oahu-based senior scientist with Environmental Defense. The governor's support did not stop there. Lingle also called for closing all federal waters to fishing, which would create the world's largest marine protected area where fishing is not allowed.

Federal protections for the 84-million-acre NWHI are under review. The Western Pacific fishery management council (Wespac) opposes strong protections and even aims to weaken existing safeguards for federal waters. "We urge the federal government to respond to the public input and the bold steps taken by Gov. Lingle and provide equally stringent protections for federal waters," said Fried. "To do otherwise would be irresponsible."

Peter Young, chairman of the state's Board of Land and Natural Resources, said: "As one of the last pristine wilderness locations on earth, it is only right to consider the long-term preservation of this area and strive to have one place that is free from extraction." – Environmental Defense.

How you can help: Federal protections for the NWHI are currently under review and Wespac has launched a vigorous campaign to weaken protections. Sign up with the Environmental Defense Action Network to receive notification of opportunities for public comment. http://actionnetwork.org/EDF_Action_Network/home.html

More about the new Northwestern Hawaiian Islands State Refuge:

[Hawaii Governor Safeguards Northwest Hawaiian Islands](#). Environment News Service, 30/09/2005.


[Fishing banned in NW isles](#). Hawaii Star Bulletin, 30/09/2005.

Governor's press release on new NWHI refuge: <http://www.hawaii.gov/dlnr/chair/pio/HtmlNR/05-N99.htm>

Marine Mammal Commission report

The [Marine Mammal Commission's](#) Annual Report to Congress for 2004 was published shortly after we went to press in May. For those interested in current Hawaiian monk seal population trends, human and natural threats to the species, the future of the Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, and efforts to encourage *Monachus schauinslandi's* repopulation of the Main Hawaiian Islands, the MMC report is an indispensable guide.

The report is available for download from the [Monk Seal Library](#):

Marine Mammal Commission. 2005. Annual Report to Congress, 2004. Marine Mammal Commission, Bethesda, Maryland: 1-163. [[PDF](#)  2.1MB]



Mediterranean News

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Croatia

Back from the dead?

Amid great media excitement, an animal identified as a Mediterranean monk seal was sighted and filmed by a Croatian television reporter at 10:30 AM on 18 June 2005, writes Jasna Antalovic of the Zagreb-based Mediterranean Monk Seal Group ([Grupa Sredozemna Medvjedica](#)).



Stills obtained from the footage at Mala Srakana.

Following a long history of persecution by fishermen and hunters, and unsuccessful surveys in recent years to identify occupied habitat, the species had been considered extinct in the Croatian Adriatic.

The reporter for Croatian National Television, Mr Boris Vehar, made his first sighting of the seal on the island of Mala Srakana near Losinj, swimming about 3 meters from the shore. Apparently startled by the noise of the 5-6 people on the beach who had also spotted it, the seal swam away. Taking his video camera, Vehar proceeded to film the animal as it left the scene, and managed to obtain about 2 minutes of footage at 50-100 meters.



The seal sighted at Cape Verudela near Pula.

Yet another monk seal was observed and photographed at approximately 13.00 hrs on 22 November 2005 at Cape Verudela near Pula (Istria). The seal was photographed by Mr Bonet, an Italian from Trentino, who was walking around Verudela as a tourist. It was the 30th time that a monk seal had been seen this year in the Adriatic. –Jasna Antalovic, GSM.

Editor's note: For further information on recent observation records in Croatia, see our companion article [Recent Sightings of the Monk Seal in Croatian areas of the Adriatic](#) by Martina Duras Gomercic, Tomislav Gomercic, Duro Huber and Hrvoje Gomercic.

The Gambia

For news of a recent reported sighting of the Mediterranean monk seal in The Gambia, please turn to [Mediterranean Monk Seal off Ginak Island, The Gambia: a new sighting at the southern fringe of the known range](#), by Roy Armstrong and Owen T. Nevin.

Greece

Understanding fisheries: a new conservation initiative for the monk seal in Greece

MOM, leading an international consortium of conservation and research bodies (WWF Greece, Greek National Institute of Fisheries Research, Erasmus University of Rotterdam, University of Aberdeen), has just started a new 4 year initiative to address the conflict between monk seals and coastal fisheries, a key issue in the conservation of *Monachus monachus* in Greece. The project, co-financed through the LIFE-Nature Programme of the European Commission and other national (Prefecture of Magnesia) and international bodies (International Fund for Animal Welfare), is supported by both the Hellenic Ministries of Environment and of Rural Development and Food.

The MOFI project's (officially entitled "*Monk Seal & Fisheries: Mitigating the Conflict in Greek Seas*") main objective is to improve the conservation status of the European Union's largest population of the critically endangered Mediterranean monk seal by mitigating the negative consequences of this interaction, thus leading to a decrease in the overall mortality rate of the species and to a decrease in the loss of the fishermen's income through the provision of socio-economic incentives. Activities will be implemented simultaneously:

- At the two most important monk seal breeding sites in Greece (the National Marine Park of Alonissos and the island complex of Kimolos-Polyaigos), in order to measure the actual intensity of the seal-fishery interaction relative to fishing effort, and to assess for the first time the effects of acoustic deterrence devices on this interaction, in close collaboration with local fishermen.
- At 7 "hot spots" (areas with intense seal-fishery interactions), awareness actions will cultivate a "working relationship" with the local fishing communities of these areas. Through open interviews with professional fishermen, aquaculture owners, fishery and port police authorities, data will be collected to obtain a measure of the extent and effects of the seal-fishery interactions and on possible solutions to resolve the existing conflict.
- At the national level, record data on the overall distribution of the seal-fishery interaction and to monitor the mortality causes and the status of the species. In addition, animals needing emergency care will be rescued and treated, leading to a reduction in the species mortality. Furthermore, analysis of stomach content samples will help determine the species' feeding preferences for the first time.

Based on the results of these activities and in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, an Action Plan to mitigate the seal-fishery conflict and a strategy for the conservation of the species will be elaborated and widely publicized.

It is expected that the MOFI project will result in:

- Reducing the fisheries related mortality of monk seals (deliberate killings of animals and entanglements in fishing gear) throughout the country.



© Panos Dendrinos/MOM
Critical contact: changing attitudes between fishermen and seals.

- Evaluating for the first time the effectiveness of acoustic deterrent devices on reducing the monk seal-fishery interaction and identifying the feeding preferences of the monk seal, providing quantified evidence on the consumption of marketable fish species.
- Implementing a scientifically sound methodology to measure the magnitude and effects of seal-fisheries interaction on a national level.
- Involving all key stakeholders in the project's activities, thus decreasing their disinterest and negative attitude towards the conservation of the monk seal.
- Preparing a feasible – and ready for immediate implementation – Monk Seal-Fisheries Action Plan with maximum possible consensus among key stakeholders (fishermen, aquaculture owners, local and national authorities and environmental organizations).

– Dr. Spyros Kotomatas, MOm.

Learning more about *Monachus monachus*

A new prototype educational package in the form of a “suitcase” was produced as part of a project carried out by MOm in the Cyclades area in collaboration with the regional government of the Southern Aegean. The educational package contains leaflets, booklets, comics, posters, slides, videotapes, and games. The educational “suitcase” will travel all over the Cyclades with the collaboration of local educators, who will be responsible for using it.



Public awareness in the Cyclades.

With the support of its new corporate partner, the mobile telephone operator TIM Hellas, MOm has designed a new educational CD-ROM, aiming to inform and educate students in the Cyclades Islands. The CD includes information about the Mediterranean monk seal, interactive games, a photo gallery, information about the natural environment of the Cyclades area and videos related to the endangered species and its habitats. The production and distribution of the CD is part of the overall programme “Awareness and Information in the Cyclades”, supported by TIM. –Stella Adamantopoulou and Danae Protopapa, MOm.

Pup boom...continues

Following a record-breaking year in 2004, when 35 newborn pups were recorded throughout the country, MOm's research team has been awaiting with great anticipation this year's pupping season. Considering the importance of accurate population censuses for the effective management of the species, and despite the limited financial support available for research and monitoring activities, MOm has managed to carry on monitoring efforts in the area of the Northern Sporades and the Kimolos–Polyaigos island complex. The birth of 12 pups so far in the wider Kimolos area confirms once again its importance for the species and justifies MOm's continuing efforts to have the site declared a National Marine Park. In other areas of the Cyclades, 6 additional pups have been recorded. In the Northern Sporades meanwhile, as part of MOm's ongoing conservation activities in the area, 9 new pups have been recorded so far. –Alexandros Karamanlidis, MOm.



Monk seal pup at Polyaigos.

No news is... bad news ...for management bodies in the protected areas of Greece

21 months and still counting... and the “new” Minister and Deputy Minister of Environment have not taken a single substantial step towards the effective operation of the management bodies of protected areas in Greece. The case of the Northern Sporades Marine Park is typical of what remains the situation in most areas...

Since August 2004, the board members of the management body remain inactive, awaiting their replacement. Funding, allocated to cover expenses for the management of the Park for the 2004-2006 period, still remains somewhere in the vaults of the Ministry because of bureaucratic obstacles and political unwillingness to support nature conservation. And last but not least, recently, the President of the Board, Prof. N. Dalezios, announced his unofficial resignation, but practically effective since early in the year... Could things get any worse?

Greek NGOs, including MOm, are intensifying their campaign at the EU level to persuade EU officials and especially the Commissioner for the Environment, Mr. S. Dimas, to take legal action against the Greek State. – Panos Dendrinou, MOm.



The Greek state's ongoing tourism campaign “Live your myth in Greece” – a fitting description, perhaps, of the country's so-called “protected areas” that still have no functioning management authorities or operational funding.

Cancellation of military exercise on protected islets in the Aegean Sea

On the 27th and 28th of September, a military exercise with live ammunition was scheduled to be carried out by the Greek Army on the islets of Anhydro and Petrokaravo in the Eastern Aegean. These islets are part of the North Dodecanese Permanent Wildlife Refuge, which was established by Greek law in 2004, as a result of the research and conservation work of the environmental NGO, [Archipelagos Aigaiou](#).

Anhydro and Petrokaravo are uninhabited islets with very limited human presence. With sheltered caves and rich fish stocks in the surrounding waters, they constitute an ideal habitat for a small resident population of Mediterranean monk seals that live and breed there. In order to ensure the conservation of this seal population, as well as of the other populations in the broader North Dodecanese region, Archipelagos Aigaiou has, during the past 5 years, collaborated closely with the local fishermen, in an effort to actively involve them in the conservation of the monk seal and also to seek solutions to the problem of damage caused by seals to fishing gear.

The terrestrial habitats of Anhydro and Petrokaravo are also of great environmental importance as they constitute breeding sites for Eleonora's falcon, Cory's and Yelkouan shearwater, shag and other protected bird species.

Archipelagos Aigaiou carried out coordinated actions in order to alert the ministries responsible, the military authorities, as well as the heads of the scheduled exercise. Initially there were objections to the cancellation, but the actions of Archipelagos resulted in the military exercise ultimately being cancelled. Despite the adverse weather conditions and the potential dangers involved, some of Archipelagos' members were on Anhydro and Petrokaravo from dawn of 27th September, while others were closely monitoring the area from boats. In support, a number of local fishermen were also present in the area.



Coastal monitoring at Anhydro.

The cancellation effort was also supported by many members of the international scientific community. Our colleague, Dr. Giuseppe Notarbartolo di Sciara, coordinated a dynamic reaction worldwide from many scientists, environmental organizations and institutes, who greatly contributed to the effort by contacting, and exercising pressure on, the ministries responsible.



Eleonora's falcon chick.

Following the above events, the issue of this military exercise was brought to the Greek Parliament, and we are soon expecting an official written confirmation that Anhydro and Petrokaravo will never be used as firing ranges in the future. With the cancellation of this exercise, apart from the fact that the destruction of the island ecosystems and the rare species they support was prevented, a precedent has now been set for the first time in Greece for restriction of the use of live ammunition in environmentally important areas. Using this precedent, Archipelagos Aigaiou, with continued biodiversity surveys in the Aegean Sea and the support of the international scientific community, aims to achieve the cancellation of exercises using live ammunition near habitats supporting protected species in the coastal zone and the open sea. Unfortunately, in Greece today a large number of such exercises still take place, resulting in significant environmental damage. – Anastasia Miliou, Scientific Director, Archipelagos Aigaiou.

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Italy

Summer sightings at Orosei

On 26 August 2005 two monk seals were observed off the coast of Capo Monte Santo in the Gulf of Orosei, Sardinia. The observer was a police helicopter pilot, who was flying approximately 100 meters above sea level and 300 meters from the coast. – Emanuele Coppola, [Gruppo Foca Monaca](#).

Madeira

Call for Sightings

Madeira's monk seal monitoring programme remains on course at the Desertas Islands. Although we have not detected any newborn pup so far this season, we are expecting the birth of at least two pups.

On Madeira Island we have developed a public awareness campaign that includes talks at schools and public recreation centres to advise people how to behave in the presence of a monk seal. As indicated in previous issues of TMG, there have been increasing instances of human-seal interactions on Madeira. A poster has been produced to coincide with the campaign, requesting members of the public to volunteer sightings information. –Rosa Pires, Parque Natural da Madeira.



New Ranger's Station opens on the Desertas

The Desertas Islands' new ranger's station was officially inaugurated on 18 June by the Regional Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources. The inauguration featured a regatta and a windsurfing race from Funchal to the Desertas, widely publicised in the Madeiran media.



The Regional Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources with PNM rangers on the Desertas Islands.



The new ranger's station on Deserta Grande.

The new station is divided into three areas: a residence for Park staff, accommodation for visiting researchers, and a small exhibition area focusing on the Reserve. –Rosa Pires, Parque Natural da Madeira.

Mauritania & Western Sahara

New encampment in the “Coast of the Seals” Reserve

A new encampment has been built over the cliffs of the Coast of the Seals in order to replace the old one, already very damaged by time, sand and wind. The new facilities provide more comfortable conditions for the surveillance team and scientists that work daily there for the conservation of the Cabo Blanco monk seal colony.

The encampment will also be equipped soon with solar and wind power systems in order to provide stable and reliable electric current to the cameras and TV systems that monitor the interior of the Cabo Blanco breeding caves. –Hamadi M'Barek. CBD-Habitat.



The new encampment at the Coast of the Seals.

Pupping season on the “Coast of the Seals”

This 2005 breeding season in Cabo Blanco, births have begun sooner than ever previously observed. Six births have been detected in the month of August, and during September, peak of this breeding season, 12 births have been registered. To date, with the breeding season not ended yet, 29 pups have been born in the two main breeding caves of the Cabo Blanco peninsula. Fortunately, and as already happened in the 2004 breeding season, such “earlier births” mean that pups are older when the storms and high swell season arrives around the end of October, resulting in a lower pup mortality rate. In the last two years the rate has been around 30% in contrast to previous years, when it ranged around 40-50%. –Michel Cedenilla and Mulaye Haya. CBD-Habitat.

Coastal expedition in the “Song of the Whale”

In May 2005, within the framework of the International Monk Seal Recovery Plan in the Eastern Atlantic, developed by Morocco, Mauritania, Portugal and Spain (Convention on Migratory Species, UNEP/CMS), the coastline between Cabo Corbeiro and Castillete de la Mesa was surveyed. Due to its inaccessibility, this area had yet to be adequately explored. The survey was performed jointly by technicians of CBD-Habitat, the Institute National de Recherche Halieutique du Maroc (INRH), the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), the local NGO Nature Initiative and the Haut commissariat des Eaux et Forêt du Maroc, onboard IFAW's sailboat The Song of the Whale. Several terrestrial expeditions to the areas were performed previously to determine the nature of the coast. The objective of the marine survey was to determine the possible presence of other monk seal colonies or to locate habitat used by seals from the Cabo Blanco population. Although no monk seals were observed between Cap Corbeiro and Castillete de la Mesa, several recent sightings by fishermen were recorded, suggesting that the area is used by seals. While we could not determine the degree of occupation or use of the coast, we were able to identify areas and caves that could potentially be used by seals. We also identified human threats, mostly related to illegal fishing and the collection of molluscs and crustaceans, as well as a trend towards generally increasing human pressure. A more regular monitoring of this coastline is being planned under the framework of the Monk Seal Action Plan in the Atlantic. –Pablo Fernández de Larrinoa, CBD-Habitat.



A coastal reconnaissance is mounted by Zodiac from IFAW's Song of the Whale.

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Turkey

Seal Watch-IV project

Monk seal presence in Turkish waters used to be widespread but has suffered a severe decline because of deliberate killing, loss of habitat, and diminished prey availability. Although observation sessions and sightings indicated that a few monk seals are present in the Izmir Bay, except for a one month pilot study conducted in 1997, to date no continuous monitoring has been carried out (24 h/day) in the coastal caves determined previously. Our aim with the Seal Watch study has been to monitor the hidden life of the monk seals based on the most used seal breeding cave in which three pups were born between 1999 and 2001. The study was conducted between October 2001 and February 2004, and used a TV surveillance system consisting of 4 TV cameras, 4 IR illumination sources, 4 monitors, and a video recorder.

Of 7,436 hours of recordings, 202 (2.7 %) hours of monk seal images (25 events) were collected. When the Seal Watch-IV system was in operation, no breeding was encountered. However, with the system, seals were found to be active during night (possibly foraging), mean sleeping duration of juvenile seals was calculated as 8,3 h, at least 6 seals (of which 3 were identified by way of the system) were found using the cave, and the possible home range was estimated as 20 km. Seal Watch systems were found effective in collection of data. However, it should be noted that the system is not recommended for caves with high humidity and wave action because of corrosion and short-circuiting problems. – Harun Güçlüsoy, SAD-AFAG.

Seal Rescue Network continues build-up

SAD-AFAG, in cooperation with the Greek NGO MOm, has already established a monk seal rescue and information network (AFBIKA) on the south-west Marmara and Aegean coasts of Turkey, between Karabiga – Fethiye, with the financial support of the EC. This network, with its 136 individual or organisational/company members, is now operational and is providing recent sightings data for SAD-AFAG.

SAD-AFAG, in cooperation with the Dokuz Eylul University - Institute of Marine Sciences and Technology, received additional funding from EC sources through REC (the Regional Environment Centre) for developing the AFBICA further east, on the Mediterranean coasts of Turkey. In this study, the project team will visit the coastal settlements between Fethiye and Samandag and seek out local contacts to participate in the network. Thanks to the REC and EC financial support and the technical know-how and labour of the Institute of Marine Sciences, SAD-AFAG will begin to store all its monk seal sightings data in GIS.

Through these means, it is hoped that a clearer picture of the species' status in Turkey will emerge. The project is expected to conclude by the end of February. – Yalçın Savas, SAD-AFAG.



AFAG staff introduce the rescue network to local inhabitants.

Zoning Plan of Foça Marine Protection Area undergoing revision

A new project to be executed in Foça, with the support of the EC through REC (the Regional Environment Centre), will further develop the zoning plan of the Foça Marine Protection Area to include bird habitat and sea grass meadows. The grant was obtained by the Foça Municipality, which is collaborating with SAD-AFAG, Dokuz Eylul University - Institute of Marine Sciences, the Aegean Nature Society based in Izmir and the Foça Public Library to achieve the project's goals.

A zoning plan, based on monk seal data, had previously already been developed and submitted to the government as a result of a project supported by the EU's SMAP program in which WWF MedPO and SAD-AFAG were partners. That zoning plan is to result in the enlargement of the Foça Specially Protected Area, following its submission by the Authority for the Specially Protected Areas to the Council of Ministers.

The area's zoning plan will now be developed further by including bird habitat and sea grass beds.



Field studies have continued to map the *Posidonia oceanica* meadows, to determine threat factors and to develop methods of decreasing the degradation seen in sea grass beds in certain spots. Foça's avifauna was first studied in the early 1990s. Through this project, the area will again be studied for its avifauna, though with an emphasis on protected area management.

All new information to be extracted by the project as well as already existing data will be stored in GIS for evaluation and for long-term monitoring of the Foça Specially Protected Area.

A visitor's information centre will also be established, to be set-up within the Foça Public Library, with information boards about local nature and the protected area, and a mini cinema with 30 seats. – Yalçın Savas, SAD-AFAG.

Meeting may accelerate conservation objectives

The Technical Sub-Committee (TSC), which consists of the core members of Turkey's National Mediterranean Monk Seal Committee, held its first meeting in several years on 7 December 2005 at the Ministry of Environment and Forests in Ankara. Representatives of the Nature Protection and National Parks General Directorate, [SAD-AFAG](#) and [METU Institute of Marine Science](#) attended, as well as the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Tourism & Culture and the Authority for Specially Protected Areas (ASPAs).

Cem Orkun Kiraç and Dr. Ali Cemal Gücü made presentations on behalf of their organizations, SAD-AFAG and METU-IMS respectively. In both presentations, the TSC members were briefed about monk seal research and conservation activities, including national and international projects carried out between 2000 and 2005. The updated information provided a basis for further discussions during the meeting.

In the first round of discussions and negotiations focusing on the conservation of the monk seal along Turkish coasts, SAD-AFAG requested that implementation of management plans covering 3 coastal areas (also designated as 'Important Monk Seal Sites') – namely Foça, the Karaburun Peninsula and west Mersin coasts – be speeded up. This met a positive response from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). The coastal zone management plans for Foça, Karaburun and west Mersin coasts had been produced by SAD-AFAG in cooperation with the Ministry of Environment during an EC-funded SMAP project between 2002 and 2004 [TMG, *passim*].

METU-IMS requested that MoEF place a warning plate at the entrance of a monk seal cave near Silifke (near Mersin) in order to caution visitors that the cave is used by monk seals and human access is prohibited. However, a MoEF delegate rejected the idea, claiming that such a plate may, on the contrary, attract more people by arousing even greater curiosity.

SAD-AFAG emphasized the importance of replacing the Foça SPA patrol boat 'Cevre', which has been out of action for some time, being beyond repair. The MoEF immediately approved the idea and asked ASPA to provide a new vessel, since Foça comes under its jurisdiction as an SPA.

In another development the MoEF will be requesting the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) that it receive renewed representation in the Aqua Products Council, thereby allowing it to take part in the decisions governing fishery rules and codes of practice handed down every year. This idea is supported by METU-IMS and SAD-AFAG so as to encourage a more balanced decision making process in the council that will prove fairer to conservation interests.

METU-IMS has asked both the MoA and MoEF to enhance control of illegal fishery activities and to maintain existing trawler bans along the west Mersin coasts, thereby helping to support recovery of the monk seal colony and increase the viability of the species in the area. SAD-AFAG strongly urged the MoA and MoEF to maintain the ban on the targeting of Dusky grouper (*Epinephelus marginatus*) and Dogtooth grouper (*E. caninus*) by divers armed with harpoons, on the grounds that it will benefit both monk seals and artisanal fishermen. MoA will consider SAD-AFAG's proposal and respond in due course.

Last but not least, SAD-AFAG's proposal for enlargement of the Foça SPA in a northern direction up to Cape Aslan (covering Hayirsiz and Kartdere Islands and adjacent mainland coasts) will be put into force immediately, as stated by the representative from ASPA. The idea of enlargement derives from previous attempts by SAD-AFAG to bring a concrete status for 5 high-priority Important Monk Seal Sites in Turkey. The decision to press ahead with expansion was subsequently confirmed by Mr. Osman Pepe, Minister of Environment & Forests in a press meeting held on 7 May 2004 in Çiragan Palace in Istanbul, attended by Yalçın Savas of SAD-AFAG. – Cem Orkun Kiraç, SAD-AFAG.

Oh, that scientific accuracy

EndQuote

“Did You Know? The Mediterranean monk seal is one of three species of monk seals; all were named for their brown or black coats, which reminded someone of a monk's robe.”

Source: National Geographic Society and WWF. 2005. Wildworld, Ecoregion Profile, Atlantic coastal desert (PA1304) <http://www.nationalgeographic.com>.



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Feature

Recent Sightings of the Monk Seal in Croatian areas of the Adriatic

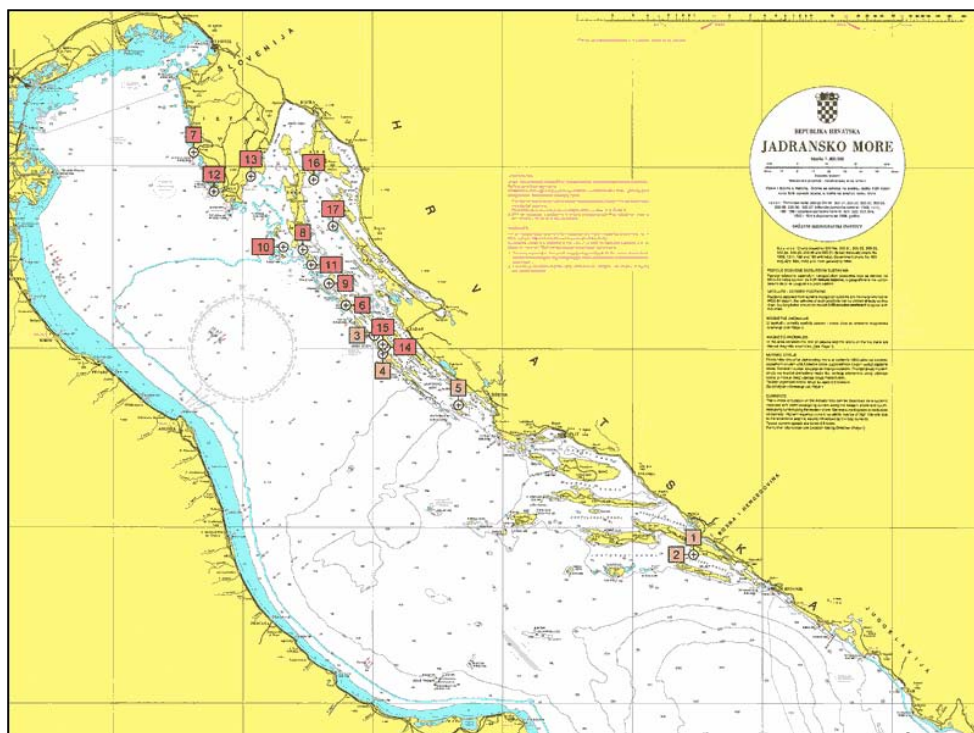
Martina Duras Gomercic, Tomislav Gomercic, Duro Huber and Hrvoje Gomercic

Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

Along with the common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) and the bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), the monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) used to be a regular inhabitant of the Adriatic Sea. According to notes by Spiridion Brusina, a Croatian zoologist of the 19th century, the central and the southern parts of the Adriatic Sea were considered to be one of the most significant habitats of this species. Local people called it “sea man”, “sea devil”, “sea calf” or “sea bear” – the latter as it is referred to in the first Croatian document about this species, a poem by Mavro Vetranovic Cavcic, composed in the period from 1482 - 1576.

The monk seal male caught in 1777 off the island of Cres found its way to Johann Hermann. His detailed observations of this specimen, published in 1779, were considered the first modern scientific description of this species. Before any serious scientific research could be undertaken, the monk seal, as well as the common dolphin, had disappeared from the Adriatic Sea. The last confirmed habitat of two specimens of monk seal was near the island of Pag in 1992. In the summer of 1993 the monk seal was seen near the island of Palagruza for a short period of time. In the past year or so, a large number of monk seal sightings have been noted in the Croatian part of the Adriatic. The locations of these sightings are indicated on the accompanying map (Fig. 1), while further data on each observation are provided under the corresponding number in the table below.

All the reports have one common characteristic: only one specimen was observed. The animal was normally observed by only one individual but there were also sightings by two, three, four people and sometimes even larger groups.



Map of sightings

The specimen was most frequently observed by those familiar with the sea: fishermen and divers. Taking into consideration all these factors, we conclude that at least one monk seal has been wandering across the Adriatic over the past year. Although it is not possible to be 100 percent certain that all the sightings are of *Monachus monachus* (conceivably, another species of true seal that has escaped captivity might be involved), we believe that the most recent sightings could well be of a Mediterranean monk seal – possibly a solitary visitor from the nearest population in the central Ionian Sea which wandered into the Croatian part of the Adriatic but has yet to settle in one area.

Marked observation location	Observation date	Latitude;Longitude	Animal - observer distance (m)	Duration of observation	Kind of observer	Previous sighting interval km/days
1	15.5.2004	N42°52';E17°27'	10-15	?	Professional fisherman	-
2	16.5.2004	N42°52';E17°27'	10-15	?	Professional fisherman	0/1
3	26.5.2004	N44°05';E15°00'	20-100	5 min	Non-professional fisherman	240/10
4	1.8.2004?	N43°59';E15°04'	30	?	Non-professional fisherman	12/66?
5	23.10.2004	N43°42';E15°39'	3-4	?	Professional fisherman	56/83?
6	22.4.2005	N44°15';E14°47'	1-2	3-5 min	Professional fisherman	93/181
7	24.4.2005	N45°05';E13°37'	10-60	5 min	Divers	131/2
8	4.5.2005	N44°33';E14°27'	100	10 sec	Tourist walkers	89/10
9	15.6.2005?	N44°22';E14°39'	?	?	Diver	26/42?
10	18.6.2005	N44°34';E14°18'	?	?	TV crew, recorded by TV camera	36/3?
11	22.6.2005	N44°28';E14°31'	?	?	Tourists on board a ship	20/4
12	1.7.2005?	N44°52';E13°46'	?	?	Divers	74/9?
13	19.7.2005	N44°57';E14°03'	?	30 min	Non-professional fisherman?	24/18?
14	27.7.2005	N44°01';E15°05'	30	5 min	Non-professional fishermen	132/8
15	27.7.2005	N44°02';E15°04'	50	5 min	Non-professional fishermen	2/0
16	27.8.2005	N44°56';E14°32'	4-5	5 min	Diver	109/31
17	4.10.2005	N44°41';E14°41'	20	15 sec	Professional fishermen	30/38



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Feature

Mediterranean monk seal off Ginak Island, The Gambia: a new sighting at the southern fringe of the known range

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On April 13th 2005, we visited the village of Ginak (also spelled Jinak) in the Niimi National Park, The Gambia, with a view to identifying suitable study sites for fieldwork on a range of marine vertebrates. During the visit we were introduced to Saidou Jammeh, an old fisherman who had worked all of his life in the area around Ginak. Through an interpreter we interviewed Mr Jammeh about the status of a range of marine vertebrates including West African Manatee, Atlantic Humpback Dolphin and marine turtles. In view of recent records of Mediterranean Monk Seal in The Gambia, for example a juvenile off the Bijol Islands on November 3rd 1997 (Van Waerebeek et al. 2001), during the interview we also asked about seals. Mr Jammeh was presented with images of all of our target species and asked whether he was familiar with each and whether they could be seen around Ginak. Great care was taken not to "lead" Mr Jammeh. Once he had confirmed the presence of any species, he was questioned about the natural history of each to confirm that he was genuinely familiar with each and not simply telling the interviewer what he wanted to hear.

Mr Jammeh confirmed that West African Manatee, Atlantic Humpback Dolphin and a range of marine turtle species were present; carapaces of Green and Olive Ridley were identified and Leatherback was convincingly described. He also confirmed that he was familiar with Monk Seals and that he had observed them many times. To try to rule out misidentification or falsification, he was asked how seals differed from manatees, a species he was clearly very familiar with. He pointed out that they had a different shaped tail, ate fish, were more "aggressive" and were found around rocky areas and caves. The latter point was of particular interest as it may indicate a breeding population. When further questioned about the caves it was not clear whether he was referring to caves on land or caves in rocky areas underwater. Although we explained to our interpreter that it was important to distinguish between caves that might be suitable for breeding and caves meaning underwater rocky areas, difficulties in translation led us to conclude that we could not be certain that Mr Jammeh was referring to suitable breeding areas. In view of the sensitivity of much of the information we had received, and the fact that we knew we would return in the winter of 2005/2006, we did not push this issue any further.



From the interview, we concluded that Mr Jammeh was familiar with monk seals and that this species was regularly present in the area around Niimi National Park. As part of the University of Central Lancashire's Project Gambia, it is anticipated that a fuller picture of the status and

distribution of monk seals in The Gambia will be gained in the winter of 2005/2006. To achieve this, boat, questionnaire and shoreline surveys are planned and identification charts will be distributed to fishermen and visiting naturalists with an in-country address for reporting sightings.

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Letters to the Editor

The National Marine Rubbish Tip of Zakynthos...

Last June I was in Zakynthos, where a viable population of monk seals (*Monachus monachus*) still survives. The island also hosts the most important nesting area for *Caretta caretta* in the EU and a National Marine Park; the importance of such an area in an international context (for Italy also!) is therefore indubitable.

Well, let me say that on the island (it was the first time I had been there) I had a strange feeling: from one side a feeling of wonder when, for example, I had the unique chance to swim with the sea turtle and also to find seal tracks canoeing by a remote beach on the west coast (it is one of very few places in the EU where you can experience a situation like that!). But on the other side, I must say that I had a feeling of anger and helplessness: in fact, it seems that nothing is going on to save such a unique marine ecosystem! The beaches that should be “the sanctuary” for nesting turtles look more like a sort of garbage dump. I saw with my own eyes the tracks of the turtles coming out of the sea, looking for a square meter of sand to dig and lay eggs, forced to dig in the loads of rubbish, and abandon the beach unsuccessfully... Volunteers present at the beaches confirmed it. This incredible situation happened inside the Park, right in the “core” area (zone “A”)! It’s unbelievable, because a couple of days of hard work would probably be enough to clean all the beaches of Lagana gulf.

But regrettably, rubbish does not seem to be the only problem for nesting turtles. No real control on tourists’ behaviour seems to exist on these beaches: everyone can stay and place a beach umbrella where eggs have been laid the night before; light and noise are high during night time too, increasing human structures in the Park (legal? – I do not think so) are present on the most important beaches (e.g. Dafni beach); little or no information on such a unique environment is available. Things really seem to be turning out badly for the turtles...!

The only partial exception to such a sad situation is Gerekas beach, which is partially clean and where a good volunteer staff is working. But the most important area for turtles in the EU, in the core of a National Park, can’t be without surveillance! Volunteers are important but absolutely not enough!

Concerning the monk seal, simply let me underline and recall that no action, no studies and no protection measures are officially being undertaken on such a small but viable population, belonging to the most endangered species of marine mammal of Europe...! Its presence is probably even more important than the turtles in an international context...!

I recently sent a letter to the Greek authorities (the Ministry of Environment) concerning the matter, but of course I do not expect any result as a consequence...

– *Claudio Groff*, Trento, Italy

✓ **Demetres Karavellas, Director of WWF Greece, replies:**

As a representative of one of the NGOs that have been active on Zakynthos for many years, I cannot but share the concern of your reader on the present state of affairs on the island. Regarding firstly the issue of monk seal conservation, I can confirm the fact that this island hosts a small but important population of this

species. Following years of local field research, we put together a comprehensive conservation plan, calling for the establishment and management of a marine protected area throughout the range of the monk seal habitat. This was submitted to the relevant Ministry of Environment for official adoption and legal enactment. Regrettably, despite our continued lobbying we have seen little progress from the side of the Greek government. Nevertheless, we will continue to push for what most *Monachus* Guardian readers consider so blatantly obvious – effective *in situ* conservation measures for one of the most endangered species in the world.

With regard to the marine turtle habitat, it is true that the situation of the National Marine Park of Zakynthos was totally unacceptable this summer. NGOs such as WWF Greece and Archelon submitted repeated complaints both to the EU and the Greek authorities. Through an e-campaign that we ran, the Greek Minister for Environment received over 20,000 emails in 48 hours, urging him to take action. On the ground, in the absence of public wardening, our volunteers did all they could to safeguard the beaches.

I might also add that the long term protection of the core of the Park, Sekania beach (which your reader may not have visited as it is only accessible by researchers with special permits) was in fact secured when WWF Greece purchased the land surrounding the beach so as to avoid the threat of tourism infrastructure encroaching on the beach. The most important nesting site for sea turtles in the entire Mediterranean was conserved through a non-governmental initiative.

All this is clearly not enough. Inevitably, there is a limit to what NGOs can do to conserve endangered species and their habitats. The government has a critical responsibility to respond to the needs of such areas and put in place the appropriate legislation and management mechanisms to deliver. It cannot remain indifferent to the degradation of such valuable biodiversity hotspots.

There is a glimpse of hope. Under strong pressure from the EU, the management body for the Park is now being re-established and is being offered initial funding to hire the necessary personnel.

There is still a great deal more that needs to be done. From our side, all I can do is to assure your concerned reader that we will persist, both in the field but also in the policy arena, to make Zakynthos a safer haven for its wonderful fauna.

Ghost site still entangling researchers

I've been researching Hawaiian Monk Seals for a college research paper and your old website was set up as a link from a U.S. government website.

I happened to find your new website by accident during a web search.

Would it be possible for you to update your old website "www.monachus.org" with a link to your new website "www.monachus-guardian.org"?

Thanks!

– *Diana Dority*, University of California, Santa Cruz, USA.

✓ Editor's reply:

We have taken up this issue with IFAW on a number of occasions, having received many verbal and written enquiries regarding the lack of forwarding links on the old monachus.org web site.

Unfortunately, the news from IFAW (which has controlled the site from early 2002) is far from positive. While expressing regret for any inconvenience, the organisation has let it be known that updating the site with forwarding links is still not a priority.

If many readers find that response puzzling – given the paltry effort and expense that would be involved in adding links – so do we.

Unfortunately, it appears that students, teachers, researchers and journalists who are searching for up-to-date information on the monk seal and who are mistakenly referred to the moribund monachus.org, will continue to be told that the latest issue online is from November 2001.

Tagged seal at the Four Seasons

A tagged seal has been hauled out on our beach at the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai on the Big Island of Hawaii for the past 2 days. Its orange tag on the right rear flipper indicated it was H46 [Later corrected to H45, ed.]. A large area around the seal is roped-off. There have been 4 different seals hauled out here in the last year (this is the first tagged one). Who would know the history of this seal?

– *David Chai*, Four Seasons Resort, Hawaii

✓ **Editor's note: We passed this enquiry on to Thea Johanos-Kam of NOAA, who replied:**

We are interested in all monk seal sightings, and sightings of tagged seals are of special importance. To report Hawaiian monk seal sightings, please call the Monk Seal Sighting Line at (808) 983-5715. To report problems such as monk seal strandings or harassments, please call the NOAA Fisheries Hotline at (888) 256-9840. Because red/orange H46 is not a valid tag, the seal reported with orange tag H46 on the right hind flipper is most likely RH44, a seal with tag H45 on the right hind flipper (originally red, faded to orange). This seal is female and was born at Poipu on Kauai in 2000. She remained on Kauai through 2003, was sighted on Oahu in 2004, and then moved to the Big Island by March 2005.

The editor reserves the right to edit letters for the sake of clarity and space



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Recent Publications

In Print

- **Adam, Peter J.** 2004. *Monachus tropicalis*. Mammalian Species 747: 1-11. [[PDF](#) 516 KB]
- **Di Guardo, G., G. Marruchella, U. Agrimi, S. Kennedy.** 2005. Morbillivirus infections in aquatic mammals: a brief overview. Journal of Veterinary Medicine Series A - Physiology Pathology Clinical Medicine 52 (2): 88-93.
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- **Nielsen, O., K. Nielsen, R. Braun, L. Kelly.** 2005. A comparison of four serologic assays in screening for Brucella exposure in Hawaiian monk seals. Journal of Wildlife Diseases 41 (1): 126-133.
- **Solow, A.R.** 2005. Inferring extinction from a sighting record. Mathematical Biosciences 195 (1): 47-55.

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