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Guest Editorial

CILICIA ON MY MIND

Monk Seal Adventures on Turkey's Southern Shore

Luigi Guarrera



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It was quite sad, that early November evening. We had spent 10 days in such a special atmosphere, with incredibly good weather, sweet, fragrant air, calm, transparent sea, reasonably intact shores and landscapes... But now the spectre of going back to our polluted towns was hanging over us... Just one last ride on the local fisherman's sputtering wooden boat, just one last dive in the sea shared with our beloved monk seals – the only reason for us travelling to this remote corner of Cilicia, in south-eastern Turkey. A sort of chimera, being able to see these shy pinnipeds again in their own habitat, like in ancient times, recalling Homer...

Our jet buzzing over the Ionian sea on our way from Rome, a small group of 8 genuine eco-tourists, old WWF members. We were not cherishing vain expectations: no real hopes of observing this rare marine mammal, just the happiness of visiting a remote area where we knew seals were still living under some kind of protection.

A long transfer to Istanbul and Adana, 7 more hours with a nice, raggy little bus, rented from a local company. It was almost early morning the next day when we finally reached our destination, Bozyazi, the centre of the Cilician

Monk Seal Conservation project, built up since 1994 by WWF-Mediterranean Programme, SAD-AFAG and the Middle East Technical University - Institute of Marine Sciences.

Intense and pithy days. The sound of reveille at the crack of dawn, but it's no burden. Crouching down like mimes among the bushes, on the rocks overlooking seal-frequented caves at twilight... Cruising slowly along the coast like local fishermen... Timidly swimming, where allowed... And, suddenly – astonished, unexpected, a joy to see – a few meters distant from our boat, the funny whiskered snout looking up curiously at us, but also vigilantly... Or, watching from our hiding place among the rocks, the emotion of realising that the shining big, black ball, now moving towards us, is really the head of a huge male seal. He lifts his head, looks around with circumspection, then returns his head to the water, still swimming towards the coast. He enters the cave and – surprise! – another seal suddenly swims into view, this one a female, flushed out of the shelter – where perhaps she'd been sleeping – by her mighty companion...

A clear cut from everyday urban life. Overwhelmed by the incredible end-of-October light. Scanning the horizon from the small boats of local fishermen. Munching on tasty Turkish bananas and red savoury tomatoes, bought in the local market. Evenings spent eating *pide* – Turkish pizza – in a simple tavern, just listening to the true but fantastic stories told by Ali and his wife Gul, our thoughtful and competent guides. Enthusiasts for the simple life that is often too hard, devoted to saving one of the rarest species on Earth.

Memory flashes of these unconventional tourists searching for *Monachus monachus* in the most discreet way. Interrupted by green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) feeding at the sea bed, still rich in *Posidonia*, or peregrine falcons, proud and lonely on the cliff-tops, cliffs where – at a different height – white, young cormorants dry their wings.



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On the fisherman's sputtering wooden boat.

Interludes devoted to a long descent to the centre of the Earth, to a mysterious, newly discovered cave hiding a Dantean black-water lake at its end. Or to a walk *au clair de la lune* through pine forests, to reach cliffs hiding caves once used by pirates and, still to this day, by monk seals. Without missing the great, triple-walled castle raised by Crusaders near the turtle nesting beaches, or the ancient Christian church (here Paul of Tarsus is recalled on the mosaic floors, still showing the variety of aquatic birds once living in nearby marshes, recently drained by man's stupidity). And with a final leap, to reach the fresh torrents and forests of the Taurus mountains, or the multi-coloured little markets, dominated by the pungent scent of spices, animated by gentle local people and the curiosity of kids.



"Mamure Kalesi", a few kilometers east of Anamur.



Mosaics at the Paleochristian church of Tisan, Aphrodisias.

It was quite sad, that early November evening. Our fisherman captain with the sunburnt face, the last of the unconventional souls to take part in our adventures, piloting his little wooden ship towards sunset. Taking us on our last sea ride, our last swim. The black-mouthed cave, no longer used by seals, getting closer. Anchoring. The silence of the wind while we prepare masks and fins. Then something moves slowly from inside the cave. A skin-diver swimming out? Now it can better be seen... A skin-diver raising that funny whiskered snout, looking up at us, humans standing astonished on the small wooded boat. Shoot the photo! Take the video! There's a tidy bustle of activity. *Nonchalante* seal! from the so-called abandoned cave. A last glance towards its fans, and it slowly dives out of sight.

The last farewells to the 8 genuine eco-tourists, to the sensible fisherman and the couple that cares. But beyond sadness there is also hope and enthusiasm for heartening signs of a real recovery. At least here in Cilicia, where conservation and rational development are now trying to grow hand in hand.

Luigi Guarrera, April 2003

The trip that was to have taken another 8 "genuine eco-tourists" to Cilicia this May was postponed until the end of October in light of recent international events. For more information about this next expedition, the Cilician seal project, or the activities of Gruppo Foca Monaca Italia, please write to grupfoca@tin.it or visit the web sites www.gruppofocamonaca.it and www.afag.org.

For more detailed information on this project, turn to [Ecotourism experiment bears fruit](#), Mediterranean News, this issue.