



Mystery at RAC/SPA

Time for pup-catching, says its anonymous expert(s)

Many readers will be forgiven for not realising the key role that the Regional Activity Center for Specially Protected Areas (RAC/SPA) plays in the conservation of the Mediterranean monk seal. While some cynics might argue that monk seals have certainly not realised it either, the Center has sponsored useful studies over the years, including field surveys in Libya [[Monachus Science II](#), TMG 6 (1): June 2003] and Syria [[Monachus Science III](#), TMG 6 (1): June 2003].

Tunis-based RAC/SPA – one of whose mandates is to coordinate the implementation of the UN Action Plan for the recovery of *Monachus monachus* – also formed a 5-member “Group of Experts” in 2002 to pinpoint priority actions for the species. These would then be used to advise and guide government officials attending the meeting of National Focal Points of the Barcelona Convention in Marseilles on 17-20 June 2003.

The Group, composed of experts from Greece, Italy, Morocco, Spain and Turkey, duly met in Lathakia, Syria, on 29-30 September 2002, and drew up their list of recommendations [[RAC/SPA confronts Action Plan failures in Syria](#), TMG 5 (2): November 2002]. These focused primarily on establishing protected areas, ensuring adequate management of new and existing reserves, and further scientific research to identify critical seal habitat.



The resulting document [UNEP(DEC)MED WG.232/Inf.6.] was submitted to the Marseilles meeting as an annex “Information Document” to the RAC/SPA’s own “Progress Report of the Activities of RAC/SPA”. TMG, however, has been informed by 3 of the report’s authors that they did not see, review or approve the final draft of the document before its release. Subsequent requests to obtain the document from RAC/SPA also elicited no response [see also [Barcelona Convention slip-up has Turkish monk seals disappear from the conservation radar screen](#), this issue].

Possibly, it is here where the plot thickens, for RAC/SPA’s own recommendations for action presented at Marseilles – written in admirably insistent prose, it has to be said – bear no resemblance whatsoever to those formulated by its own Group of Experts.

Lamenting government inaction and the dwindling fortunes of the species, the report declares:

“The situation is too critical to put off action any longer. Action must be taken now. For a species in critical danger of extinction the risk of doing nothing may be even greater than risking starting management actions and may justify active intervention.

The reasons driving to the monk seal extinction [sic] are very well known: the main one is killing, mostly deliberate but also accidental, almost exclusively by fishermen; it is followed by human degradation of breeding areas. Although actions at several levels are needed for the long term survival of this species, priority should be given now to direct measures to neutralize these two root problems, concentrating on them every effort and economic allocation on behalf of the species within the areas where it still subsists, and rescheduling other measures until a trend in this long lasting situation changes.”

Providing details, the report goes on to pinpoint its recommendations for action, including:

- **A ban on setting nets around breeding caves** to a distance of 5 nautical miles. This measure, claims the report, should statistically reduce interactions between fishers and seals by one third.
- Possible implementation of mandatory, **nationwide insurance schemes for net damage**, thereby helping to mitigate one of the primary causes of direct killing by artisanal fishers. The report, however, suggests that no more than 5% of net damage can be attributable to seals (other causes include dolphins, eels, rocks, general wear and tear), a figure that is unlikely to impress fishermen.
- A feasibility project to allow **artisanal fishermen to profit from the conservation process by carrying paying tourists** on their fishing trips. Although few will argue with the central idea of encouraging local stakeholder involvement in SPAs, there is growing disquiet about efforts to encourage unregulated ecotourism in monk seal areas. The report stresses that licenses should only be issued “where healthy marine mammals presence is yearly proved”. Under a subsequent point, it goes on to advocate that entry into caves by tourists be specifically banned and that, with the exception of fishing boats, navigation be prohibited 500m around caves.
- **Greater efforts to prosecute the killers of monk seals**, including the setting up of national ad hoc prosecution committees. So far, in the 15 years’ of the Action Plan’s existence, charges the RAC/SPA report, not a single prosecution has been brought against those responsible for these crimes [see [Alleged monk seal killers acquitted: case heads to Supreme Court](#), this issue, and [Monk seal deaths](#), TMG 6 (1): June 2003]. Where foul play is suspected, says the report, every monk seal death should be thoroughly investigated.
- **Capture and translocation**. Citing government inaction and the alleged failure of in situ conservation measures to justify its insistence that more invasive actions are now vital, the report advocates “the temporary transfer of both weaned pups and every captive raised one from areas where killings continue into fully safe semicaptivity locations.” The report continues:

“These locations should be enclosures of wild areas and not fully artificial installations, as always proposed before. The seals should be raised there, including life fish [sic] on their diet, to the verge of maturity (four years the females and seven years the males) with minimal visual close contact with humans. Locations should preferably be less than three, until first successful raisings being fully on course. They should be properly preserved areas within the historical distribution area of the species and separated from present wild stocks, to preclude them to be affected by any stochastic catastrophe hitting wild individuals (epidemic, red tide, oil spill, etc). Raised animals should be released in their exact places of origin to restock them or, should it be risky for them, in the closest full-safe one. One example of physically suitable location to raise the seals could be the Meleda lagoons, in the National Park of Mljet, Croatia, which possesses advantages as protection status, big size, and easiness to enclose seals inside it, fact already done in the middle ages to trap them. However, other feasible locations should be researched, the criteria being the most optimal possibilities for the species and the willingness of host countries to collaborate on its behalf.”

Most objective observers would not argue about the indifference with which most national governments – despite their legal obligations and promises – have treated the monk seal. Nor would they reject the importance of scientific debate of controversial management actions that, experience has shown, could well end up killing monk seals [see [Conservation Guidelines](#), 955KB].

Despite some promising and energetic conservation solutions (for example, the proposed ban on setting nets outside breeding caves) many question marks hang over RAC/SPA policy. Why has it disregarded the recommendations of its own Group of Experts, consigning their views to an annex that few officials will bother to read? And who, exactly, has formulated its action priority recommendations in a document that bears no name? Which scientists, if any, supported the view that we should now “rescue” pups from their mothers and transport them to UN safe havens in other regions and countries? And if such secure zones *can* be created, why not create them where the seals are still living?

Unfortunately, the report does not tell us – and nor does it explain why funds would be available for such costly schemes when fieldworkers are still struggling to find the price of a can of petrol to run their patrol boats in protected areas [[Funding crisis strikes Turkish, Greek and international efforts](#), TMG 6 (1): June 2003]. Even more importantly, perhaps, it does not reveal why this scandalous state of affairs should be any different in the RAC/SPA safe havens.

It is known that at least one government Focal Point reacted with alarm when reading the RAC/SPA proposals in preparation for the Marseilles meeting. Though the precise causes remain uncertain at present, it appears that the meeting could not agree on the range of measures presented to them. As a result, the delegates appear to have deferred a decision in the UN bureaucracy’s time-honoured fashion, voting instead to convene another “high-level meeting” in 2004 [see [Barcelona Convention slip-up has Turkish monk seals disappear from the conservation radar screen](#), this issue, and [Mediterranean states commit to implement “urgent actions”](#), below].

Although TMG contacted RAC/SPA several times for further comment and information, the secretariat in Tunis did not respond.

Sadly, this follows a tediously familiar path, well trodden by advocates of monk seal captive breeding and translocation. Those who most favour such invasive conservation actions for the species have always been the ones most reluctant to encourage or to engage in open debate on these issues. Even so, it is a dark day indeed when a UN organization withholds public documents on the basis that releasing them, and making them available for scrutiny and debate, may damage pet policies that enjoy no consensus.

Further reading

RAC/SPA. 2003. [Progress report of the activities of RAC/SPA](#). Report on the activities carried out by RAC/SPA since the fifth meeting of National Focal Points for Specially Protected Areas (March 2001 – May 2003): 1-29. [PDF 124KB].

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].

Mediterranean states commit to implement “urgent actions”

National delegations from the 22 Mediterranean Basin countries convened at Catania, Sicily between 11-14 November 2003 for the 13th Meeting of Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea Against Pollution.

Addressing the issues of Biological Diversity and Specially Protected Areas in the Mediterranean (UNEP/MED IG.15/5, II.B. page 13), the Plenary adopted, amongst other measures, the following recommendations to the governments of the Contracting Parties for the 2004-2005 biennium concerning the protection of the Mediterranean monk seal:

- To invite all the concerned parties to hold a high-level stakeholder meeting to define appropriate ways of urgently implementing actions for the effective protection of the Mediterranean monk seal, on the basis of the reports of the expert group convened by RAC/SPA in 2002.
- To promote, when necessary, the creation of protected zones in those areas where Mediterranean monk seals are concentrated.

As the framework for protection of Mediterranean monk seal habitats in the EU Mediterranean countries has already been established through EU law and the Natura 2000 network, the above adopted recommendations, if implemented accordingly, may prove particularly important for the protection of the species in countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean basin, such as Libya and Turkey, where it is estimated that significant populations of monk seals still exist. – Kostas Triantafyllou

The numbers game (II)

Thousands of islands, inaccessible coastlines, and a species that shies away from human contact have all conspired to make population estimates for the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) an extraordinarily inexact science. Partly because of their own tendency to err on the side of caution, historically, biologists have consistently underestimated the numbers of monk seals populating the Mediterranean. Conversely, errors can also creep into population estimates when biologists rely on old data. On more occasions than the authors would probably care to remember, this has resulted in monk seal colonies being placed in areas where they have been extinct for many years. The only thing that can be said with any degree of certainty is that the Mediterranean monk seal remains critically endangered, and that its range has shrunk dramatically over the last 50 years.

At the risk of continuing the tradition of pulling numbers out of a hat, we present this, our second updated population estimate, based on various sources (many of them published within TMG). It should be remembered that question marks hang over monk seal abundance in most of these regions and countries. As such, these figures should be treated with caution.

However, readers will notice at least one major change compared to our first [Numbers Game](#) [TMG 3 (1): May 2000]: according to researchers, the monk seal has finally become extinct in the Black Sea.

A failure to confirm any recent sightings in Croatia also appears to spell a final tragic end to the species that once frequented the Coast of a Thousand Islands.

Italy and Sardinia remain at "0" despite recent sightings, because researchers have yet to identify occupied habitat.

As a result of more intensive research, Turkey is expected to increase its population estimates for the species in the months ahead: for the time being, the estimate remains at 50.

Following the mass mortality that struck the world's largest surviving monk seal colony in the western Sahara in 1997, 103 individuals were estimated to survive (mean estimate: 95% CI: 77 – 148, Forcada, Hammond & Aguilar 1999), down from 300. These estimates are generally considered more reliable than those obtained elsewhere since they relied upon clearly-defined photo-identification procedures, often impractical elsewhere. New estimates of 150 individuals are based on interpretations of evidence by researchers – counts of seals at low tide in breeding caves, increasing beach counts, decreasing mortalities – but have not been confirmed by capture-recapture methods (that compare data from different sample frames).

Mediterranean monk seal population estimates		
area	regional subtotal	area total
Black Sea		0 – 0
Bulgaria	0	
Georgia	0	
Romania	0	
Russia	0	
Turkey	0	
Ukraine	0	
Eastern Mediterranean		255 – 315
Albania	0	
Croatia	0	
Cyprus	5	
Egypt	0	
Greece	200 – 250	
Israel	0	
Lebanon	0	
Libya	5 – 10	
Serbia and Monte Negro	0	
Slovenia	0	
Syria	0	
Turkey	50	
Western Mediterranean		15 – 30
Algeria	10 – 20	
France & Corsica	0	
Italy & Sardinia	0	
Malta	0	
Morocco	5 – 10	
Spain	0	
Tunisia	0	
Atlantic		180
Azores (Portugal)	0	
Canary Islands (Spain)	0	
Cape Verde Islands	0	
Gambia	4	
Madeira (Portugal)	24	
Mauritania	2	
Morocco	0	
Senegal	0	
western Sahara	150	
TOTAL		450 – 525

Acknowledgements: Pablo Fernández de Larrinoa, CBD-Habitat, Madrid, Spain; Harun Güçlüsoy, SAD-AFAG, Foça, Turkey.

Additional Sources

Aguilar A. 1998. Current status of Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) populations. Meeting of experts on the implementation of the action plans for marine mammals (monk seal and cetaceans) adopted within MAP. Arta, Greece, 29-31 October 1998. UNEP, Athens: 1-34.

Forcada J., P.S. Hammond and A. Aguilar. 1999. Status of the Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* in the western Sahara and the implications of a mass mortality event. Marine Ecology Progress Series 188: 249-261.

González L. M. 1999. Update on the situation of the Mediterranean monk seal (English translation). *In*: Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals. Scientific Council of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals. 9th Meeting, Cape Town, 4-6 November 1999: 1-16 + 6 maps.

Johnson W. M. (ed). The Monachus Guardian. <http://www.monachus-guardian.org>

Kıraç C.O. 2001. [Witnessing the monk seal's extinction in the Black Sea](#), TMG 4 (2): November 2001.

Kıraç C.O., Y. Savas, H. Güçlüsoy and N.O. Veryeri. 1998. [Status and Distribution of Monk Seals *Monachus monachus* \(Hermann 1779\) along Turkish Coasts](#). World Marine Mammal Science Conference, Monaco, 19-24 January 1998, Workshop on the World's Endangered Monk Seals, SAD-AFAG Poster Presentation [📄 51KB].

Seal rehab proceedings published online

Proceedings of the April 2002 ECS Workshop, *Seal Rehabilitation in theory and practice: protocols, techniques, cases* [see [Rehab workshop convenes in Liege](#), TMG 5 (1): May 2002] have at last been published online:

Androukaki E. and Y. Larondelle (eds). 2003. [Seal rehabilitation in theory and practice workshop: protocols, techniques, cases](#). 16th Annual Conference of the European Cetacean Society, 7 April 2002, Liege, Belgium.

The issue on platform 12

At the risk of sounding like a UK station announcement, we would like to apologise for the late arrival of December's Monachus Guardian.

This year, the journal has been produced on an entirely voluntary basis, despite the fact that the publication continues to fulfil a conservation "Action Priority" first identified at the Rhodes Conference in 1978.

On the plus side, TMG retains its independence as a publication that defends the interests of monk seals, and reflects the diverse views of those who are engaged in the frontline conservation of the species and their threatened habitats.

Responding to a suggestion from several readers, we hope to publish more on the funding issue in our next edition – including 'who pays what and who does not'.

EndQuote

"It's a fire alarm," says Richard Ellis about his new book, *The Empty Ocean*, which joins a chorus of recent publications documenting the precipitous decline of world fisheries and the dire state of the marine environment. That alarm should make you think long and hard about your lunchtime tuna sandwich or the sashimi you order at your favorite Japanese restaurant...

In *The Empty Ocean*, Ellis recounts the historical eradication of entire marine species, including Caribbean monk seals, Labrador ducks, and Steller's sea cow, which was slaughtered to extinction in less than 30 years. "Only recently have biologists come to understand the intricacies of fish breeding, recruitment, and migration, and for many species the revelations have come too late," Ellis writes. Yet despite all we have learned about ecology and biology, he says, we continue to decimate ocean species: "We have entered an era in which the lesson of the sea cows has been ignored, usually in the name of short-term profits..."

So what do we do now? "I wish we could turn the clock back," says Ellis. Barring that, he says, we must take steps to protect and restore what's left. "Marine reserves that incorporate no-take zones, which means no fishing by anybody," are essential to stemming the decline of world fisheries," he writes. But, he adds, "even penicillin won't work if you don't take it." How, then, to ensure that marine ecosystems get the protection they need? "We have to keep this going," says Ellis of the current barrage of books, articles, reports, and editorials detailing the plight of the oceans. Otherwise, he says, "the only way these lessons will get driven home, is when fish is no longer on the menu."

– From [Cod Is Dead](#). Richard Ellis's *The Empty Ocean* delves into the world of marine destruction, by Elizabeth Grossman, *Grist Magazine*, 24 July 2003.