



Vol. 7 (1): June 2004

ADD BIOPOLITICS TO THE MONK SEAL'S DEADLY FOES

Manel Gazo

Going through the guest editorials of other TMG issues, I see there's always a reference to the writer's first sighting of a monk seal. I'm also in the list of those lucky people that, in their time on Earth, will share some of it with these special creatures. From 1995 to 2001, I spent several months every year studying the Mediterranean monk seal colony of Cabo Blanco (western Sahara – Mauritania). My first sighting was from the cliffs of the Saharan coast, where several individuals "floated" in the entrance of Cave-1 (the main cave where the colony rests and rears its pups). Of all the times I spent with the colony during those years, there are two moments saved in the files of my memory that, with some regularity, I like to remember: one was the first time I entered a cave with more than 90 individuals hauled out on the sandy beach inside, males, females, juveniles, adults and pups resting all together; sounds, movements and odours reminded me of a prehistoric picture. The second memory that stands out is the mother-pup dialogue, the sound of the sharp bark of the mother returning to the cave answered by the desperate yelp of the pup anxious for suckling time.



During the years, I've had the chance to visit different places and people conducting research and conservation programmes with monk seals. I still remember the time I spent at French Frigate Shoals with colleagues from the National Marine Fisheries Service, working with the Hawaiian monk seal. For the very first time in my life I understood why, in many old books and guides, several authors described monk seals as *inoffensive and trusting animals*. It is easy to imagine how the seal's docility, from which scientists take profit nowadays to conduct their research, was also used in the sealing expeditions of the 19th century to slaughter the animals for their oil and pelts. "*The seals were easy to kill*" — this overwhelming sentence contained in a 19th century book, still reflects the situation of the monk seals nowadays. Although not commercially exploited, the indirect threats that monk seals face today are at least as efficient as the mass slaughter of olden times.

Somewhere I read that the number of workshops and meetings organized to confront the drastic decline of the species is greater than the real numbers of individual seals alive. Unfortunately for the seals, in the Mediterranean, biopolitics has to be listed as another cause of decline affecting the species — alongside direct killing, loss of habitat, overfishing and incidental catches. Too many countries sharing the same sea, too many competing interests in coastal zones and too many economic and social differences to allow a conservation politics of consensus. And all the while, existing among them all, is a handful of seals fighting a last chance claim for survival.

Of course, the same problem exists not only between countries but also within them: how many research groups, organizations and teams are working for the same objective but without sharing results or experiences; or how many conservation efforts and research projects have been abandoned because of a conflict of interest between groups and individuals.

Just this week, here in Barcelona, an international event has been inaugurated (*Forum Barcelona 2004*). The ultimate goal of this event is to promote *dialogue* between countries, cultures and societies in order to go a step further towards cultural diversity, sustainable development and conditions for peace. Who knows, perhaps the first step solution to the monk seal problem is just to sit and engage in dialogue with the right interlocutor.

While some countries are still thinking in terms of planning complex and expensive strategies to repopulate their degraded coasts with the seals that disappeared many decades ago, I'm still wondering why this great amount of money, time and effort is not devoted to conservation actions in the places (and countries) where the species still occurs. A year ago I was involved in a survey to monitor the north coast of Syria in order to identify potential habitat for the species in case some individuals still remain in the area. If seals do survive there, then certainly it will be along coasts like those. But materials and infrastructure to conduct a survey of the comprehensive type required in the region is limited. In Spain by contrast, the idea of reintroducing seals is still alive, and there are at least four potential translocation sites. If anyone wants to do something for seals and has the money and the time, why not invest it in people and places where the potential salvation of seals is still possible? ...biopolitics again.

With realities being what they are, the future of the Mediterranean monk seal is more than uncertain. In the same way that, during last centuries, the decline of the species has been linked to human activities, so too is the ability to reverse that trend also in human hands.

The roots of that hypothetical change, however, do not belong to biologists, wildlife managers, vets or ecologists — rather, the plan for change and what is expected of it has to be re-written in order to involve all those whose lives somehow intersect with the seals'. As a consequence, from them will emerge the final decision of whether it is worth the time and money to keep the seals alive.

Because the real question is not *Do you want to save the seals?* — an easy question that most people would answer in the affirmative. The real question is: *Do you want to continue living with seals in the Mediterranean?* If the answer is 'yes' then there can be no alternative but to implement the relevant social, economic and biopolitical changes that, among others, will inevitably affect the use of the coastal zone and will regulate fishing and tourist activities. Conservation is not free. If we don't walk in this direction, however, unable to turn back from the exploitative road that we have long travelled with the monk seal, then there can be little doubt that, in short order, *Monachus monachus* will enlarge the list of the world's extinct species.

Manel Gazo, Barcelona, May 2004

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