



Cover Story

Vol. 8 (1): May 2005

Download this article 

MAKING SEAL SENSE

Critically-endangered monk seals in the Eastern Aegean may share sea, caves, fish, mates, and human threats, but for many years political realities meant that they were almost regarded as having their own distinct Greek or Turkish nationalities. In short, seal border crossings were not the subject of polite conversation, scientific or otherwise.

Even as little as five years ago, the idea of Greek and Turkish research teams working together to protect a shared population of monk seals would have been unthinkable. But then came a gradual thawing in political relations between the two uneasy neighbours, encouraged by reciprocal humanitarian aid after earthquake disasters, and more recently, by Turkey's EU aspirations.

Although joint management or fieldwork in the militarily-sensitive region will probably remain off the radar screens indefinitely, with the financial encouragement of the EU the two sides are now cooperating on a range of monk seal conservation issues.

The Delegation of the European Commission to Turkey – whose Civil Society Development Programme attempts to foster civil dialogue between the two countries – is funding the latest joint venture: the establishment of a monk seal rescue network in Turkey, drawing on expertise and experience built up over a 14-year period in Greece.

So what are the experiences of the two sides? The limits? The expectations? The Monachus Guardian interviews Jeny Androukaki, head of [MOM](#)'s rescue and rehabilitation division, and Harun Güçlüsoy of [SAD-AFAG](#).

Jeny Androukaki, MOM

TMG: What do you hope to achieve in your current project with Turkish conservationists?

Jeny Androukaki: The aim is to transmit know-how from Greece to Turkey on how to confront emergencies in the eastern Mediterranean – such as how to deal with dead, wounded or orphaned seals, with disease outbreaks or oil spills. By doing this, we hope to develop a compatible methodology on both sides of the Aegean in the establishment and operation of a rescue network. Once the alert system is in place and is functioning efficiently, we also hope that the Network will end up improving the survival chances of seals in distress in the region.

TMG: What is the benefit of following comparable methodologies?

Jeny Androukaki: We share a common population of monk seals. With seals moving between Greece and Turkey for feeding and possibly breeding, it is important that we can reliably compare the data gathered by the research teams in each of the two countries. We can then ensure that we react in the same way when responding to emergencies, based on best, internationally recognised practices.



Greeks and Turks participate in a seal necropsy as part of the Rescue Network project. Second, fourth and fifth from left: MOM's Jeny Androukaki, Foça municipality veterinarian Avni Gök, and SAD-AFAG's Harun Güçlüsoy.

TMG: But politically, this would not have been possible even a few years ago?

Jeny Androukaki: Yes, even 5 years ago, this cooperation would not have been possible. The new approach began in 2001, with small initiatives aimed at transfer of know-how and purchase of research equipment, enabling us to learn from each other's experiences in research, conservation and management. A subsequent project sponsored by the EU focused on forging closer links between the protected area in Foça and the National Marine Park in Alonissos. With exchange visits involving the fishermen of the local communities, officials and others, it was possible to gain a clearer understanding of common problems as well as potential solutions.

TMG: How supportive have the governments been?

Jeny Androukaki: The Greek government is very supportive, the Turkish government also; however, due to past difficulties in communication between the two countries, certain limitations do exist. So the current project focuses on technical exchange of know-how, rather than working together as teams in specific areas.

TMG: How is the transfer of know-how accomplished on a practical level?

Jeny Androukaki: Well, the Turkish team participated in the rehabilitation of orphaned monk seal pup Hippocrates on Alonissos, learning specific rescue and feeding techniques. At the same time, we held a theoretical seminar, focusing on necropsies and the framework by which a rescue and information network can be established in Turkey. Our team also travelled to Turkey to assist in the necropsy of an adult male seal at the Dilek Peninsula National Park.

TMG: How long has the Rescue and Information Network (RINT) been operating in Greece?

Jeny Androukaki: Since 1991.

TMG: And what kind of information has been collected through the RINT that you would consider particularly important in terms of conservation of the species or in yielding new facts about its biology and behaviour?

Jeny Androukaki: Data collected through the RINT have shown that the monk seal is more widely distributed in Greece than previously thought, along both mainland and island coasts. Because of the Network, we have also identified important new breeding habitats of the species, sometimes in very unexpected locations. It has also provided vital information on the direct threats facing the species and its habitat – something that we hope will also be duplicated along Turkish coasts as a result of the current project. It has also alerted us to seals in distress, and provides information to us on emergencies, such as oil spills or constructions in sensitive coastal areas.

TMG: How many seals in distress?

Jeny Androukaki: 22 animals, about two thirds of which were orphaned pups, and the remainder sick or injured adults.

TMG: How was the RINT formed and who composes it? What kind of people are involved?

Jeny Androukaki: All kinds of people, or associations or clubs that have some connection with the sea or coast. The most important are the fishermen who are on the sea throughout the year – they provide us with valuable information year-round. Tourists that have sailing boats. And the Port Police, of course, which play a specially important role because members of the public generally report incidents involving monk seals to their local Port Police, who then contact us.



Foça municipality veterinarian Avni Gök with MOM's Jeny Androukaki.



Harun Güçlüsoy of SAD-AFAG learns all about monk seal rehabilitation at the MOM rescue station on Alonissos.

TMG: What type of emergencies is the project gearing up to confront?

Jeny Androukaki: Apart from individual incidents, such as a seal found sick, wounded, orphaned or dead, the project is also trying to devise a common approach to deal with mass mortalities – a disease outbreak, for example, of the kind that hit the Mauritanian seal population in 1997 killing two-thirds of the population in one blow, an oil or toxic waste spill as a result of an accident. There is considerable tanker traffic in the Aegean and so we face this risk. The better we are prepared to face such a crisis, the better our reaction will be.

So we agreed with our Turkish friends to devise a common contingency plan to confront such emergencies. We will have an agreed organisational framework that will identify the specific tasks that are the responsibility of the authorities, and those to be undertaken by the NGOs. We will also need to involve experts and organisations abroad that have the necessary experience and the equipment in dealing with such emergencies.

TMG: How have the Greek-Turkish projects fared on a personal level?

Jeny Androukaki: It has been a moving experience from the very beginning. We had a chance to meet our neighbours for the first time. We met as strangers but quickly became friends – perhaps also because we discovered that we *do* share common problems and solutions in protecting the monk seal and the marine environment.

Harun Güçlüsoy, SAD-AFAG

TMG: How will you adapt the Greek experience in establishing the RINT to Turkish coastal needs and characteristics?

Harun Güçlüsoy: Actually, we will not need to adapt it very much because the characteristics of the coastline, especially in the Aegean, are very similar. The fact that we do not have many inhabited islands may even make it easier logistically to operate the Turkish RINT.

TMG: Who will be involved as members of the Turkish RINT?

Harun Güçlüsoy: Our main target groups are diving clubs, fishing cooperatives, coastal municipalities and existing SAD-AFAG members (currently numbering around 700). However, whenever we visit a site in the Turkish Aegean we look for the locals who log many hours at sea, basically sea lovers who can report sighting data as well as wounded, sick or dead seals. The other possible RINT member candidates for the future will be caretakers of the coastal holiday housing complexes, sailing clubs, tourist agents, marinas, water-related sports federations, relevant faculties and departments of the coastal universities, veterinarians from universities and local councils, and the other relevant governmental agencies including coast guard commanders, gendarme post commanders, harbour masters etc.

TMG: How will you practically set about establishing the RINT in Turkey?

Harun Güçlüsoy: We have targeted the coastline between Dalaman and the Turkish-Greek border in the north. However, though well planned, the duration of our visits to the sites will be the determining factor. Therefore, we are focusing on coastal protected areas, including 4 of the 5 selected sites that have been announced as Important Monk Seal Sites, as previously reported in TMG. Before our visits we gather information on local media contacts, and through them, we let the locals know about our presence. We will be mainly visiting diving clubs and fishing cooperatives as well as national park officials.

TMG: How will your current way of working suit the operation of the Turkish RINT?

Harun Güçlüsoy: To date we have been receiving information from our members as well as governmental organisations, especially in the case of wounded or dead seals. As also MOM does, we registered all the names of those people (approximately 100) who helped us on this issue previously, and we will ask them to become our RINT members. Among these people are fishermen, divers, diving instructors, veterinarians etc. Previously, we also regularly visited sites to collect current knowledge of monk seal presence. With the establishment of the Turkish RINT, we will from now on, also determine the potential RINT members and try to involve them in the operation.

TMG: What difficulties are you encountering, or expect to encounter in the establishment of the Rescue Network in Turkey?

Harun Güçlüsoy: To date, except for the weak response from diving clubs to our invitation message at the “Sualti Dunyasi” and “Scubaturk” e-mail discussion groups, we have not encountered any difficulty, either from governmental organisations or from target groups at the sites we have visited so far, including Marmaris, Dağça, Bozburun and Gökova on the south coasts of the Turkish Aegean. All the people we’ve talked with about the Turkish RINT so far have been very enthusiastic, and seem willing to take even greater initiatives for the conservation of monk seals and the marine environment.

TMG: What practical training have you undergone as a result of the current project that will improve monk seal conservation practices in Turkey?

Harun Güçlüsoy: Well, two of us, Avni Gök – the veterinarian of the Municipality of Foça – and myself, had already received previous training in rehabilitation procedures at the Seal Rehabilitation and Research Centre in the Netherlands. That was on common and grey seals, however, and until recently we had never experienced monk seal rehabilitation. But in the current project, Avni and I had the chance of handling a monk seal pup for the first time, which we both found more difficult than expected. In comparison to the pups we handled at the SRRC, the monk seal, Hippocrates, seemed particularly active and strong for his size. It also reminded us that the persons who are handling the pups should be fit physically. Otherwise, though they are small, they can be very difficult to handle.

TMG: The project calls for a full necropsy to be performed on each dead animal found – depending, of course on the stage of decomposition. Why are necropsies important in the conservation of the species?



Rescue Network team members in Turkey collecting a dead monk seal in preparation for necropsy.



Avni Gök and Harun Güçlüsoy tend to an ailing seal at Dilek Peninsula National Park.

Harun Güçlüsoy: As many TMG readers know, monk seals are a very elusive species and difficult to study in field; therefore, necropsies give us direct information about the threats the animals face, their life history, feeding habits and so on. For example, necropsies have confirmed that the majority of pups found stranded on Turkish coasts drowned in fishing gear. Though this confirms breeding in the vicinity of the stranding site, it also indicates the sites where the fishing activity is affecting the health of the local population. And it may also show the sites where important breeding caves should be protected as no-fishing zones. Necropsies may also offer up information on the feeding habits of the monk seals through analysis of stomach contents.

TMG: Have there been instances in the past when rescue and rehab knowledge and techniques might have been applied to save a monk seal’s life in Turkey?

Harun Güçlüsoy: Yes, five times that we are specifically aware of, and all were found along the central Turkish Aegean coasts. **[Editor’s note:** see Further information below for details of past strandings in Turkey.]

TMG: In the event of an orphaned monk seal pup being found in Turkey how/where will you accomplish the rehabilitation, as currently no specific facilities are available?

Harun Güçlüsoy: In the last Dilek National Park stranding, we realised that we could easily set up a temporary facility in Foça. However, we still have to think about organising transfer of the ailing seals. The Authority for Specially Protected Areas decided to offer funds for a rehabilitation unit to be established in Foça. However, during establishment, we will surely need the expertise of MOM and the SRRC. We hope to start this initiative this summer.

TMG: What kind of scientific information do you expect to obtain from the RINT? Is the new data collection system compatible with AFAG's existing FokData database?

Harun Güçlüsoy: Simply, distribution and stranding data. Maybe breeding records. Although the new data collection system is more or less the same as our FokData database, the new data collection system will also allow us to obtain effort data as well. Moreover, second hand data is now being taken into consideration to a certain degree; previously, with the FokData database, we never stored information coming from second hand sources.

TMG: Have the Turkish authorities been supportive?

Harun Güçlüsoy: Yes, during the rehabilitation of the male monk seal found at Dilek NP, the Gendarme station staff on site as well as Aydin Menderes University Veterinary Faculty staff were very helpful. Moreover, the Coast Guard Command Headquarters has given a positive answer to our request that they become the official partner of the Turkish RINT. We are still awaiting positive answers from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, Gendarme Command Headquarters and Undersecretariat of Maritime Affairs.

TMG: How has the public and mass media reacted to the project?

Harun Güçlüsoy: At the sites we visited so far, locals were very supportive. Also two national newspapers and one magazine have already published stories on the project. We hope to see more news coverage by the end of the project.

TMG: Do you intend to continue your cross-border collaboration in the future? If so, what avenues do you envisage?

Harun Güçlüsoy: I think the best answer to this is the [common statement](#) issued by the Turkish and Greek partners of the first project of the EC delegation to Turkey, through a programme that aims to encourage "Turkish-Greek Civil Dialogue". In that statement, both sides voice a strong commitment to further their cooperation and their marine protection efforts.

Further information

Gorgorapti K. 2002. [Greek-Turkish liaison](#). The Monachus Guardian 4 (2): November 2001.

Gorgorapti K. 2002. [Meeting of minds](#). The Monachus Guardian 5 (1): May 2002.

Güçlüsoy, H., H. Örek and N.O. Veryeri. 2003. [Is the rehabilitation of the Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* \(Hermann 1779\) in Turkey necessary?](#) The Monachus Guardian 6 (1): June 2003.

Güçlüsoy, H. 2004. [Seal in need](#). The Monachus Guardian 7 (1): June 2004.

Savas, Y. and H. Güçlüsoy. 2004. [Developing closer ties between Turkey and Greece in monk seal conservation](#), The Monachus Guardian 7 (2): November 2004.

TMG. 2004. [Greeks and Turks join forces in rescue project](#). The Monachus Guardian 7(2): November 2004.