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ACTION PLAN FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF THE MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL (*Monachus monachus*)



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I. INTRODUCTION

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 population of the Mediterranean monk seal have declined rapidly and drastically. Concerted and effective action by all the countries of the Mediterranean concerned is required in order to reverse this trend.

Many important aspects of the monk seal's biology and behaviour are too poorly known to plan a complete management strategy for the species, but so few seals are left that research on them has become very difficult. The situation is too critical to put off action any longer. Plans must be made using the best data available, and then adjusted if necessary as more information is obtained. Action must be taken now.

Proposals from various sources which could help to save the Mediterranean monk seal from extinction are included. Scientific opinion is divided as to what is appropriate or unwise. Some risk to the seals involved. The species is known to be sensitive, and its reactions to close observation or capture are uncertain. However, for a species in danger of extinction the risk of doing nothing may be even greater and may justify active intervention as a last resort. such actions should be undertaken only, after every effort has been made to evaluate and minimize the risks involved.

The major threats to the monk seal are deliberate or accidental killings of adults mostly by fishermen ; and human disturbance of breeding areas. Both have increased as men and seals compete for increasingly scarce resources (fish and remote coastal areas). The first priority is the preservation of remnant populations of the monk seal. The challenge is then to find that delicate balance between the biological requirements of the monk seal and human uses of the Mediterranean and its resources that will allow the species to recover to a viable population level.

This Action Plan for the management of the Mediterranean monk seal outlines both immediate and longer-term actions which, if taken together may succeed in reducing pressures enough to permit gradual recovery. No one action by itself is enough. The different components of the management plan are mutually reinforcing and must be taken together to have a chance of success.

2. REDUCTION IN ADULT MORTALITY

An urgent information campaign among fishermen in all areas where the seal occurs must aim to neutralize their antagonism to the monk seal and win their support for protective measures. Governments should encourage the co-existence of fishermen and monk seals by developing programmes which regulate and control fishing activities and provide additional facilities and opportunities to local fishermen communities. Governments should ensure strict enforcement of regulations prohibiting the use of dynamite for fishing operation, the carrying of fire-arms in boats and the use of any other illegal fishing techniques endangering the monk seal. Improved fishing nets should be developed which seals cannot damage or become entangled in, and fishermen should receive the assistance necessary to convert to using such nets. Research is needed on techniques for repelling seals from fishing equipment and fishing areas. States that have not yet extented legal protected to the monk seal should do so at once. Governments are strongly urged to ensure that existing protective measures are enforced.

3. ESTABLISHMENT OF A NETWORK OF MARINE RESERVES

All countries that still have breeding monk seal populations should make immediate efforts for the stringent protection of the remaining seal breeding sites, by isolating seals from incompatible human activities.

An inventory of caves all around the Mediterranean is needed to identify breeding caves for inclusion in a network of protected areas for monk seals. Such work has already been carried out for sites like sardinia, Greece (Nothern Sporades), Tunisia (Galite) and should be expanded to cover other areas.

A network of marine reserves should be created across the Mediterranean, covering both existing and potential monk seal habitats, so spaced that they can be gradually repopulated as other protective measures take effect and the population recovers. Monk seal reserves should protect suitable caves or other breeding and resting areas, and should be surrounded by a buffer zone of 40 kilometers covering major fishing areas. Fishing with nets or other techniques known to threaten or conflict with the seals should be prohibited or controlled in the buffer zone. Coastal development should be restricted to compatible activities, and intensive tourist development should be avoided in these zones.

Tourist visits or other human disturbance of breeding and resting sites should be carefully regulated, it should be completely prohibited during the seal breeding season and while the pups are young.

4 RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION AND REHABILITATION

All countries should encourage an intensive programme of data collection on seal biology and ecology and the interaction of seals with fisheries. The latter research should include economic and sociological aspects. Research should be conducted so as not to increase the threats to any seal population.

The establishment of national networks of observers is an extremely effective way of determining which areas are of particular importance for the seals. The exact numbers of seals in these areas can then be determined by intensive study using, for example, "camera traps". Sighting of seals should be reported to appropriate national bodies of focal points.

All information obtained on the species should be compiled and evaluated on a regional basis, possibly by an expert group under the auspices of the Coordinating unit of the Mediterranean Action Plan (UNEP/MEDU, Athens) and be distributed through its information exchange network.

A small number of rescue centres should be established to receive wounded seals and abandoned pups. When they have recovered these seals should be released in protected areas, preferably in the region where they were originally found. The survival of these animas and the contribution to the wild population should be carefully assessed.

If all other attempts to reverse the species' decline fail, the following measures should be considered : captive breeding ;translocation of isolated, non-reproducing individuals to better protected groups ; and the transfer of pups from healthy colonies to undersized or newly established ones. All appropriate precautions to ensure the adequate welfare of the animals and adherence to international agreements should be taken.

A pilot project to determine the practical feasibility of such programmes may be appropriate if it does not increase the risks to the remaining wild population. The value of such a programme for the conservation of the stocks concerned should also be assessed.

5. INFORMATION PROGRAMMES

An information programme for fishermen and fishing communities should aim at reducing the killing of seals and encouraging reporting of seal sightings and other observations to the appropriate focal point.

Special information activities should be developed for tourists and tourists and the tourist industry in areas where tourism threatens seal breeding areas.

Information materials should be produced for military authorities, industrial developers and the shipping industry concerning actions they can take for monk seal conservation.

A widespread campaign for the protection of the Mediterranean monk seal should encourage public support for conservation measures.

Training programmes should be developed for protected area managers responsible for monk seal reserves.

6. CO-ORDINATION, REVIEW AND FINANCE

The Coordinator of the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP), Mr. Aldo Manos, agreed that the UNEP/MEDU office, Athens could take responsibility for the coordination of the different activities.

The major coordinative functions will be :

- collect the data ;
- create an information network ;
- develop monk seal protected areas ; and
- facilitate regional research projects on monk sealspresent Action Plan.

The Consultation suggested that a person be employed through voluntary offers or through projects or contract in order to facilitate coordination of existing and new activities for research, protection and management.

The status of the monk seal and the content of this management plan should be reviewed by a regional expert meeting every two years and its report be submitted to the meeting of the contracting parties of the Barcelona Convention for endorsement.

Governments, whose local monk seal populations have been exterminated, should assist countries with remaining populations in their efforts to protect these in the hope that recovery of the species will permit its eventual reintroduction throughout its original range.

SPA/RAC WORKING AREAS

*SPA/ RAC, the UNEP/ MAP **Specially Protected Areas Regional Activity Centre**, was created in 1985 to assist the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention (21 Mediterranean contries and the European Union) in implementing the Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity in the Mediterranean (SPA/BD Protocol).*

POST-2020 SAPBIO

Strategic Action Programme for the **Conservation** of **Biodiversity** and **Sustainable Management** of **Natural Resources** in the **Mediterranean Region**

SPAMI

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Marine turtles

Cetaceans

Specially Protected Areas

Monitoring

Mediterranean Monk Seal

Cartilaginous fishes
(Chondrichtyans)

Coralligenous and other calcareous bio-concretions

Marine vegetation

Marine and coastal bird species

Listed in Annex II of the Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity in the Mediterranean

Dark Habitats

Habitats and species associated with seamounts, underwater caves and canyons, aphotic hard beds and chemo-synthetic phenomena

Species introduction and invasive species

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