

SITUATION REPORT ON THE MONK SEAL

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The threat of extinction which has lain over the Monk Seal during the last few years, has stimulated the revival of an International Conference to clarify the status of the species and to propose a programme for its survival. The first International Conference on the Monk Seal was held in Rhodes (2nd - 5th May, 1978) on the joint initiative of the Greek Government, the I.U.C.N., and the United Nations Programme for the Environment.

Sixty-one persons, travelling from 20 different countries, participated in work sessions under the Presidency of Professor K. Ronald, University of Guelph, and of the co-President, Dr. R. Duguy, Director of the Museum of La Rochelle.

From the wealth of information furnished by 16 reports devoted to the evolution of different populations of Monk Seal, a summary has allowed a precise definition of the actual status of this species.

Mauritania - a colony which seems to maintain itself at a level of about 50 animals, actually represents the most important existing concentration.

Morocco - no certain observations of the actual presence of this species.

Algeria - the population here is estimated at about 90 animals divided into 4 principle colonies.

Tunisia - a small number of animals still exists, principally grouped round the islands of Galite.

Israel - the species here has actually disappeared.

Greece - the biggest number (about 400) of Monk Seals in the world are found in Greek waters: Dodecanese, Ionian Isles, the northern Sporades, the southern Cyclades, the Gulf of Corinth and the region of Crete.

Turkey - on the Turkish coasts, notably on the Aegean Sea and in the west of the Black Sea, the population was estimated at about 200 animals.

U.S.S.R. - no observations of certain presence.

Bulgaria - previous presence not confirmed in reality.

Yugoslavia - several isolated specimens survive around the Adriatic islands.

Italy - there are only a few seals observed singly in Sardinia and the island of Montecristo.

France - the last Monk Seals were observed in Corsica in 1973; no observations have been recorded since this date.

Spain - the disappearance of the last animals round the Balearic Islands seems to have been in 1975.

The gathering of all this information allows an estimate to be made of the total number of the species in its area of distribution: the world population is of the order of 500 - 1,000 Monk Seals.

A second group of reports presented concerned different details of the biology of the species. Comparisons between previous information and these actual recordings suggest that the environment in the grottos does not resemble, as a general rule, what it was before: it perhaps forms a marginal habitat which has progressively been adopted because of disturbances due to man's activities. An uncertainty exists which concerns the existence of geographically racial differences between the populations of the Atlantic and those of the Mediterranean. In the present state of our knowledge it would be thought imprudent to move animals from one population to another.

After a discussion about the various pros and cons of the reports on the work carried out, the conference adopted a plan of action for the conservation of the Monk Seal and approved a resolution being transmitted to the Governments concerned. These propositions, in formal language, are as follows:

The Monk Seal, which has had a very long historical association with man, presents a great aesthetic and scientific interest, notably to serve as an indicator of the state of the marine medium.

Its populations are declining regularly and are threatened with extinction by the activities of man, resulting in the disturbance of its dormitory sites and its breeding grounds, of the direct destruction, due to accidental capture with fishing tackle, of the over-exploitation of fish and of the pollution of the environment.

In consequence, it is demanded that this species benefits from legal protection in all the countries concerned. The strict application of this measure should be matched with information of the population, notably from fishermen, in respect of the seals and their habitat.

The establishment of a system of reserves for the Monk Seal is required with urgency. This programme will take note of the conservation of existing habitats but also of new potential sites.

Pollution should be reduced to acceptable levels for a marine habitat.

It does not appear desirable to envisage actually the re-introduction of animals to the sites in which they were living beforehand. On the contrary, individual animals rescued from the wild, or orphans, ought to be placed in centres offering specialist care.

Lastly, research should be held following this study, as soon as possible, into the biology of the species which at the moment is still very imperfectly understood.

N.b. The complete report of the First International Conference on the Hooded seal is actually in the course of publication under the care of the U.N.E.P. and I.U.C.N.