



Guest Editorial

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WITNESSING THE MONK SEAL'S EXTINCTION IN THE BLACK SEA

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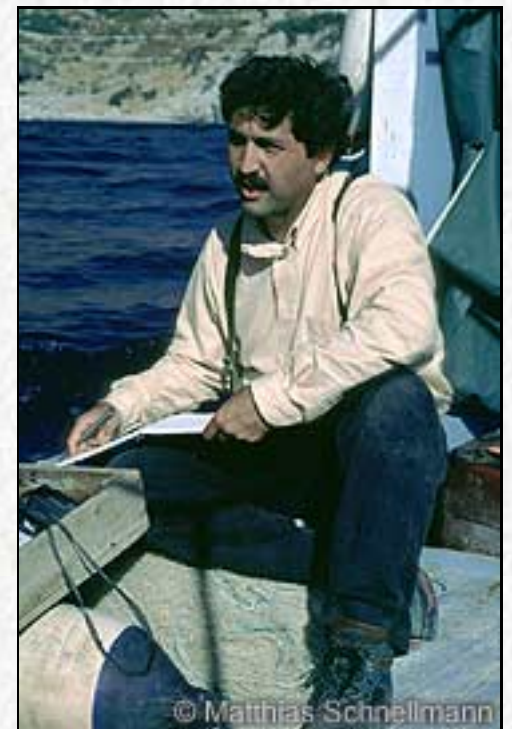
Along Turkey's Black Sea coasts, the actual existence of the Mediterranean monk seal remained a myth to us for years. When Gökhan Türe, co-founder of METU Subaqua Society, first told me about the live monk seal captures that had taken place near Eregli, I could only imagine the incredible scenes of local men trying to catch the animals inside the dark caves along the cliffs. In 1988, during a long term survey in Eregli, we tracked down Sükrü Aydın, an old fishermen known locally as the "bear catcher" because of the many seals he had netted and sold on to fairs, travelling shows and zoos. From his reminiscences, we were even able to trace two monk seals that had ended up in Ankara Zoo in 1957 and 1961.

Our interviews with local fishermen also indicated a substantial reduction in the frequency of seal sightings during the late 1980s. Our follow-up survey in 1994 showed that monk seals had become extinct in the vicinity of Eregli. Despite this major setback, we still needed to know what was happening to monk seals along the remainder of Turkey's central Black Sea coasts.

Our subsequent surveys in 1993, 1995 and 1997 covered the long stretch of coast between Akcakoca and Trabzon. It was important for us to know if there was still a viable monk seal population that might respond to urgent conservation efforts. Although our team discovered about 50 coastal caves along unspoilt cliffs that appeared suitable for breeding or resting, and spent months conducting observations, we failed to find a single trace of a living monk seal. Apart from that disappointment, what shocked us most of all was the scarcity of fish observed during our dives.

It seemed unlikely that the disappearance of the seals and plunging fish stocks could be unrelated. During interviews with some 150 local people, mostly fishermen, we collected over 200 reported seal sightings, but these covered the period between 1993 and 1997, and the majority of fishermen had made only single observations during that 5-year period!

Indeed, from the information that we were gathering, it was clear enough that the Mediterranean monk seal had been reduced from relative abundance to virtual extinction within a human lifetime. Monk seal distribution ranged from Igneada in the western reaches of the Black Sea to Yakakent in the east (though its easternmost appearance was at Mersin village, Ordu). Old fishermen told us of herds of monk seals dashing out of caves when disturbed; of male seals challenging each other in territorial fights sometimes lasting several hours. In contrast to the Aegean coast of Turkey, our research at the Black Sea showed that habitat destruction and disturbance by tourism actually played a negligible role in the decline of the monk seal population. The dominant factor here was direct killing and live capture. Historically, locals exploited the seals for their fat and skin and the animals were also targeted by fishermen in the bounty hunting of dolphins during the 1970s. Both dolphin and seal were regarded as the fisherman's arch enemy, damaging nets and stealing fish.



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Between Akcakoca and Sinop, villagers reminisced about how they or their fathers had boiled down their killed seals to produce lighting oil, sometimes also selling the pelts to companies in larger cities to manufacture leather. In neighbouring mountain villages, poverty during the 1940s and 1950s had driven inhabitants to hunt monk seals to produce “çarik”, a primitive yet durable shoe made either of ox or seal skin. Seal skin was also processed to make harnesses for oxen used in ploughing.

Live seal captures brought additional profit to a few enterprising fishermen. Before he died in 1996, Aydin reported capturing at least 21 monk seals, although I suspect it was much more. Another fisherman, Tunc, claimed that he and Aydin had captured dozens, and perhaps even as many as a hundred monk seals inside the sea grottos between Igneada and Doganyurt, fulfilling orders received from fairs, zoos and showmen between 1948 and 1973.

Although our own surveys had failed to find any trace of surviving monk seals, it was still comforting to know that there had been sightings among local fishermen up until 1997. In the years that followed we still expected to receive news of additional observations. As time passed, however, our disappointment and unease intensified. It wasn't that sightings had simply dwindled but that, during this entire period, not even one monk seal observation or encounter had been reported. There was silence even from the Cide, Doganyurt and Sinop coasts where the majority of seal sightings had been collected during the 93-97 period.

And finally, when I drove from Sinop to Akcakoca in July 2001 for a monk seal television documentary, a week of surveys among our old friends confirmed that there had been no seal sightings, no incidences of damage to the stationary nets of artisanal fishermen and no half-chewed turbot catch – a simple but effective indication of monk seal presence – in short, no proof of a living monk seal in the last four years!

The evidence at our disposal now strongly suggests that the Mediterranean monk seal may have become extinct throughout the Black Sea. Given the hectic marine traffic through the Bosphorus, and the handful of seal survivors in the Marmara that are already teetering on the brink of extinction, natural recolonisation of the Black Sea seems doubtful.

It is unlikely that the monk seal's passing in the Black Sea will be met with anything but silence or a brief shrug of regret. And yet, if only for the historical record, it is important to acknowledge how apathy, indifference, lack of judgement and ecological awareness all conspired to bring about its demise.

During the late 1970s, the Ministry of Agriculture supplied ammunition to fishermen to hunt dolphins, even though endangered monk seals were commonly victims of these “official bullets”. Despite numerous resolutions urging action, relevant government departments, universities and NGOs did little or nothing to address the monk seal's alarming decline.

When I first became acquainted with the species, I remember being impressed by expert opinion describing its ecological role in the marine environment. The monk seal was at the head of the food chain we were told; it was an ‘indicator’ species, whose increase or decline would reveal the health of the marine ecosystem. What would befall the seal might eventually befall humans as well. Can it be that government officials and academics read such information, but didn't really believe it? Perhaps the ecologists were being alarmist again? If so, perhaps it is time they looked again. The monk seal in the Black Sea is gone. The marine ecosystem is collapsing. Fish stocks have hit rock bottom, unable to withstand the pressures of industrial fleets. Many artisanal fishermen are virtually destitute and many are desperate to sell their boats.

The monk seal's probable extinction in the Black Sea is a milestone in the history of the species yet the event, however tragic, calls for far more than sorrow or regret. The same kind of events are now unfolding in other areas, the Marmara, the Aegean, the eastern Mediterranean. Isn't it time that governments finally recognised that monk seals are truly the ecological indicators of the health of the sea upon which we all depend?

Cem Orkun Kiraç, [SAD-AFAG](#), Turkey, October 2001.

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