



Assessments for threats and ecological needs of monk seal populations in Turkish Aegean and the Sea of Marmara

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Turkey has suitable coastal habitats for monk seal even though habitat deterioration has occurred in some coastal segments since 80s until today and its pristine coasts are still home to regularly breeding monk seal populations. The current distribution of the species covers the southwestern coasts of the Sea of Marmara, the Aegean Sea and the Levantine coasts of Turkey including islands while sightings occur more frequent and in expanded ranges in the recent years.

The threats to monk seals can be divided into two broad categories as primary and secondary, based on degree of risks they pose as observed in the last 32 years in the country. The primary threats are composed of –coastal habitat deterioration, –monk seal deaths mainly due to pup/young entanglements to set nets and deliberate killings, and –disturbances inside their caves by tourist divers and recently by photographers/video shooters & conservationists(!) Coastal development and urbanization pressure accelerated in the coasts of Turkish Aegean and the Sea of Marmara recently resulting in habitat destruction in certain pristine coasts, whose impact on monk seal’s ecology will be forever as an irreversible process. The primary threats are mainly observed in the coasts of Izmir, Aydın, Muęla and Antalya provinces. The secondary threats include –intense human activities & boat traffic along coasts near seal caves/caverns, –decreased fish stocks and –marine pollution. The effect of decreased fish stocks and marine pollution on monk seals ecology are not fully assessed although a few findings are published until now.

It is envisaged, in the near future, that monk seal-human interaction will be more intense in the following two economic areas especially in the above-mentioned provinces as a result of increased human activities and expanding monk seal populations; 1- *fishery* including recreational & artisanal and 2- *coastal tourism activities* including excursion boat tours and diving in the main tourist attraction locations and adjacent coastal zones. In order to mitigate negative interactions between human and monk seals, a wide range of public awareness and information & rescue network should be enhanced in the country, which will also serve early warning for any infringements relevant to coastal habitat destruction.

On the other hand, the threats issue is rather complicated and not homogeneous throughout Turkish coasts and it won’t be a solution to do a single threat prioritization for the whole country. In other words, remedial actions based on a general threat priority model cannot be utilized for whole coasts. This is due to the existence of various socio-economic structures with different weights in each sub region within the country. Hence, threat analysis studies should be made on sub regional basis in which threat priorities be established exclusively.