

The recovery of the Mediterranean monk seal in the Atlantic: a success history

The population remaining of the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*), one of the most threatened mammals in the world and considered as “Critically Endangered” by the IUCN, is estimated around 400-500 seals in a few remote areas of the Mediterranean and the Eastern Atlantic coastline. It has disappeared from most of its distribution range, except for a few isolated groups. In the Atlantic there are two breeding colonies: one on the *Desertas* Islands (Madeira) and the other on the *Cabo Blanco* Peninsula (Morocco-Mauritania).

Important initiatives and projects have been developed in the last years in Atlantic, within the framework of the CMS, which is cause for a renewed optimism with regards to monk seal conservation. There is an Action plan for their recovery in the Atlantic approved at the 8th COP of CMS and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by Mauritania, Morocco, Portugal and Spain, under the auspices of CMS. The agreement contained the mandate of implementation of the Plan, which contain as most important action the creation and effective operation of a network of special protected areas for the conservation of the species located strategically in the region.

In Madeira in the 1980s the species was in the verge of extinction with no more than 6-8 animals; the decline was reversed following the creation and implementation and of a Nature Reserve in the *Desertas* Islands. Since then, monk seal numbers have increased to reach around 25-30 individuals in 2009.

In the Cabo Blanco peninsula, which holds the largest aggregation of monk seals in the world, in 1996 there was around 300-400 individuals, but suffer in 1997 a mass die-off (by a natural fitotoxin), that killed two thirds of this population, remaining around 100 seals in 1998 (the majority juveniles); this caused strong concern of their probabilities of recovery, even based on the most optimistic estimates. The urgent develop of diverse conservation initiatives in the area, under the framework of the Action Plan, included the establishment of a no-fishing area and the elimination of disturbances in the breeding caves and vicinity, in collaboration with local and regional authorities and artisanal fishermen. All permit that the monk seal population of this colony recovered to 200 individuals in 2009 and that the productivity of the colony have been increased from 24 pups in 1998, to 46 in 2008. Also recently a small but incipient colony, up to 20 individuals, have been using open beaches; even a female, by first time in centuries, gave a birth in 2009 in the beach. This habitat it is the optimal for the survival of pups, but was abandoned due to human disturbance and persecution in past centuries. After nine years of strict protection and elimination of threats and disturbance. These facts allow being optimistic in relation to the recovery of this colony.

The Plan provides a new focus for monk seal conservation by specifying the commitment of the countries in the species’ distribution range, as signatories to the Bonn Convention. It is the first time that monk seal conservation actions in the Atlantic region have been approached in a spirit of co-operation and international co-ordination. For the future the plan has provided, with the possible assistance of UNEP and LIFE-web, create a large protected area in the Aguerguer-Cabo Barbas out to the north of Cabo Blanco and covering a major area of potential habitat that will permit the extension of the species to the north of their range.



