A Monk's Life

They once symbolized good fortune, but today's Mediterranean monk seals have no such luck. Now reclusive and rare, these seals are surrounded by human threats.

By Malcolm Smith

I had come a long way to peer into a large fissure at the base of a limestone cliff on the tiny Greek island of Piperi. But this was no ordinary fissure. Out in the cobalt-green waters of the Aegean under an early summer sun, I was looking into a sea cave—the preferred birthing spot for one of the most endangered animals on the planet.

This sea cave, with its house-sized interior and its gently shelving shingle beach, is a special place. Two seal pups were born inside this cave last fall. The pups were welcome additions to the rarest population of seals in the world—the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*).

Once abundant across a huge swath of sea from the western North African coast right through the Mediterranean and into the Black Sea to the east, Mediterranean monk seals are now extremely difficult to find. Little wonder. There may be just 500 or so left, scattered over isolated stretches of coast and offshore islands. More than half of them live in Greek waters, such as this spot 50 miles east of the Greek mainland.

With me on the boat to the sea cave, Vassilis Kouroutos is the scientific officer in charge of the National Marine Park of Alonissos, one of the few areas designated to protect the monk seals. The Marine Park covers a sea area of almost 900 square miles and includes seven islands: Alonissos, the largest island, is inhabited; Piperi, a smaller island, is just three miles long and half a mile wide.

Shoals of fish drift past us in the crystal-clear water. Overhead, scimitar-shaped Eleonora's falcons show off their amazing aerial maneuvers. Steep, off-white limestone cliffs plunge almost vertically down to the sea, and on the slopes above are a scatter of large pine trees that appear to be hundreds of years old. It’s an idyllic place to anchor.

With a three-mile boat exclusion zone around the island, Piperi has one of the best-protected remaining monk seal breeding colonies in the world. In recent years, about eight pups have been reared here. Kouroutos says the seals are very sensitive to
disturbance when they are breeding, and the island’s exclusion zone has boosted their breeding success.

“At this time of year, the seals are scattered well out to sea. They rarely come close to the islands so it’s difficult to find any,” he says, as our boat bobs gently in the shallow water close to one of Piperi’s caves. “There may be no more than 20 seals in the whole of the park’s sea area at any one time, and they often travel huge distances.”

A Monk by Any Name

If you’re lucky enough to spot one, monk seals look like big-eyed torpedoes. Males can reach nearly eight feet in length and 650 pounds, making them one of the largest seal species in the world. Females are only slightly smaller. Adult males are black with a distinctive white belly patch; females are browner or grayer with a lighter belly patch. They can live until they are 20 to 30 years old, sometimes longer. Clumsy and sluggish on shingle beaches, once in the water they are impressive swimmers that can outmaneuver a shark.

Monk seals reproduce at a slow rate, which is a primary factor for their population’s struggle to recover. Adult females don’t have pups until they are more than four years old. Even then they might give birth to only one pup in alternate years.

When pups are born, in the autumn, they measure no more than three feet long and have dark woolly coats with a white belly patch. In their first days of life, they are extremely vulnerable to drowning, particularly in stormy sea conditions. But by the time they reach two weeks old, they become masterly swimmers.

Feeding mainly at night, monk seals feast on spiny lobsters, eels, octopus, and reef fishes. They can easily dive to 200 feet, sometimes more. Not often seen, except by fishermen, they generally keep away from any human presence. Sometimes in the winter, when there is less boat traffic, a monk seal may be spotted close to shore or even in an island harbor.

What gave the monk seal its name? Is it because many of the islands in the Aegean had monasteries? Or because the smooth, dark brown coat of an adult seal is said to resemble the robe of a Franciscan friar? Most likely, its reclusive, monk-like nature led to the seal’s name. Mediterranean monk seals never live in groups, leading a pretty solitary existence for a seal.

Of the other monk seals in the world, 1,200 or so Hawaiian monk seals are scattered around islands and atolls in the Hawaiian archipelago. The only other, the Caribbean monk seal, was last seen in 1952 and is now considered extinct.

Sealing Their Fate

In ancient Greece, monk seals were venerated because they showed a great love for both the sea and sun, ironically two of the main reasons tourists flock to the Mediterranean today. To fishermen and seafarers they were an omen of good fortune. One of the world’s first coins, minted around 500 B.C., depicted the head of a monk seal. Ancient vessels such as water jugs sometimes bore their images, and they were immortalized in the writings of Homer, Plutarch, and Aristotle.

People found that the naturally confiding monk seals were easy to kill using clubs, spears, and nets. The animals provided meat, fur, skins for shoes and clothing and fat for making candles. In early antiquity they were probably not killed in sufficient numbers to
endanger their existence.

Mediterranean monk seals are impressive swimmers.  
\(\text{(Luis Quinta/naturepl.com)}\)

But by the Middle Ages many monk seal populations had already died out. Pollution, two World Wars, increasing industrialization of fishing, and the enormous boom in tourism since the 1970s have all depleted their numbers further.

Over time, human pressure has altered the monk seal’s basic behavior, according to experts such as William Johnson, editor of The Monachus Guardian, a publication dedicated to the conservation of monk seals. In order to steer clear of human impact, monk seals no longer breed on open beaches as they did in the past. They have become shy creatures that today breed only in sea caves—out of sight, on the most inaccessible islands. Only in places like the strictly protected Desertas Islands south of Madeira in the Eastern Atlantic, where there is virtually zero disturbance, have mothers with pups been glimpsed once again on beaches.

These exquisite mammals face an array of threats. Coastal developments, especially for tourism, have destroyed habitat. An increase in the use of pleasure boats disturbs the seals.

Fishermen sometimes kill the seals deliberately, and sometimes entangle them in fishing nets unintentionally. Pollution and over-fishing lead to a decline of fish and shellfish, impacting the seals’ food supply. Occasional disease outbreaks among monk seal populations add to the threats.

**Prompting Protection**

The need to protect monk seals picked up momentum in the 1970s, eventually leading to the designation of the National Marine Park of Alonissos in 1992. That act in itself was not enough to help the seals. It wasn’t until two years ago that the Greek government allocated funding to staff the park in order to put the protections into practice.

The Marine Park is divided into two main zones, with different restrictions in place. More restrictions apply in Zone A, including around the idyllic island of Piperi. Scuba diving and spear-gun fishing are prohibited. Fishing boats have restrictions on how close to the islands they may fish. Pleasure and passenger boats are limited to anchoring in a few marked places.

Lighter restrictions apply in Zone B, which takes up about a third of the park’s area—including the main island, Alonissos, with its 3,000 residents and about 10,000 tourists each year. In this zone, oil tankers and hazardous cargo boats are banned and all...
boats have to keep under ten knots near parts of the coast. Mapping out these protection zones at the Marine Park is one thing. Formulating the safeguards and measures needed to put the protection into practice is more challenging. One of the biggest stumbling blocks is winning the hearts and minds of local people. On Alonissos, suspicions abound. Many of the locals have fished these seas for generations, and are wary of the restrictions being imposed upon their way of life for the sake of the monk seals.

“The Greek government has imposed this designation on us, restricts our fishing but gives us no compensation,” says Theodoros Malamatenias, who represents the Fishermen’s Union of Alonissos. We are talking at an outdoor cafe overlooking Alonissos from old Patitiri, the island’s original main village high above the sea. The incessant calls of cicadas from the cafe’s shade-bearing trees reverberate on the village’s stone walls.

“We have 60 boats on Alonissos, all family owned. We have fished the seas around these islands for many years, generations before us. This is our livelihood. Piperi used to be good fishing,” says Malamatenias. “They’ve stopped us from going there, but the Marine Park doesn’t give us any information to show if fish numbers have increased there. The Marine Park people don’t seem to want to work with us, so we’re suspicious.”

These concerns are mirrored by Dimitris Christou who runs the Nautical Union of Alonissos in his spare time, a voluntary organization promoting opportunities for sailing, canoeing, fishing, and diving in an environmentally responsible way.

“I don’t agree that the seals are so easily disturbed,” says Christou. “The seals come close to fishermen to take fish. People here want to visit Piperi, but we are banned. We are local people and we would not cause any damage. We could go when the seals aren’t breeding.”

Local tour boat companies are frustrated too. Ikos Travel offers boat trips that concentrate on wildlife and culture. The company’s owner, Pakis Athanassiou, was involved in getting the Marine Park designated, but he thinks that some of the regulations are unnecessary.

“It’s a big advantage having the Marine Park, and it attracts a lot of people to Alonissos,” he says. “But there are some silly restrictions such as no snorkeling or swimming except in two small bays around one of the islands where there are no seals breeding. Why?”

Panagiotis Vlaikos, the mayor of Alonissos, a courteous man who was formerly a physics teacher at the island’s high school, has a more balanced approach. He explains that tourism is by far the most important component of the island’s economy.

“The Marine Park is a benefit for the island. There is no point having such an area designated for conservation unless there are some restrictions. It wouldn’t make sense,” says Vlaikos. “We have an international responsibility to protect our wildlife, including the monk seal.”

Does MOm Have the Answer?

How can protections for the easily disturbed monk seal be balanced with the concerns of the local people? The answer may lie in a project that is trying to bridge the two sides. The Hellenic Society for the Study and Protection of the Monk Seal—abbreviated to MOm (based on the monk seal’s Latin name, *Monachus monachus*)—has 7,500 members
and was set up in 1988. It was instrumental in getting this Marine Park designated. But it also does seal monitoring, research, and conservation education.

Greek fishermen dock at Pateriri harbor. Protections for the Mediterranean monk seal include restrictions on where the fishermen can pursue their livelihood. *(Malcolm Smith)*

“Our project is trying to bring together fishermen and conservationists,” says Eleni Tounta, who runs MOm on Alonissos. The island is one of seven hotspots across Greece where the group is trying to find solutions. Tounta says the group is looking into adding deterrent devices to fishing nets, so that seals will not try to take the fish. This serves the double duty of helping the fishermen save their catch, while also preventing the seals from entangling themselves, leading to injury or death.

Tounta adds that MOm maintains good relations with fishermen, and the group has no evidence that local fishermen are actually killing seals intentionally. Every year there are reports of seals killed by fisherman elsewhere in Greek waters. The group hopes to continue supporting the local people, while promoting more protections for the monk seals. One proposal is to extend the Marine Park to an even greater area.

If monk seals are to prosper, though, the Marine Park needs to generate a continuous dialogue with local interests to eliminate their fears and garner their support. And other sea areas need to be designated and managed appropriately by other Mediterranean countries in cooperation with local fishermen to provide a protected network.

The future of the Marine Park is somewhat uncertain, however. The European Union, recognizing the importance of wildlife conservation, does fund about 75 percent of the park. But the Greek government’s contribution is only guaranteed until the end of this year.

Over time, the Mediterranean monk seal has lost its prominence and its prevalence. It has adapted to human impacts by withdrawing to the few isolated places it has left. Now experts cannot express confidence about this elusive mammal’s chances of long-term survival. “Greece hosts the world’s largest amount of monk seal habitat and the greatest number of animals,” says Giuseppe Notarbartolo di Sciarra, a Sicilian international sea mammal expert. “The monk seals’ survival will largely depend on the capability of Greece to protect the animal in its waters.” It seems the Mediterranean monk seal has lost its historic standing as an omen of good fortune.
—Malcolm Smith is a freelance writer living in England.

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