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Guest Editorial

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MONK SEAL APOCALYPSE

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I'm reading a book, rocked gently on a small boat, moored in a few meters of water off the south coast of Patmos, a Greek island in the Eastern Aegean Sea. It is late afternoon on the first of August 2002. My wife and daughter chat, my son dives from the top of the wheelhouse with great splashes. All of a sudden I hear my wife's hushed voice: "Look, a seal!" We all freeze. And a seal, indeed, it is – a huge seal. The animal swims calmly at the surface, in a meandering way, towards our boat. About 30m away from us the seal lifts its whiskered head out of the water, takes a long, hard look straight into my eyes, then dives. It surfaces again minutes later on the other side of the boat, farther along the coast, seemingly inspecting from above a trammel net which had been set by a local fisherman no earlier than an hour before. We follow the seal in its early evening patrol along that stretch of coast, and watch it as it alternates 3 minute-long dives with short periods at the surface. We keep track of the seal's movements, first with our naked eyes, then with the binoculars, until finally it disappears into the distance, 40 minutes after we first spotted it. Forty minutes that changed my attitude to these Aegean shores, 32 years after I first began frequenting them.

As a marine mammalogist by profession, I have come into contact with many different cetacean and pinniped species in their habitats – including Hawaiian monk seals – and remember every sighting as being a memorable event. This time, however, it was particularly special, perhaps the most special event of all. I have been coming to Patmos to spend my summer vacations ever since 1971. I always longed to set my eyes on a Mediterranean monk seal, and often found myself looking at the beautiful yet empty cliffs and beaches, trying to imagine them teeming with seals. With the passing of time I had even begun to wonder if such a treat would ever be bestowed upon me or upon my children. But now, after so much waiting, I had finally managed to put myself in a place where a Mediterranean monk seal would appear. It was truly a revelation – or 'apocalypse' – to evoke the well-known scripture written on Patmos two millennia ago that made the island famous.

Five days later a seal revealed itself again. I have no idea whether this second one was a different seal, but I suspect it was the same as before since it had a very similar appearance. This time the animal hauled out on a small beach in front of my eyes, and I was able to take a few snapshots from a distance with my small digital camera. Worried that I might scare the seal away, I remained at a safe distance, and so the quality of the photographs is rather modest.

What I found most striking was how this seal (or these seals?) appeared to be confident of humans, and consequently quite vulnerable. The beginning of August is peak tourist season on Patmos, and during both sightings motorboats of all sorts were passing by every few minutes further offshore. The people aboard these boats gave the impression of being totally oblivious to the presence of a seal near them. The seal also had an air of confidence about it, cautious and aware as it might have been. I found it a good sign that the seal chose to be in a populated area in a season in which the strong *meltemi* winds offer long stretches of windward coasts that are empty of people.

However, I also realised that I could easily have killed that seal with a rifle, had I had the intention, for some reason, of carrying out such a criminal act. I understand that direct mortality inflicted by fishermen is still the greatest conservation threat that monk seals face in the Mediterranean. The impression I got on Patmos strongly supports this. Fishermen still declare that they hate seals, although there is some hope that such animosity will eventually melt away as decreasingly remunerative fishing activities are progressively abandoned in favour of the more lucrative catering for tourists. On Patmos there are just over a dozen fishermen left. One of these, interviewed after our sighting, said that he knew very well that there are still seals around the island. However, I also noted the continued existence of serious misconceptions. Fishermen are earnestly convinced that there are still numerous

seals about, and all this talk about seals disappearing is nonsense circulated by environmentalists. They also say that seals and dolphins are a great problem for them because they tear their nets, and will try to kill them if they only get the chance, or chase them away at best.

But I also had the clear impression that at this particular moment in history there may be a chance that the tide could finally be turned in favour of the seals, if only we were to accelerate the solution of problems affecting the fishermen. If this is true, I see three strategic management actions as having a high priority. First, address and solve problems locally: work with the locals, island by island, rather than on a grander scale. If we manage to make a good home for the seals on an island, they'll stay there; and if we manage to construct a mosaic of "good" islands for the seals, we may be able to reconstruct a population. Second, ensure that the locals, and particularly the fishermen, are made aware of the real condition of the monk seal through sources of information that they trust. Fishermen should be convinced that, rather than being plentiful, monk seals have indeed disappeared from most of their former range, and that they only remain in perilously small numbers in scattered archipelagos like these in the Aegean. Efforts must also be made to impress upon the locals the ecological and symbolic importance of saving the monk seal. Third, and most important, a concrete programme of incentives for the locals, to convert the presence of seals from nuisance to advantage, must be devised. This is not an easy task. However, the potential benefits are enormous and so an effort should be undertaken. In Sweden, for example, Lapp reindeer herders are compensated for the numbers of predators – notably wolverines – inhabiting their grazing lands, regardless of stock losses and other forms of damage. Even if it were impossible to convince the local or national authorities in Greece to adopt such an approach, this could be accomplished through NGO initiatives. The affluent international community that converges on Patmos every summer may be particularly sensitive to the problem and be willing to contribute.



Giuseppe Notarbartolo di Sciara, Patmos, Greece, August 2002.

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