

# Occurrence of the critically endangered Mediterranean Monk Seal, *Monachus monachus*, at Olympos-Beydağları National Park, Turkey

(Mammalia: Phocidae)

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**Abstract.** The coast of Antalya, despite being acknowledged as an important Monk Seal (*Monachus monachus* Hermann, 1779) habitat, has never been studied systematically for the occurrence of the species. The rocky cliff-bound coast of Antalya Olympos-Beydağları National Park, where human disturbance appears minimal compared to the rest in the area, was surveyed between June and November 2008. Of the 39 caves discovered, both along mainland and island coasts, only 8 were considered suitable for placing photo-traps and a total of 11 automatic cameras was deployed. The caves were periodically visited to retrieve recorded digital images. 4 individual seals (2 adults, 2 juveniles) were photo-identified in 3 caves. The National Park provides suitable habitat for breeding. Human disturbance was very high throughout the Monk Seal habitats, and the most serious pressure appeared to be the human intruders in the caves. From the conservation point-of-view, three sites in the surveyed area, Üçadalar, Olympos and Adrasan, were noted as significant and so require strict protection.

**Key words.** Mediterranean Monk Seal, Olympos-Beydağları National Park, photo-trapping, endangered species, Antalya, Turkey.

## Introduction

The Mediterranean Monk Seal (*Monachus monachus* Hermann, 1779) has been listed by IUCN as critically endangered since 1996 (IUCN 2007). The north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean, the coast of Mersin in particular, is one of the last segments hosting a continuously breeding Monk Seal colony (GUCU et al. 2004). In the 1990s, a series of conservation measures was applied on the west coast of Mersin and the size of the colony has increased consequently (GUCU 2003). Some of the individuals belonging to the colony were sighted outside their respective area, probably in search of new breeding sites (GUCU & OK 2004). A new-born pup found on the Turkish/Syrian border, 175 km east of Mersin, indicated that the seals of the Eastern Mediterranean have spread over a wider range than was previously believed (GUCU et al. 2007). The studies have been expanded towards the south and a small breeding group composed of at least 5 seals has been identified on northern Cyprus (GUCU et al. in press). One of the seals photographed on the island had been identified earlier on the Mersin coast. This observation confirmed that seals in the northeastern Mediterranean undertake long distance movements. This ability bears risks and advantages in terms of conservation: seals may move beyond those areas where they are protected, but on the other hand, with long distance mobility, the genetic pool of the colony may be broadened. In either case it is important to identify the range of their distribution.