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ABSTRACT BOOK

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Re-evaluating the actual distribution range of the Mediterranean monk seal, *Monachus monachus*

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In ancient times, the distribution range of the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) extended all over the coasts of the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and NW Africa up to Madeira and the Azores and as far south as Gambia (Johnson & Lavigne 1999). Nowadays, the species is critically endangered; the current total world population is stated to consist of 500-600 animals (GFCM 2011), though population numbers mainly derive from estimations in countries where actively reproducing populations are systematically monitored (Greece, Cabo Blanco/Western Sahara, Turkey and Desertas islands/Madeira). Distribution patterns in the last decades indicated that the species is extinct in most of its former range. In some countries only few individuals survive and in others the status is considered unknown. However, recent sporadic monk seal sightings indicate that the species may still exist or may have started recolonizing some areas throughout its ancient habitat where it is considered extinct or of unknown status. Studies outlining the species movement ability of hundreds of km within a few months (Adamantopoulou et al. 2011), and substantial changes in the use of its terrestrial habitat (Guçu 2012; Panou et al. 1993) corroborate this suggestion. In the past decade, scientific and conservation communities focused on the importance of such areas as potential recolonization nuclei and on the need for protection measures as well. These "low density areas" are characterized by the potential presence of monk seal populations, recent sightings and habitat availability (UNEP/MAP/RAC-SPA 2003). This paper reviews sporadic seal sightings in low density areas throughout the species' former range. We strongly believe that efforts for the protection of the most endangered marine mammal of Europe should also encompass these areas in order to implement appropriate conservation measures ensuring natural recolonization and guaranteeing genetic flow between distant regions.