

MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEALS: NOW A GRAVE DANGER FOR LOGGERHEAD TURTLES AT ZAKYNTHOS

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Laganas Bay in Zakynthos Island holds the largest nesting aggregation of the loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*) in the Mediterranean. Turtles of both genders typically begin to arrive in the Bay in April, while nesting occurs from late May to early August. Zakynthos is also home to a resident population of the Critically Endangered Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*). It was first noted in 1994 that monk seals predate on loggerhead turtles by snapping off the posterior plastral scutes and feeding on the entrails. This unique behavior, not documented anywhere else in the world, was thought to have been triggered by depleted levels of local fish resources. Similar incidents were noted in subsequent years, but these were considered occasional and infrequent. However, during the 2010 nesting season 21 adult turtles were found dead with injuries attributed to monk seals, i.e. opened body cavities, teeth marks, entrails missing. Most of these turtles (85.7%) were nesting females. It was also noted that monk seals have changed their predation technique; now they open the body cavity by tearing the soft tissue behind the turtle's flippers. Predation continued during 2011 with 16 dead turtles, all of them nesting females. Delayed maturity in marine turtles renders adult individuals as exceptionally valuable to the population. The annual loss of reproductively active females, estimated at about 4% of the nesting population, may prove non-sustainable in the long run. It is therefore urgent that the Management Body of the National Marine Park of Zakynthos takes the necessary initiatives to mitigate this serious danger.