

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND BEHAVIOR OF THE UNIQUE MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL COLONY OF THE ISLAND OF GYAROS

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The Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) is considered to be nowadays one of the most critically endangered marine mammals on earth. Fewer than 600 individuals of the species are thought to survive – the main part of the population, estimated to number 250 – 300 individuals, is found in Greece, and identifying and effectively protecting all remaining populations has been identified as a conservation priority. Following short-term monitoring efforts in 2002 – 2010 that identified the island of Gyaros in the northern Cyclades Islands as one of the most important strongholds of the species in the country we initiated in 2011 systematic efforts to monitor the local population during the pupping season (September 2011 – January 2012). Automatic infrared cameras were installed in the main pupping cave and the two main resting beaches and regular field surveys were carried out. Based on the evaluation of more than 50000 images of seals and the field visits we conclude that the species has retained at the island of Gyaros a colonial population structure that evolves around the presence of a small number of dominant males and the reproductive females – this is only the second time and the first one in the Mediterranean Sea that this has been recorded for the species. The use also of open beaches for resting is also noteworthy. The results of the study confirm the importance of Gyaros as one of the most important areas for the critically endangered Mediterranean monk seal worldwide and urge for the implementation of effective conservation measures.