

The Mediterranean monk seal

Life between land and sea



Distribution of the Mediterranean monk seal

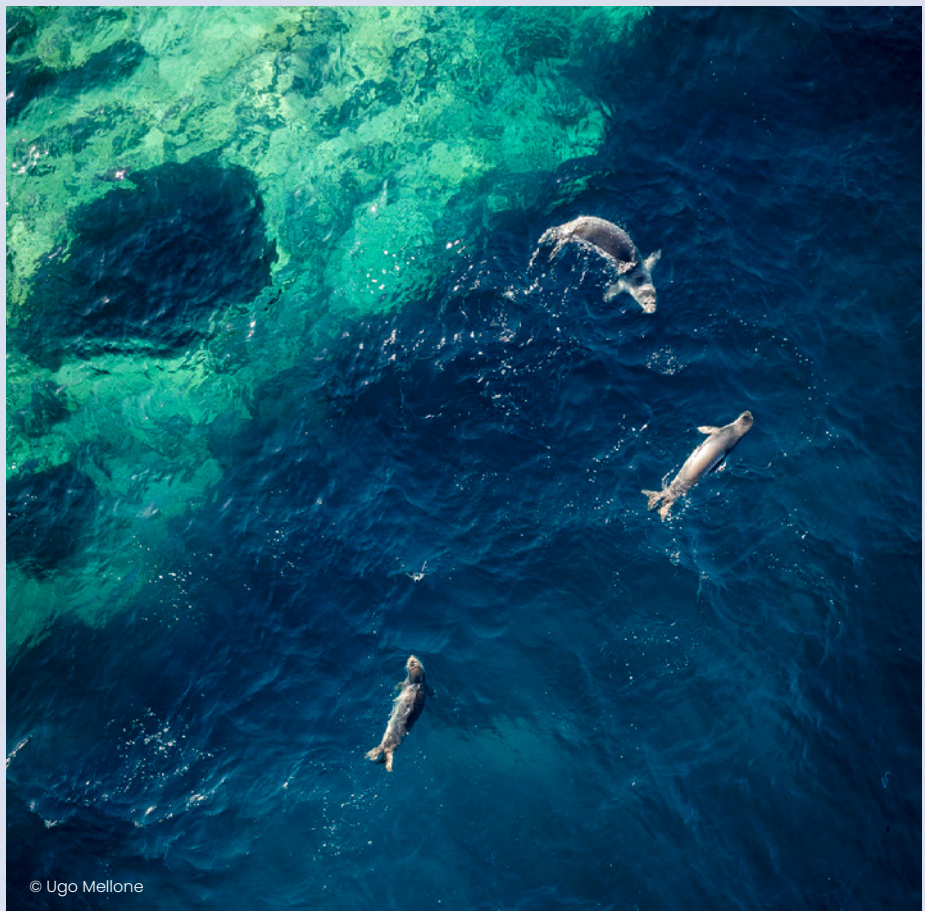
(Monachus monachus)

One of the world's rarest seals, the Mediterranean monk seal once thrived across the Mediterranean Sea and Black Sea, stretching into the Atlantic Ocean along the northwest African coastline. Its range included the Macaronesian archipelagos – such as Azores, Madeira, Canary Islands and Cabo Verde – and reached as far south as the coasts of Senegal and Gambia.

Today, approximately **1,000 individuals remain**, with half residing in the eastern Mediterranean basin. However, sightings are becoming more frequent, particularly across the Adriatic suggesting a potential recovery, along with the increasing numbers of individuals from the main populations. On the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, the Mediterranean monk seal is listed as Vulnerable (VU).

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Where Are They Now?

Monk seals can still be found in:



Mediterranean:

Greece, Türkiye, Cyprus



Atlantic:

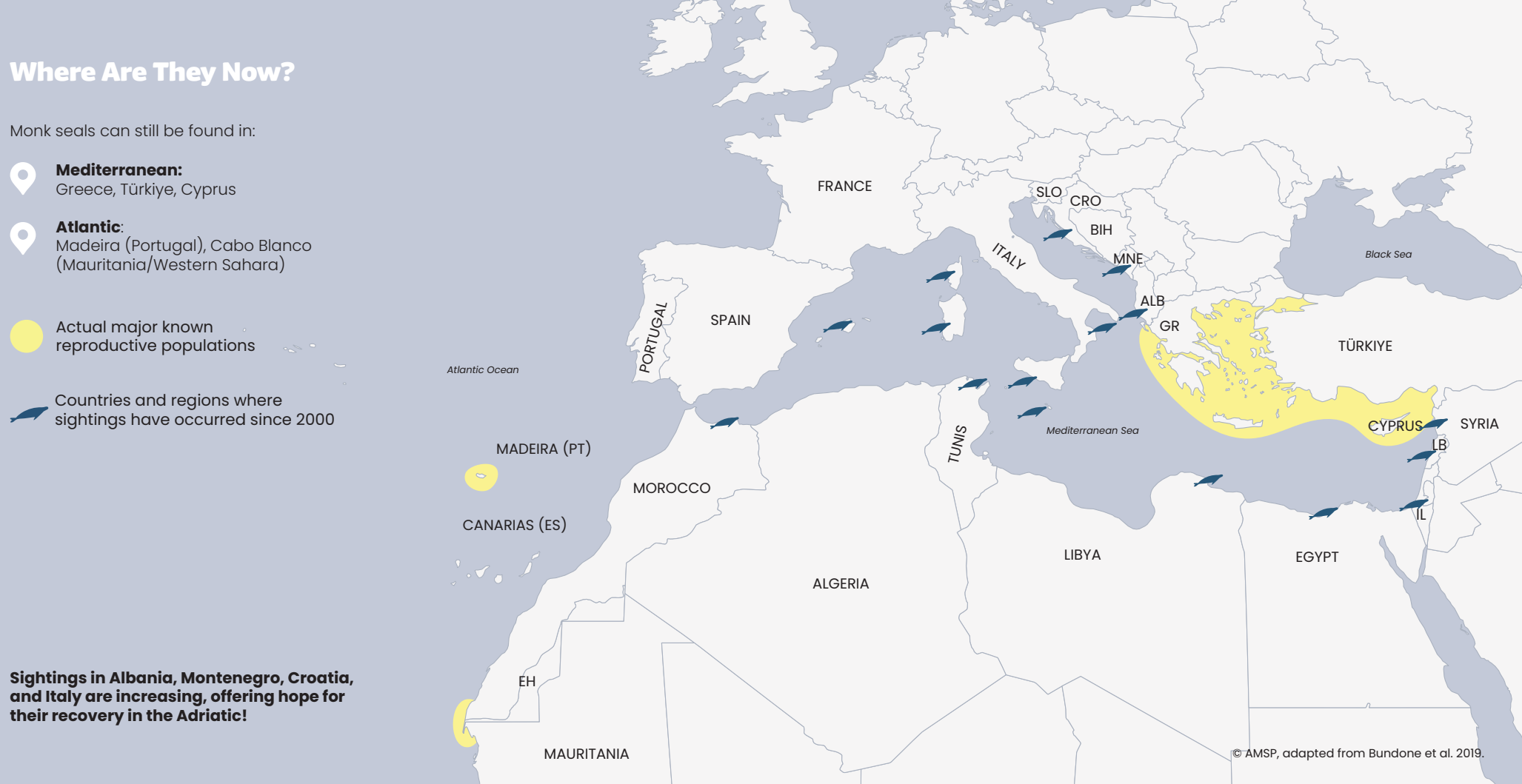
Madeira (Portugal), Cabo Blanco (Mauritania/Western Sahara)



Actual major known reproductive populations



Countries and regions where sightings have occurred since 2000



Sightings in Albania, Montenegro, Croatia, and Italy are increasing, offering hope for their recovery in the Adriatic!

How Do They Look?



 ~1 m

Baby seal

Born with black fur (lanugo) and a unique white belly patch


Young seal

Fully weaned at 4 months, turning to greyish on the back and whitish on the belly



 ~1,5 m



 ~2 - 2,4 m

Adult female

Seals shed their fur every year, partially changing their appearance. Major scars used for identification may stay visible

Adult male

Male turn completely black when mature, with the belly patch visible again



 ~2,4 m

Their Habitat & Diet

Monk seals prefer marine caves with secluded beaches for resting and giving birth. These caves provide protection from humans and many other threats, making the caves critical to the species survival.

Monk seals are top predators that feed on fish, cephalopods (e.g. octopus, cuttlefish, squids) and crustaceans (e.g. shrimp, crab).



Seal habitat © MOM

The Menu:



Shrimp



Octopuses



Fish



Squids

Main Threats



Accidental capture
in fishing gears and
illegal fishing methods
(i.e., explosives)



Overfishing
(reducing their
food supply)



Pollution

Extensive anthropic
development of the
coastline



Growing maritime
tourism and traffic

Ways You Can Help

Help protect the sea: establishment and work of marine protected areas, reduce pollution, and respect seal habitats.


Report the sighting to the Adriatic Monk Seal Project partners in your country, government agencies, NGOs, and/or veterinarians. Note the exact location, date, and time of the encounter. Try to gather as many details as possible about the seal's appearance and behavior: number of individuals, color, body length, and whether it was hunting, resting, swimming, diving, etc.

Keep distance! Do not interact with or disturb the seal and encourage others to do the same. Keep pets on a leash and away from the animal.

Take a photo or video if possible - this greatly helps with identification. However, always maintain a safe distance to avoid disturbing the animal.

Remember: Monk seals are wild animals with strong jaws and large teeth - they are not pets. Never attempt to approach or touch them.

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**Spread the word
about the monk seal!**

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Did You Know?

It is one of only three seal species known to live in warm waters. The other two are the Hawaiian monk seal and the Caribbean monk seal, which was declared extinct in the 1950s due to intense human hunting and exploitation.

In 1997, a mass mortality event struck the largest known colony of monk seals in Cabo Blanco (Mauritania/Western Sahara). The population plummeted from 350 to under 150 individuals, pushing the species closer to extinction.

Monk seals can sleep while floating in the water, with just their nose sticking above the surface to breathe. This allows them to rest in the open sea.

Monk seals are strong and active swimmers. They can travel up to 40 kilometers per day.

The monk seal was known in ancient times – it appears in prehistoric cave drawings, as well as in Greek and Roman mosaics and writings.

Working Together for a Future: The Adriatic Monk Seal Project

The return of the Mediterranean monk seal to the Adriatic is only possible through strong cooperation. NGOs from Albania, Montenegro, Croatia, and Italy are working closely together to protect the species and its coastal habitats. By sharing knowledge, building local capacity, and addressing threats like human disturbance and habitat destruction, we are creating the conditions needed for monk seals to return.

But this is not something we can do alone. The fisheries, tourism, and other nature protection sectors all have a role to play – and so do local communities. With joint efforts and the right support, we can help in bringing the monk seal back from the brink of extinction.

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**Learn more about
the Adriatic Monk
Seal Project and
the Mediterranean
monk seal here:**



**Adriatic
Monk Seal
Project**



Archipelagos



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