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RECENT OBSERVATIONS ON *MONACHUS MONACHUS* (PHOCIDAE) AT SEA-CAGE FISH FARMS IN IZMIR (TURKISH AEGEAN SEA)

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ABSTRACT

*On 8 February, 3 May, and 9 May 2025, three specimens of *Monachus monachus* were photographed by a staff diver at two fish farms rearing sea bass and sea bream in Gerence Bay, Izmir, in the Aegean Sea. A comprehensive set of behavioural data on Mediterranean monk seals was obtained from the diver via an interview. The findings confirm the near-permanent presence of monk seals in the study area. The paper also suggests that excessive dependence on fish farms could alter the monk seals' feeding behaviour and potentially even lead to their domestication.*

Key words: Mediterranean monk seal, feeding behaviour, interaction, Mediterranean Sea

OSSERVAZIONI RECENTI SU *MONACHUS MONACHUS* (PHOCIDAE) PRESSO IMPIANTI DI ACQUACOLTURA IN GABBIE A MARE NELL'AREA DI IZMIR (MAR EGEO TURCO)

SINTESI

*L'8 febbraio, il 3 maggio e il 9 maggio 2025, tre esemplari di *Monachus monachus* sono stati fotografati da un subacqueo del personale presso due impianti di allevamento di spigole e orate situati nella baia di Gerence, a Izmir, nel Mar Egeo. Un ampio insieme di dati comportamentali sulle foche monache del Mediterraneo è stato raccolto dal subacqueo tramite un'intervista. I risultati confermano la presenza quasi permanente di foche monache nell'area di studio. L'articolo suggerisce inoltre che una dipendenza eccessiva dagli impianti di acquacoltura potrebbe modificare il comportamento alimentare delle foche e persino portare, potenzialmente, a una loro domesticazione.*

Parole chiave: foca monaca, comportamento alimentare, interazione, Mediterraneo

INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) is regarded to be one of the rarest marine mammals in the world, with a current global population estimated at no more than 800 individuals (Dendrinis *et al.*, 2022). The species has registered a marked recovery over the past decade and is now classified as Vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The largest subpopulation – estimated at 444–600 mature individuals – is currently found in the eastern Mediterranean Sea (Karamanlidis *et al.*, 2023; Karamanlidis, 2024). Other groups in the eastern Mediterranean consist of small, loosely structured aggregations, usually comprising fewer than 20 individuals. A recent study reported thirty-four sightings along the Syrian coast between 2001 and 2023 (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2024).

The Mediterranean monk seal is the sole resident pinniped species in the Mediterranean Sea (Karamanlidis, 2024). Sporadic sightings have been recorded primarily in the eastern part of the basin, including the islands of the Ionian and Aegean Seas, the mainland coast of Greece, the western and southern coasts of Türkiye, and the coasts of Cyprus (Dendrinis *et al.*, 2022). A recent study reported a total of 361 monk seal sightings in Cyprus between 2009 and 2018, with the vast majority (95%) involving juvenile and adult individuals, and only 18 sightings being of newborn pups (Nicolaou *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, Mediterranean monk seals were monitored in caves along the northern coast of Cyprus between November 2016 and May 2019, and seven individuals were confirmed: three pups and four juvenile-subadult-adult seals (Beton *et al.*, 2021).

The extirpation of the Mediterranean monk seal from the Black Sea is believed to have occurred as recently as 1997, though a small population persists in the Sea of Marmara (Dendrinis *et al.*, 2022), including two individuals recorded near Karabiga (Inanmaz *et al.*, 2014). Despite sporadic observations reported from this region, the only known active breeding populations are located in the Aegean Sea, the northeastern Mediterranean Sea, the Greek Ionian Sea, Madeira, and off the coast of Mauritania (Bundone *et al.*, 2019; Panou *et al.*, 2023).

The monk seal is strictly protected under Turkish law, European Directives, and International Conventions. In Türkiye, a national strategy for the conservation of the species was adopted in 1991, followed by the establishment of a national seal committee to coordinate conservation activities (Güçlüsoy *et al.*, 2004). In spite of these measures, the primary threats to the species in

the Mediterranean persist and can be categorised as follows: terrestrial and marine habitat loss and degradation resulting from increased human pressure, including tourism and pollution; negative interactions with fisheries and aquaculture, which occur even in countries and regions where the species is legally protected; and other unpredictable threats (Karamanlidis, 2024).

The Mediterranean monk seal spends most of its life at sea, primarily foraging for food (Dendrinis *et al.*, 2022). It is widely considered an opportunistic predator that feeds mostly on the continental shelf, with a diet dominated by fish, crustaceans, and cephalopods (Karamanlidis, 2024). Recent studies have confirmed that Mediterranean monk seals can successfully forage independently in the wild from as early as five months of age (Kıraç & Ok, 2019). Since the 1980s, the widespread expansion of mariculture in the Mediterranean has provided the species with a new and abundant food source, rivalling the availability of wild fish (Akyol & Ceyhan, 2020). This has led to monk seal attacks on sea-cages at fish farms, which have been documented. Güçlüsoy & Savaş (2003), for instance, reported 40 such attacks at 11 fish farms in the Turkish Aegean Sea between 1992 and 2000, which caused cage net damage and the escape of farmed fish. Similarly, Gerovasileiou *et al.* (2017) captured photographic evidence of seven Mediterranean monk seals at four different fish farms in the Aegean Sea.

This study provides further photographic evidence of *M. monachus* at two sea-cage fish farms in the Aegean Sea, thereby expanding our knowledge on the adapting feeding behaviour of this rare species.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

On 8 February, 3 May, and 9 May 2025, three *M. monachus* individuals (Fig. 1) were photographed by a staff diver using GoPro Hero 8 at two fish farms rearing sea bass and sea bream in Gerence Bay, İzmir (1st farm: 38.440312°N, 26.481155°E; 2nd farm: 38.449723°N, 26.417067°E, Fig. 2). The diver works at both fish farms, which are owned by the same company. The fish farms were deployed at depths of 70 m and 89 m, respectively, and are both located approximately 1 km from the mainland. They lie within the Chios and Turkish Coast IMMA (Important Marine Mammal Area) in the central eastern Aegean Sea, which encompasses an area bounded by Chios, Psarra, Çeşme, the Karaburun Peninsula, the Gulf of İzmir, and Foça, extending offshore towards the 200 m isobath (IUCN-MMPATF, 2017).

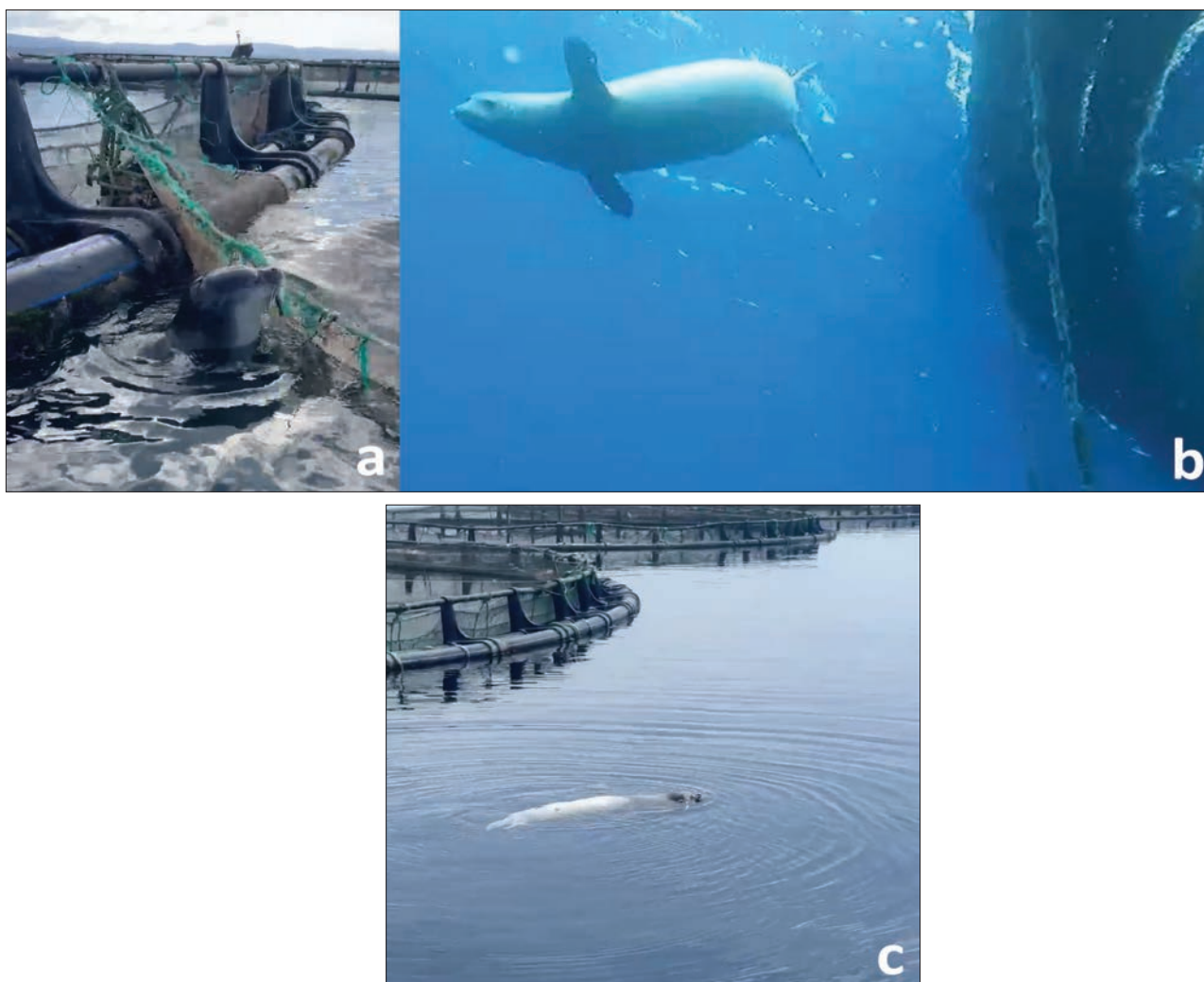


Fig. 1: Recent observations of *Monachus monachus* at sea-cage fish farms in Gerence Bay (i.e., Chios and the Turkish coast of the IMMA) include the following: (a) an adult female with a fish in its mouth, recorded on 8 February 2025 at the first fish farm; (b) an underwater view of a subadult specimen captured on 3 May 2025 at the second fish farm; and (c) an adult female observed eating fish at the sea surface on 9 May 2025 at the second fish farm (all courtesy of Davut Aydın).

Sl. 1: Nedavna opažanja vrste *Monachus monachus* v ribogojnicah v kletkah v zalivu Gerence (tj. Hios in turška obala IMMA) vključujejo naslednje: (a) odrasla samica z ribo v ustih, posneta 8. februarja 2025 v prvi ribogojnici; (b) podvodni pogled na mladostni primerek, posnet 3. maja 2025 v drugi ribogojnici; in (c) odrasla samica, opažena pri prehranjevanju z ribami na morski gladini 9. maja 2025 v drugi ribogojnici (vse z dovoljenjem Davuta Aydın).

The sex of Mediterranean monk seals was estimated based on their coloration across different life stages (Samaranch & González, 2000; Quintana MartínMontalvo & Muñoz Cañas, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the diver we interviewed, the Mediterranean monk seals appeared occasionally during the harvest period, especially in summer. This occurred when a fish transfer bridge – made of a net and ropes

– was installed between a large cage containing reared fish (50 m in diameter) and a small, empty cage (20 m in diameter). The seals were observed entering the open-top net and stealing fish (Fig. 1a). In general, they would be seen reposing on the cage floats, exhibiting a curious but timid attitude, often observing people from a distance. Sightings increased in frequency in the spring and summer months, typically during daylight hours. The diver also reported that the seals did not display any aggressive behaviour and were never seen entering the cages themselves (D. Aydın, pers. comm.).

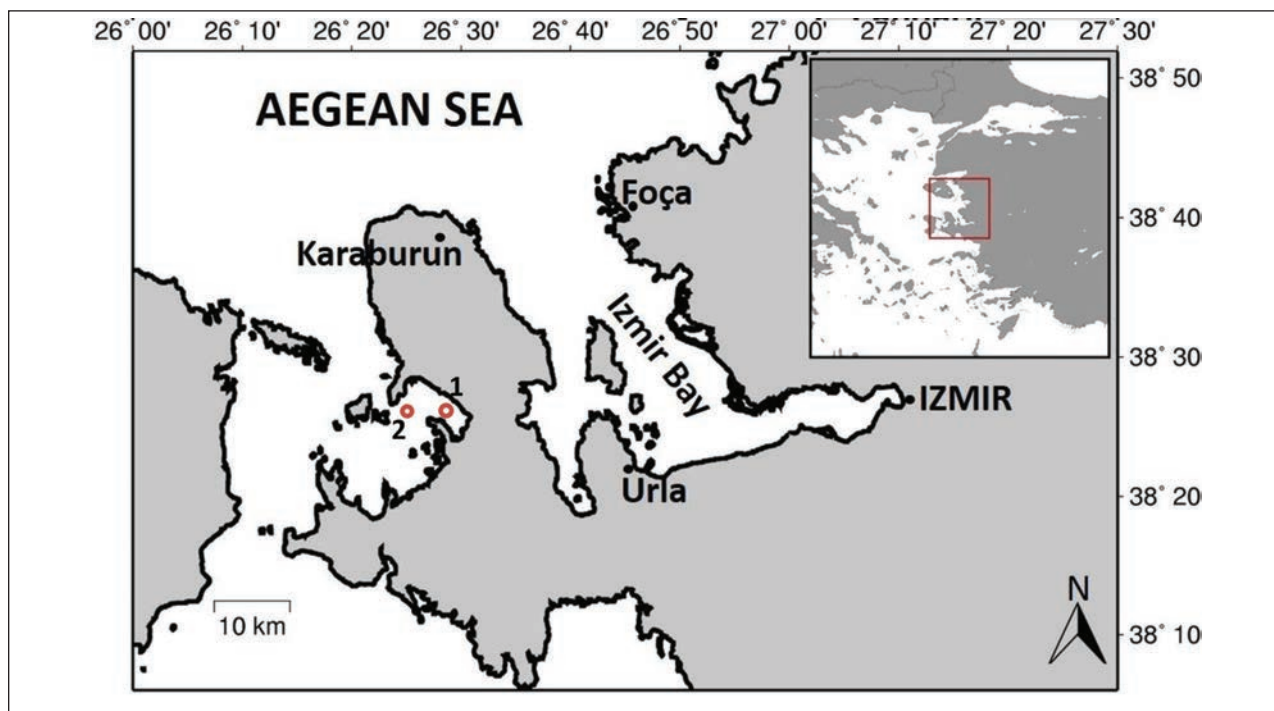


Fig. 2: Map showing the locations of the sea-cage fish farms (1: first fish farm, 2: second fish farm) in the Aegean Sea.

Sl. 2: Zemljevid obravnavanega območja z ribogojnicami s kletkami (1: prva ribogojnica, 2: druga ribogojnica) v Egejskem morju.

Gerovasiliou *et al.* (2017) documented an individual of *M. monachus* attacking a sea-cage fish farm in Izmir on 15 December 2016, further confirming the behaviour previously observed by Güçlüsoy & Savaş (2003). It is evident that Mediterranean monk seals are able to locate ample sustenance in the vicinity of fish farms, which act as Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs), and in the fish bridges formed during harvesting operations. This trend is problematic as it fosters negative interactions between the seals and man-made structures. Potential adverse consequences include Mediterranean monk seals abandoning open-sea foraging, increased attacks on fish farms, or harm inflicted upon the seals by unscrupulous fishers. It is therefore imperative that fishers, including

fish farm employees, understand the behaviour exhibited by Mediterranean monk seals. To support the conservation of this species, human interaction, such as feeding, should be actively discouraged. Moreover, since Mediterranean monk seals represent an important component of our natural heritage, their populations should be continuously monitored.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NEDAVNA OPAŽANJA PRIMERKOV *MONACHUS MONACHUS* (PHOCIDAE)
V RIBOGOJNICAH Z MORSKIMI KLETKAMI V IZMIRJU
(TURŠKO EGEJSKO MORJE)

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POVZETEK

*Potapljač je 8. februarja, 3. maja in 9. maja 2025 fotografiral tri primerke vrste *Monachus monachus* na dveh ribogojnicah, kjer gojijo brancine in orade v zalivu Gerence v Izmirju v Egejskem morju. S pomočjo intervjujev je pridobil obsežen nabor vedenjskih podatkov o sredozemskih medvedkah. Ugotovitve potrjujejo, da je na preučevanem območju sredozemska medvedka skoraj stalno prisotna. Poleg tega prispevek tudi nakazuje, da bi lahko pretirana odvisnost od ribogojnic spremenila prehranjevalne navade sredozemskih medvedk in morda celo privedla do njihove udomačitve.*

Ključne besede: sredozemska medvedka, prehranjevalno vedenje, interakcije, Sredozemsko morje

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